

Vayechi and Shemot 5776

BS"D Parashat Vayechi and Shmot 5776

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Moshe, the Runaway from Responsibilities

At the heart of our parsha is one of the most emotionally-charged human dramas in history, before which the greatest plays of Shakespeare pale. It is the story of the child with the Hebrew name Tuvia, who later became the Egyptian called Moshe.

The Torah relates that Moshe went out one day "to his brothers and he saw their suffering, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew of his brothers." Moshe is so reviled by the scene that he kills the Egyptian.

Why was Moshe so shocked at the beating of a Jewish slave? Did he not know that millions of Jews were being beaten daily?

If indeed the conduct of the Egyptian taskmaster justified his being punished, why did Moshe opt to run away rather than bring the matter before his adopted father?

Of all the people in the land of Midian, how is it that Moshe finds himself "by chance" in the house of Yitro?

At the scene of the mysterious burning bush for a period of seven days, Moshe rejects HaShem's command that he return to Egypt. How does one argue with the Creator for even an

instant, much more a whole week?

How does Moshe enter the palace and attain an audience with Paro seemingly at will? And when he orders Paro to free millions of slaves, in effect suggesting the undermining of the Egyptian economy, why does Paro tolerate Moshe at all? Why does he not give the order to rid himself of this man?

At the first meeting with Paro which transpired before the first plague, a full year before the death of the first-born Egyptians, Moshe already warns Paro that his own bechor (first born) will “die.” But Paro had no bechor, his only child being his daughter Batya (or Bitya)!

I suggest the following reservedly and with apologies if I am wrong.

We meet Moshe for the first time as an infant, with his real name Tuvia – the one, according to Chazal, that was given to him by his parents. The next time he appears in the Torah as an adult with the Egyptian name Moshe.

As a member of the royal family, being the adopted son of Batya, he was certainly well versed in all aspects of Egyptian culture. He undoubtedly completed the officer’s training course at “West Point” and was the honored guest at the cocktail parties given by the movers and shakers of Egyptian society.

Don’t fool yourself into believing that Amram and Yocheved had visitation rights with the young Moshe, at which opportunities his true father could have taught him Yiddishkeit. Moshe was culturally an Egyptian. He was the beloved “son” of Paro; and as the Midrash tells us, Paro would often hold him on his lap. Paro, his daughter, and many of the older courtiers (and probably Moshe himself), were aware of Moshe’s background. He was a Hebrew who was adopted by the childless Batya.

With this in mind, Paro – who very much loved the clever and

handsome Moshe – was anxious to eradicate every semblance of Moshe's past from the boy's consciousness, and certainly anxious to hide from him the intolerable servitude of the Hebrew people. The way to do this was to distance Moshe from life's realities. And as Rashi comments, Paro appointed Moshe al beito – "over his palace", whereby Moshe would remain far from matters of the realm by having to concentrate on the complex affairs of the royal court.

One day, Moshe ventures out to see the hinterland. He comes upon a totally unexpected scene – the mass oppression of the Jewish people as the basis of the Egyptian economy. He is overwhelmed when he sees a taskmaster beating a Jewish slave. Moshe's sense of outrage arouses him to punish the oppressor.

Moshe is not distraught because he killed the man, but because he discovers that Paro, the man he loves as a father, is capable of this inhuman treatment of a people who did only good for the Egyptian nation. It is like waking up one day to find out that your father was the commandant of the Auschwitz extermination camp.

Moshe could have confronted Paro with the fact that he was now aware of the secret which Paro had been holding back from him. But to do so would be to accuse this man whom he loved, of heinous crimes, this man who had saved him from death and had provided him with the life of a prince. Moshe's only way out was to escape, because to fulfill his moral obligation of standing up to Paro and the entire Egyptian leadership was too awesome a task.

Moshe arrives at the home of Yitro. Who was Yitro? The Talmud (Tractate Sota) tells us that Paro had three advisors: Yitro, Bil'am and Ei'yov. When Paro brought up the matter of enslaving the Jews, Bil'am agreed, Ei'yov gave no opinion and Yitro RAN AWAY.

HaShem plans it that Moshe, the RUNAWAY from his

responsibilities, finds himself in Midian at the home of the original runaway. While sitting around the fire on a cold winter night, Moshe looks at Yitro and thinks that if Yitro had not run away from his moral responsibilities and had, instead, opposed Paro's proposal to enslave the Jews outright, there would have been no slavery. And Yitro, who had known Moshe as a child, looks at him and thinks that Moshe could have been the only person in the kingdom to influence Paro, if he had not run away!

One day, while Moshe is tending the sheep at Mount Chorev, he sees a wondrous sight – a burning bush which is not consumed. He draws closer and hears a voice, but it is not the voice of HaShem. It is the influence of this holy place which arouses Moshe's conscience and, for seven days, paralyzes him to that spot. Should he return and confront Paro with the fact that he is a despot or let time run its course? At the end of seven days, Moshe resolves his conflict and decides to return and help his Jewish family. At this point, and only after Moshe decides to do the right thing, HaShem appears to him.

Moshe returns to Egypt and to the palace – to the place of his childhood, to his beloved "mother" Batya, and to Paro whom he dearly loves.

I picture the scene as follows: Moshe arrives at the palace gates, after being away (according to one opinion) for forty years. He asks the sentry to allow him to enter the palace in order to speak with Paro. The sentry asks him if he has an appointment? Moshe says he does not, but requests that Paro be informed of his presence. The sentry approaches Paro's personal secretary telling him that a certain "Moshe" wants to see Paro. The secretary probably answers that without a previous appointment no one can see Paro. The sentry tells the secretary that the strange-looking man demands an audience. The secretary goes into the throne room and tells Paro that a certain "Moshe" wishes an audience. Paro jumps up and calls out to Batya to come immediately. "Moshe is back!" Moshe comes

in. Paro looks at Moshe and asks, "Where have you been all this time? Not a letter. Not an e-mail. Look. Your mother Batya who saved your life, look at her eyes which have not stopped crying out of longing for you." Then Paro says to Moshe, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Moshe looks at Paro and at his beloved Batya, and with tears in his eyes calls out to Paro sh'lach et ami – "let my people go!" Paro descends from his throne and says, "Moshe, WE are your people!" Moshe answers, "The Israelite slaves are my people." And Moshe continues, "And if you do not send out the Jews, then HaShem will kill your firstborn son." But since Paro has no son, Moshe is telling Paro that if he does not free the Jews, then he Moshe will no longer feel as a son to Paro. Paro cannot bear this threat from his beloved Moshe, but he also cannot free the slaves.

I cannot prove that this is in fact what transpired, but it must have been very similar. It must have been Paro's love for Moshe that prevented Paro from killing the man who would overturn the entire national order. And it had to be a person like Moshe, who was intimately associated with Paro and the royal court, who could come and not be overwhelmed by the grandeur of the ambience.

It is Moshe's love for Paro and Paro's rejection that stirs the highly emotional reaction recorded in our Parasha when Paro warns Moshe that he never wants to see his face again.

The emotional scenes between Moshe and Paro end in a very surprising way. Chazal say that the entire Egyptian army was destroyed at the crossing of Yam Suf except for Paro himself. HaShem spares Paro's life because of the mutual love between Moshe and his Egyptian "father".

If not for HaShem's direct intervention in the life of Moshe, Prince of Egypt, master of the royal court, he would never have become Moshe Rabbeinu (our rabbi).

It was HaShem who brought Moshe to the place at the exact moment when an Egyptian taskmaster was beating a Jewish slave.

Of all the many thousands of homes in Midian, it was HaShem who led Moshe to the home of Yitro, the original runaway from moral responsibility.

And HaShem led Moshe's flock to Har Chorev to witness the burning bush.

American Olim Selected by Hashem

Similar to Moshe Rabbeinu, the people I know who came on aliya from the US went through a 'God-induced experience'. It is as if HaShem holds a pincer and plucks out the individuals whom He wants to bring to Eretz Yisrael.

In these weekly writings, I try not to relate personal matters. However, every time parashat Va'yechi comes around, I am gripped with feelings of thanksgiving to HaShem for all that He has done for me, as I will explain.

Efrayim and Menashe

In parashat Va'yechi, Yosef brings his sons Efrayim and Menashe to receive a deathbed blessing from their grandfather Ya'akov.

Ya'akov looks at the the two young men standing before him and calls out:

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Who are these (young men)!?

And Yosef replies:

They are my sons whom HaShem has given me here

What happened at that moment?

Human nature is such that on a person's deathbed, life passes before his consciousness as a closing epilogue of a book.

Ya'akov probably reviewed his life of 147 years, recalling the sweet and less-than-sweet experiences. The sweet years were when he learned Torah with his illustrious grandfather Avraham and illustrious father Yitzchak. It was when they took the young Ya'akov into the highest realms of kedusha through Halacha and mysticism, and then how he transmitted these teachings to his great sons, who in turn would pass them on to their children.

Except for his years in exile at the home of Lavan, Ya'akov surrounded himself with people of moral and ethical stature and kedusha – his parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren who were all 'bnei Torah'.

Yosef enters and interrupts Ya'akov's sweet memories of a totally spiritual life in order to have his father bless Efrayim and Menashe.

Ya'akov looks at his two grandsons but cannot believe what he sees. Two Egyptians in dress, mannerisms and language. And Ya'akov calls out

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Who are these (young men)!?"

Yosef replies:

They are my sons whom HaShem has given me here.

Imagine the dialogue between them as Yosef explains to his father that he had been sold as a slave here in Egypt and that it was the best he could do under the circumstances. “The land here is unholy. There are no yeshivot, there is no kedusha. I bring my sons to you for a bracha that HaShem should arouse their pure Jewish souls to return to a life of kedusha.”

At that moment, Ya’akov could have rejected the two young men whose other grandfather was Poti-Ferah the priest of Ohn. But not only does he not reject them, he elevates Efrayim and Menashe to a full and equal status with his other sons to be the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

A Personal Story: My Yitro and My Burning Bush

My father was born in 1904 in the holy city of Tzfat. He entered chaidar at three years old. At his Bar Mitzva he received a shtreimel, as did all the other young Tsanzer chassidim. Shortly afterwards, my grandfather Nachman Kahana took his young son to Galizia to learn at the yeshiva in the town that was later to be known as Auschwitz, where our family had relatives.

From there, my father went to learn at the Chatam Sofer yeshiva in Pressburg, Slovakia. Eventually, he arrived in New York.

My parents married and settled in Flatbush where my father served as a pulpit rabbi. My father was a great talmid chacham, and my mother’s father was known as the ‘gai’indiker

shas' (the walking Talmud), because he knew the entire Talmud by heart.

My brother Meir and I grew up as all the other kids in the neighborhood who were of Italian and Irish descent.

It is not difficult for me to imagine what my parents thought of my brother and me. We were very much American despite the kippa on our heads. We studied at the Yeshiva of Flatbush of 70 years ago, which was far different than it is today. It was a yeshiva in name only, but not in spirit nor in its curriculum. As an example, we did not begin learning Gemara until the eighth grade, only twice a week, and each time for 45 minutes.

My mother's parents, who came from the city of Dvinsk in Latvia where my grandfather was on the bet din of the illustrious Rav Meir Simcha (Or Samayach), probably said to themselves like Ya'akov:

וְיָשׁוּב וְיִשְׁמַע

Who are these (young men)!?"

And my parents surely replied, like Yosef:

אֵלֶּיךָ יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ וְנִשְׁמָע

They are my sons whom HaShem has given me here in the United States of America!

My parents decided that I would continue at the Yeshiva of Flatbush High School, where, at best, I would become a chemist or, at worst, a Conservadox rabbi in a place like Corpus Cristi, Texas. I would have marched for the Blacks in Selma, Alabama or would today be a backer of the BDS movement against the 'racist, fascist, apartheid State of Israel'.

What saved me from a fate worse than death was the

unpredictable hand of HaShem.

My brother Meir was a student at the Brooklyn Talmudical Academy (BTA). One day, when he was 16, he announced to our parents that he wanted to transfer to Lincoln High School because he wanted to be a member of their renowned track team.

I recall my father saying that he would not prevent him from transferring, but he predicted that it would not be long before Meir would come back begging to return to yeshiva. My father also required Meir to learn Gemara every day with a private teacher.

The deal was struck. Into our lives stepped Rav Moshe Bunim Purotinsky z"l, from the Mirer Yeshiva who taught Meir every day. A few months later, Meir returned to BTA because of the very goishe atmosphere of the public HS and because he could not compete with the black students who are born with springs in their legs.

Rav Moshe Bunim once asked my father where I was to continue for high school. When he was told that my destination was the Yeshiva of Flatbush HS, he convinced my parents to send me to Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef HS on Manhattan's lower East Side, where I was awarded the first prize for Gemara studies at graduation.

I owe much to President Lincoln and the NY Board of Education for naming a school after him and to Meir's desire to join their track team. They were responsible for bringing Rav Moshe Bunim Purotinsky to my family, and he in turn was responsible for making a 180-degree change in my life.

Rav Moshe Bunim was my Yitro and my burning bush, behind whom stood HaShem eventually bringing me and my family and my wife's parents to Eretz Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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