

Shmot: Selected Shorts
Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 9, 2021 25 Tevet 5781

שמות א':ח'-ט'

(ח) וַיִּקַּם מִלִּדְהָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יֹסֵף: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעֲצוּמִים מִמֶּנּוּ:

Exodus 1:8-9

(8) *A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. (9) And he said to his people, "Look, the people Children of Israel are much too numerous for us."*

The rabbis debate the interpretation of this verse: was this a new king or did the old king change his policies? This is important because it relates to how change happens in politics and how that change impacts the public. One view is that change happens from the top down: new leaders, new policies. The other view is that change happens from the bottom up: change in public opinion, change in policies. As usual, both positions are correct. Note also: this is the first time the term עם "nation" is used with reference to Israel. We have made the transition from family/clan to people/nation.

שמות ב':י'

(י) וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבַאֲהוּ לְבַת-פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי-לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן-הַמַּיִם מְשִׁיתָהוּ:

Exodus 2:10

(10) *When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."*

We cannot overstate the role of women in Moses' life. His mother, Yocheved, decides to save him from the genocidal policies, by putting him in a basket and floating him on the Nile. His sister, Miriam, watches from the bullrushes. Pharaoh's daughter, named Bitya in the midrash, sees him and adopts him. The posture of spiritual resistance is exemplified by the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Pu'ah, who save the babies and create a model of heroism rather than submission. Finally, Tziporah, Moses's wife whom he meets and marries in Midian. Here, Pharaoh's daughter names him with an Egyptian name that also portends the deliverance of Israel "from the waters."

שמות ב':יא'

(יא) וַיְהִי אִ בַּיָּמִים הֵהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיִּצְאָ אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסֻבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו:

Exodus 2:11

(11) *Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brothers and witnessed*

their suffering. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brothers.

Our narrator is very spare in the development of Moses, but this verse discloses the central tension that he (and any young person) has to resolve: who am I? By identifying the Hebrew slaves as his **brothers**, we understand his tension and his turmoil. *I represent the monarch and the state, but these are my brothers. As a member of the Egyptian royal family, the taskmaster is subservient to me, but he is not my brother.* In this one sentence one of the major themes of Genesis is resolved: Yes, I am my brother's keeper. Moses accidentally kills his non-brother taskmaster to save his brother slave, setting off the chain of events beginning with his exile (the consequence of the crime of manslaughter), his intervention and encounter with Tzipora at the well in Midian and then his eventual encounter with God while tending his father-in-law's sheep.

שמות ג':ב'

(ב) וַיֵּרָא מִלְּאֵךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת-אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּינָה וַיֵּרָא וַהֲגֵה הַסִּינָה בְּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּינָה אֵינָנָה אֹכֵל:

Exodus 3:2

(2) *An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.*

A fire is something you run away from, not towards. But this fire is different because its fuel source remains intact. The deduction that "the bush was not consumed" arouses curiosity and wonder, and Moses goes down to see it. This vision conveys a message: as the leader you will face adversity, but you will not be depleted.

שמות ג':ה'

(ה) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תַּקְרֹב הֵלֶם שְׁלֹ-וַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רֶגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי-לְדָשׁ הַזֶּה:

Exodus 3:5

(5) *And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground."*

This first encounter with God creates the framework for the later relationship. God is holy, the presence of God is demarcated by a boundary of sorts. The sacred requires a different manner of

comportment, reverence, respect. The violation of that boundary has catastrophic consequences.

שמות ג': י"א

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנִי כִּי אֵלֶּה אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Exodus 3:11

(11) *But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"*

We, the readers, already know more about Moses than he knows about himself! He is the perfect person to go to Pharaoh! He knows the language, culture, and thinking of the Egyptians. And yet he also knows that the slaves are his brothers. He has remarkable compassion and resolve. He is both fearless and reverent. Despite his modesty, we know that he is in a class of his own. He just has to get to that realization himself.

שמות ג': י"ד

(יד) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אִתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׂלֹתָנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

Exodus 3:14

(14) *And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'"*

"Ehyeh-I will be" is a strange name. One compelling interpretation: I will be with **you**. This is consistent with what God says to the patriarchs and is at the heart of the Bible's perception of God whether it is here or in a text like the 23rd Psalm: *I fear no evil because **You are with me***. God does not simply "exist" as "being"; God is God in relationship with human beings.

שמות ד': י'

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' כִּי אֵד-- לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם מִשְׁלֹשׁ גַּם מֵעַז דְּבָרָה אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פָּנָי וְקִבְד לְשׁוֹן אֲנִי:

Exodus 4:10

(10) *But Moses said to the LORD, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."*

The only one to comment about Moses' poor speaking ability is Moses himself! (Rabbi Barry Chesler). Everyone else seems to be able to hear what he says without much difficulty. This is a psychological statement rather than a physiological one. How do we interpret it? Lack of self-confidence? Lack of political skill? A tendency to malapropism? I am a man of deeds rather than

words? I have never seen myself in this way, and now You are placing me in a role that I am not ready for. The irony is that by the end of the Torah, he has filled many columns of parchment with his words.

שמות ד': כ"ב-כ"ג

(כב) וַאֲמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּנֵי בְכֹרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כג) וַאֲמַר אֵלַיִךְ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנֵי נְעֻבְדְּנִי וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחָם הַגֹּדֶל אֲנִי הִרְגִּיתָ אֶת־בְּנֵי בְכֹרֶי:

Exodus 4:22-23

(22) *Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: Israel is My first-born son. (23) I have said to you, "Let My son go, that he may worship Me," yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.'*

What is the meaning of being God's first-born? In the biblical world, the first born has a different status from other children. The first-born is the primary inheritor and the primary representative of the family. To God, Israel is the primary representative of the human family and has tremendous responsibility. In this statement, Moses lays out before Pharaoh what is at stake: Israel is God's firstborn; Israel makes God, God. If you don't free them, your first born, which makes Pharaoh, Pharaoh, will be put to death.

שמות ד': כ"ז

(כז) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵךְ לִקְרַאת מֹשֶׁה הַמַּדְבָּרָה וְלִלְוֶה וַיִּפְגְּשֻׁהוּ בְּהַר הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשְׁקְלוּ:

Exodus 4:27

(27) *The LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him.*

Up until now in the Torah, when brothers have met each other after long periods of estrangement, their meetings have been fraught with tension. Think of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. But here there is only love and joy. There is a realization that the task before them is ominous; Moses defines the qualities of a leader, and Aaron defines the qualities of the indispensable right-hand man, without whom the leader cannot succeed. In the tradition, the people fear Moses, but they love Aaron. The story could only proceed because they had a genuine love and respect for each other. Every nation at its founding possesses tensions that sometimes erupt into full-blown civil wars. This moment, at the Mountain of God no less, is a portent of hope for the success of their mission. Shabbat Shalom!