

Short Comments on Parashat Shmot
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December 25, 2021 21 Tevet 5782

שמות א':ו' נִימַת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא:
Exodus 1:6 Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. We cannot underestimate the significance of this verse. The formative period of Israel's history is over. The sense of loss and aimlessness is palpable. Without a direct link to the founders, the descendants ask themselves, who are we? What are we? Whither? א':ז' וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאֶרֶץ אֹתָם:

1:7 But the Israelites were fertile and swarmed; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. A stunning verb in this context! It echoes Creation's account of the sea creatures (Gen. 1:20) but hints that this is the way the Egyptians perceived them. א':ט"ו וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמַיְלֵדֵת הָעֵבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שָׂם הָאֱחָת שְׁפָרָה וְשָׂם הַשְּׂנִית פּוּעָה:

1:15 The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah. We don't really know if the midwives were Hebrews! Commentators (based on the Greek translation and Josephus) make a strong case that they were *midwives to the Hebrews*. They are exemplars of the idea that the moral impulse is not exclusive; it belongs to all humanity. This is a much stronger reading.

ב':ו' וַתִּפְתַּח וַתִּרְאֶהוּ אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה-נֹעֵר בְּכָה וַתַּחֲמֵל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מֵיִלְדֵי הָעֵבְרִים זֶה:

2:6 When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." Consider for a moment what would have happened if she didn't have compassion. All of Jewish history hinges on a simple moment of maternal compassion.

ב':י' וַיִּגְדֵל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבֹאֵהוּ לְבַת-פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי-לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן-הַמַּיִם מִשִּׁיתָהוּ:

2:10 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." At what point does Moses understand who he is? Does he have memory of his childhood? To what extent does that impact his life? To whom does he belong, Egypt or Israel? ב':י"א וַיְהִי וּבְנֵי מִצְרַיִם וַיִּגְדְּלוּ מִשָּׁה וַיִּבְצֵא אֱלֹהֵינוּ וַיִּרְא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיִּרְא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מִפְּנֵי אִישׁ-עֵבְרִי מֵאֲחָיו:

2:11 At that time, when Moses had grown up, he

went out to his **brothers** and saw their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his **brothers**. The text so subtly takes us into Moses' internal conflict. Why does it refer to them as **his brothers**? Because that's what they are to him.

ב':י"ב וַיֵּצֵא וַיִּפְּן כַּה וְכַה וַיִּרְא כִּי אִישׁ אִישׁ וַיִּדְ אֶת-הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל:

2:12 He turned this way and that Why? Is he looking for other authorities? Is he planning to strike the taskmaster? Is he assessing the risks of involvement? *and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian* How hard? With or without a weapon? Was there blood? Did the victim lose consciousness? Did he die immediately or sometime later? **and hid him in the sand.** Partially or completely? Enough to smother him or just enough to enable him to breathe? Is this murder or manslaughter? Was it a justifiable act in defense of a helpless individual in mortal danger, or an act of excessive zeal and vigilantism?

ב':י"ג וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׂנִי וַיִּהְיֶה שְׁנֵי-אֲנָשִׁים עֹבְרִים נֹצֵחַ וַיֹּאמֶר לְרִשָּׁע לְמָה תִּכֶּה רַעַךְ:

2:13 When he went out the next day, Why does he go out the next day? Why didn't he already escape? Was he trying to go about business as usual? Was he trying not to draw attention to himself? Or did he now have an enhanced sense of identity and self-confidence? Did he know if he actually killed the Egyptian? *he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the evil one*, that is, the *evil one* in Moses' judgement. He assessed the situation and came to the aid of the victim, "Why do you strike your fellow?" Why were they fighting in the first place? Perhaps they were debating if the death of the Egyptian was good or bad for them. Maybe one said, "This is a great thing! This is the beginning of our liberation!" Maybe the other said, "This is horrible! This is going to get us all killed!" Off came the gloves.

ב':י"ד וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שָׂמְךָ לְאִישׁ שָׂר וְשָׁפַט עָלֵינוּ הֲלִקְרַגְנִי אֲתָהּ אֹמֵר כְּאִשֶׁר תִּרְגַּם אֶת-הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּרְא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן נֹדֵעַ הַדָּבָר:

2:14 He, the wicked one retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Us, meaning me and my victim. Does the victim also want Moses to butt out of their fight and let them settle it themselves? *Do you mean to kill me as you killed*

the Egyptian?” Does Moses even know he killed the Egyptian? If so, then how could he have neglected to see the commotion around the discovery of the deed? *Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known!*

בי:ט"ו וישמע פרעה את־הדבר הזה ויבקש להרג את־משה ויברח משה מפני פרעה וישב בארץ־מצרים וישב על־הבאר:

2:15 And Pharaoh heard of the matter. Pharaoh is in a bind. He is Moses' 'grandfather' and also the 'father' of all Egyptians. If he lets Moses go unpunished, he'll lose credibility among the Egyptians. If he punishes Moses, he'll make his daughter suffer and lose her as well! **And he sought to kill Moses;** without any judicial process. Pharaoh, the complete antithesis of Abraham who sacrifices his relationship with his son to serve God, sacrifices his relationship with his daughter for the sake of maintaining his power over his people, ie. to serve himself! *But Moses fled from Pharaoh.* Not only for his life, Moses flees out of revulsion, because he realizes that Egypt venerates power, is corrupt, distorts justice and gives no value to moral human instincts. *He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.* And thinks about all of this.

בי:כ"ב ותלד בן ויקרא את־שמו גרשם כי אמר גר ה'יתי בארץ נכריה:

2:22 She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land." His lack of identity is the identity he wants to give to his son. The son of Moses will be a constant reminder of Moses' homelessness.

בי:כ"ד-כ"ה וישמע אלקים את־נאקתם ויזכר אלקים את־בריתו את־אברהם את־יצחק ואת־יעקב: **וירא** אלקים את־בני ישראל נדע אלקים:

2:24-25 God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and God took notice of them. Umberto Cassuto notes that the verbs **שמע**, **ראה**, **זכר** - **to hear, to see, to remember** are all used in Genesis when God responds to other instances of human suffering. The Torah thus has primed us for the Divine response to Israel's suffering in Egypt.

גי:ג' ויאמר משה אסרה־נא ואראה את־המראה הגדל הגדל מדוע לא־יבער הסנה:

3:3 Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" Is he reacting to the spectacular **sight** of the burning bush or to his **understanding** that the bush is on fire but not disintegrating? How long

would it take for him to determine that a burning bush is not turning to embers and ash?

גי:ד' וירא ה' כי סר לראות ויקרא אליו אלקים מתוך הסנה ויאמר משה ויאמר הגני:

3:4 And God saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." God responds to Moses' curiosity. This is divine validation of the scientific method! God honors those who follow their curiosities for discoveries.

גי:ה' ויאמר אל־תקרב ה' של־נעליך מעל רגליך כי המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת־קדש הוא:

3:5 And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. The kohanim walked barefoot in the Temple. *Wherever the Shekinah is revealed it is forbidden to wear shoes. Shmot Rabbah*) Why? Footwear represents the boundary between the body and the impure world. Removing footwear removes potential impurity. In the Temple the priests would wash their feet. Here there is no water.

גי:ו' ויאמר אנכי אלקי אביך אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב ויסתר משה פניו כי ירא מהביט אל־האלקים:

3:6 I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses **hid his face,** for he was afraid to look at God. How interesting it is that the man who, later on in the book (33:18), only wants to have a direct experience of God's presence, hides himself when he first encounters God's presence. Here, Moses shields himself; there, after the Golden Calf incident, God insists that Moses be shielded from him.

די:ט"ט ויאמר ה' אל־משה במדון לה שב מצרים כי־מתו כל־האנשים המבקשים את־נפשי:

4:19 The LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead." We were told earlier that only Pharaoh wanted to kill Moses; but here we are told that **men** are seeking to kill him. What is the significance of this piece of information? For those of us who think that Moses committed manslaughter, this information signifies that the statute of limitations has been reached on Moses' liability. With the death of the avengers, Moses now is entitled to amnesty, similar to the way the death of the High Priest entitles amnesty to those who commit manslaughter. They can leave their cities of refuge and return home to their families.

Shabbat Shalom!