



First words, and first sentences¹ always demand our attention. *These are the names* takes us back to the previous story, but it also signals to us that we are in a state of transition to a new story. Like

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:	<i>These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each man and his household they came</i>
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the recitation of a Yizkor or the credits at the end of a movie, so much information is encoded in the list of these names. Reciting the list

takes us back to the past, but the word at the center of this verse, **מִצְרָיִם** - *to Egypt* situates us the present. Here we are. And then the very interesting phrase, **אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ** - *each man and his household they came*, or more elegantly, *each man coming with his household*. Note this subtlety: the sons of Jacob are not only defined by their names, they are defined by their **households**. Note also this is just slightly different from the way they are described at the end of Genesis (46:8): **וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם יַעֲקֹב וּבְנָיו יַעֲקֹב וּבְנָיו** - *These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt, Jacob and his sons*. In the commentaries there is an interesting debate as to what the term **בֵּית**-**household** means. To some these are **חֲלָבָיו** - *descendants*. To others, this means **כִּי עִם נְשׁוֹתֵיהֶם בָּאוּ שָׁם** - *that they came there with their wives*. In other words, now they are defined, one way or another, as **family men**, whereas before they were primarily **sons and brothers**. This also signals a key theme in the book of Exodus: **בֵּית**-

household. If we fast-forward to the exodus itself, we recall that in the preparation for departure, each man was to take a lamb for the meal: **אִישׁ שֵׂה לְבֵית־אָבִתָּהּ שֵׂה לְבֵיתוֹ** - *a lamb to their Fathers' House, a lamb per household*. (Exod. 12:3) Why the emphasis on **בֵּית**-**household**? Because slavery employs a strategy to crush families. Every despot and totalitarian regime understands that in order to exert power over individuals, you need to destroy their primary bonds. Children are separated from parents, wives from husbands etc. By emphasizing the household, the Torah is teaching us that the primary means of being free is through the re-constitution of primary family bonds. Note also one more thing: there is a progression here from **אִישׁ** to **בֵּית** to **עַם** - *man to family to nation*. That is the progression of the story of Israel.



Pharaoh's Daughter Sees the Basket²

So much of the Bible and, by extension, Jewish history hinges on single moments where everything could have gone another way. Let's follow the progression of verbs. 1. Pharaoh's daughter, in an entourage, **goes down**

to the Nile. 2. **She sees** the basket - an accident. 3. **She sends** a maiden - a decision. 4. **She takes** the basket - a decision. 5. **She opens it** - a decision born out of curiosity. 6. **She sees** the child - a result of her curiosity and obviously sees that it is a boy. 7. **She pitied**. This **seventh moment** (not an accident!) is the moment where everything could have changed. And it is a stunning moment. Because if she didn't have compassion, if her feelings weren't aroused, she wouldn't have responded in the way she did. She knows that male children of the Hebrews are being thrown into the Nile. Indeed, she is probably not that far

וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וּנְעֻרֹתֶיהָ הֵלְכֹת עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתְּבָחָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אִמָּתָהּ וַתִּקְחֶהּ: וַתִּקְמָחַ וַתִּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה־נֹעֵר בֵּכָה וַתַּחֲמֶל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לִדֵי הָעִבְרָיִם זֶה: שְׁמוֹת בֵּ-ה-ז	<i>Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe at the Nile, and her girls were walking along the Nile. She saw the little-ark among the reeds and sent her maid, and she took it. She opened [it] and saw him, the child—now here, a boy weeping! She pitied him, and she said: One of the Hebrews' children is this! Exod. 2:5-7</i>
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¹ Initial word *We-elle shemot* (And these are the names) inhabited by dragons, birds, hybrids, at the beginning of Exodus. Origin: Germany, late 13th century. Scribe: Baruch. Folio 63v. From the British Library.

² Screen capture from *The Ten Commandments*. Pharaoh's daughter played by Nina Foch. Infant Moses played by Fraser Clarke Heston, the actual son of Charlton Heston.

from where that is being done, which makes this scene all the more jarring. Here she is going for a daily bath and somewhere, not too far from where she is right now, the Egyptians are casting Hebrew baby boys into the Nile, with all the sadism and torment that can only be imagined. She sees this boy in a basket and would have had to ask herself why is this child in a basket? But the critical line here, **the seventh verb in a string of verbs**, is that she has compassion for him. How much of a time lapse exists between **seeing him** and reacting to him? Is it an instant? Is she being human, and reacting like any human creature

would react, or is she waiting just a beat and discovering that she now has a very big problem. *What do I do? I see this child. This child is in a basket. Someone is trying to save this child. Here this child is in front of me. Do I just let this child go down the river or do I do something? And if I do something I will be defying my father. If I don't do something, this child will die.* When it comes to risking your life in defiance of authority, our tragic experience has demonstrated that 99% of people would have looked the other way. But she does not. Her reaction is instinctive but also a result of a cognitive act. She makes a

deliberate decision. And once the decision is made, she understands that she is in defiance of her father. Which makes the scene all the more powerful. She is not merely taking the child as a doll or a plaything. She is, in her own human way, acting in defiance of her father's decree. She is, to use the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel (whose 50th yearzeit was this week) acting with **moral grandeur**. And we note that this makes her behavior consistent with that of the midwives who we saw in the previous chapter, who, in saving the Hebrew baby boys from death, also act with **moral grandeur**.



Moses Smites the Egyptian

But the theme of **moral grandeur** continues. **וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם - he saw their burdens** echoes the daughter of Pharaoh, his adoptive mother. How much time elapses between Moses seeing the burdens inflicted upon **his brothers**, and his seeing the Egyptian hitting the Hebrew man? We don't know. But compressed between **seeing their burdens** and **seeing** the hit is a hidden psychological process in which Moses begins to differentiate himself from his adoptive brothers (the Egyptians) and align himself in solidarity with his natural **brothers** (the Hebrews). The words **וַיִּפְּן כֹּה וְכֹה - he turned this-way and that-way** means not only that

he looks to his right and left, front and back, or his surroundings; they also signify Moses' internal struggle. *I am looking toward my Egyptian identity and toward my Hebrew identity.* **וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ - and saw that there was no man** could mean **no one who could witness what he was about to do**. But it could also mean **that there was no man who would stand up** to help another human being in distress, a victim. Indeed, Moses' adoptive mother made the same discovery when she opened the basket and saw the baby in it. She **sees** that there is no-one else who would save this child and resolves to do that herself. When Moses strikes the Egyptian, he

discovers that he has killed him. Is it manslaughter or murder? There is plenty here to argue both sides. The fact that Moses ends up in exile supports the manslaughter charge because, as we recall, Cain also is "exiled" after the slaying of Abel (Gen. 4:14) and fears retaliation from any future next of kin. When he sees the two Hebrews fighting, he again acts with **moral grandeur**. He chooses not to look away but gets involved. When Moses

chases away the aggressing shepherds at the well in Midian, again, he could have looked away. But with this third event, the Torah seals the pattern. With empathy for victims in each case, and with a keen awareness of the excesses of might and power, Moses demonstrates his **moral grandeur**. While it costs him his residency in Egypt, he nevertheless, acquires a wife, and like all those who came down to Egypt, he too, establishes his own household, albeit in exile.

<p>וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו: וַיִּפְּן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּבֶן אֶת-הַמַּצְבֵּי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל: שְׁמוֹת בִּי-אֵי-יב</p>	<p>Now it was some years later, Moshe grew up; he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brothers. He turned this-way and that-way, and saw that there was no man and he struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. Exod. 2:11-12</p>
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<p>וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וַתִּקַּח שְׁנַיִם-אֲנָשִׁים עִבְרִים נֹשְׂוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לְרֹשֶׁע לָמָּה תִּכֶּה רֵעִי: בַּיּוֹם</p>	<p>He went out on the next day, and here: two Hebrew men scuffling! He said to the guilty one: Why do you strike your fellow? 2:13</p>
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<p>וַיָּבֹאוּ הַרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיִּזְשַׁק וַיִּשְׁק אֶת-צֹאֲנָם: בַּיּוֹם</p>	<p>Shepherds came and drove them away. But Moshe rose up, he delivered them and gave-drink to their sheep. 2:17</p>
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Shabbat Shalom!

**Mazal Tov to Rabbi Dr. Mordy Schwartz on being named
the "Ripp Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections" at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.
From Rabbi Esther Reed and Family**