

Some Comments on Parashat Shmot: Moses Slays the Egyptian
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וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאַחָיו.
Now it was in those days, Moshe grew; he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, [one] of his brothers.

Exodus 2:11

norms and behaviors of the past from those of the audience. We are talking about a different epoch. And why is that important? Because it sets up in our minds the inevitable contrast between Moses' past and Moses' future, or the cultural crucible in which Israel is presently located, and that which they will create. The phrase is found in several places in the Bible. Take for example, the Book of Judges: **אִין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל** - **In those days there was no king in Israel** (Judges 18:1). Or in Esther, **בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם קִשְׁבָּת** - **In those days when King Ahashverosh sat on his throne** (Esther 1:2). And it becomes part of Jewish liturgy in the recitation of the blessings for miracles recited on Hanukkah and Purim - **שְׁעֵשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם** - **(Blessing God) who made miracles for our ancestors in those days** at this time and in the *Al Hanissim* prayer.

וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם. Literally, it was **in those days**. It's a formulaic phrase like *once-upon-a-time* that cues us to anticipate a story. Those words help the audience situate the events in the past, and they serve as a literary frame to differentiate the

The Past: Those Days	The Future
The rule of the Pharaoh. A human.	The rule of God. The One and Only.
Justice administered by raw human power and the state.	Justice administered by divinely inspired law and the elders.
Moses administers the law on his own.	Moses becomes a lawgiver.
Moses acts on deep sense of moral rage.	Moses becomes a model of humility.

וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה - **Moses grew**.¹ Wait! Wasn't he just a baby in a basket in the bullrushes a second ago? Wasn't he just taken out of the Nile? It's characteristic of the Bible to compress time into a few words, which in turn invites us to assemble the clues and put the story together in our minds. The Torah has already described one phase of his growth in the previous verse, using the exact same word: **וַיִּגְדַּל**. But in 2:10 it's **וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד** - **the child grew**. By comparing the two verses we get some interesting insights into the story:

Exod. 2:9-10	Exod. 2:11
וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּנִיקֵהוּ. So the woman took the child and she nursed him.	וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם Now it was in those days,
Explanation: The first phase of Moses' life is located within the tiny radius of mother and child, and in the time frame of childhood.	Explanation: The next phase takes place within the larger radius of the royal palace and within those days of Pharaoh's rule.
וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד The child grew,	וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה Moshe grew;
From infancy to childhood.	From childhood to adulthood.
וַתְּבִיאָהּ לְבַת פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֵן and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son.	וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens.
As a child, Moses transitions from the Hebrew zone of his birth mother to the Egyptian zone of his adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter.	As an adult, Moses transitions from the Egyptian zone of his adoptive mother to the Hebrew zone of his oppressed brothers.
וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן הַמַּיִם מִשִּׁיתִּיחוּ. She called his name: Moshe/He-Who-Pulls-Out; she said: For out of the water meshitihu/I-pulled-him.	וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאַחָיו. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, [one] of his brothers.
Moses gets his childhood identity in the form of an Egyptian name with a hidden Hebrew meaning.	Moses gets his adulthood identity by identifying with the victim of the Egyptian brutality.

¹There is rich commentary on this phrase, **וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה** - **Moses grew**. The midrash says, **שְׁמֹשֶׁה לְמַד כָּל הַחֲכָמוֹת אֶצְל כְּהֵנִי מִצְרַיִם** - **There are among our sages those who say that Moses learned all his wisdom from the priests of Egypt.** (Shmot Rabbah 1:26). Elijah Benamozegh (*Em Lamikra*, Italy, 1823 – 1900) and others interpret

this to refer to his studies: **יֵשׁ מְחַכְמֵינוּ שְׂאֵמְרוּ** - **There are among our sages those who say that Moses learned all his wisdom from the priests of Egypt.**

he went out to his brothers. In our conventional understanding of this moment, we identify **his brothers** as the Hebrew slaves. But if we follow Ibn Ezra's reading, **his brothers** here are **his Egyptian brothers!** Why? **כי נראה כי אין איש** *-because he lived in the palace of the king.* To Ibn Ezra it would make perfect sense that he would be seeing his **fellow Egyptians** and would be observing **their burdens** that is, the burden of the Egyptians in overseeing the Hebrew slaves. But the more conventional reading follows Rashi: **he gave over his eyes and his heart to be in distress over them.** In other words, he developed an immediate empathy for the **burdens of the Hebrews.** In our conventional reading, the ground-zero of his new identity is when he empathizes with the Hebrew slaves. In Ibn Ezra's reading, the ground-zero of his new identity is when he sees the single victim of the Egyptian being beaten.



And he saw an Egyptian man. We tend to read that this man is an Egyptian taskmaster. Notwithstanding the fascinating

midrashim about this incident,² there is only one problem: the text says **איש** *-man* and not **טַסְמַסְטֵר** *-taskmaster*. We already know about Egyptian taskmasters.³ An Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave would not have been that surprising to Moses. As post-Holocaust Jews, we also have no problem imagining that scenario. We think of the SS and the Kapos brutalizing inmates. But what if this person really was an **ordinary Egyptian man?** In this reading, here is an ordinary Egyptian who feels that he has total freedom to brutalize a Hebrew with impunity, following the example set by the state. This is not an example of ordinary **taskmaster brutality** which was probably common enough, but cruel **civilian barbarism.** This is an ordinary Egyptian man within the larger framework of a morally repugnant society acting with wanton cruelty and barbarity. *If the state can abuse Hebrews, why can't I?* In other words, this is a private lynching. What is Moses to do?

וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה	He turned this-way and that-way,
וַיִּרְאֵהוּ כִּי אֵין אִישׁ	and saw that there was no man [there],
וַיִּכֶּה אֶת הַמִּצְרִי	so he struck down the Egyptian
וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל	and buried him in the sand.

He turned this-way and that-way. The plain sense of this is obvious: he was looking to see if there is anyone

²From Shmot Rabbah: *Our Sages, of blessed memory, say: The taskmasters were Egyptian and the foremen were Israelite; one taskmaster was appointed over ten foremen, and one foreman was appointed over ten Israelites. The taskmasters would go to the homes of the foremen early in the morning to get them out to work with the crowing of the rooster. Once, an Egyptian taskmaster went to an Israelite foreman and directed his glance to his wife, who was beautiful and flawless. He arrived there at the time of the crowing of the rooster and got him out of the house. The Egyptian returned and consorted with his wife, as she thought it was her husband, and she was impregnated. Her husband returned and saw the Egyptian emerging from his home. He asked her: 'Did he touch you?' She said: 'Yes, and I thought he was you.' Once the taskmaster realized that [the Israelite] had sensed what he had done, he returned him*

around who will witness what he is about to do.⁴ Or he was looking to see if one of his Hebrew brothers would rise up to save his brother.⁵ Or perhaps he was looking to see if there is anyone who will join the aggressor. But we can also read this metaphorically. Having established that Moses is now constructing his new identity, he is going to **turn this way** - towards his Egyptian identity - and **turn that way** - towards his newly emerging Hebrew identity. The external choreography of his defining moment reveals the internal quandary that he needs to resolve. Accordingly, **when he sees that there is no man** he understands that there is no one here who will stand for basic justice. Out of moral necessity, he acts violently to save the life of another human being, the single most important moral imperative, out of which his new identity will emerge, therefore **he strikes the Egyptian.** Interesting: the Human Story and the Story of Israel begin with acts of violence resulting in death. Let's compare:

Cain slays Abel	Moses slays the Egyptian	Both stories are stories of manslaughter resulting in exile. Cain will be a wanderer and will live out his life in a city of refuge. Moses will run away to Midian, where he will find a wife and father two children, only to return once the sovereign has died.
וַיִּקַּח קַיִן אֶל הַבֵּל אֶחָיו וַיַּחַרְבֵהוּ.	וַיַּךְ אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל.	
Cain smites his brother.	Moses smites his non-brother.	
Cain commits violence to get God's attention.	Moses commits violence to save a life.	
Abel's body bleeds into the earth.	Moses covers the Egyptian in sand.	
Troubled, God asks him: <i>Where is Abel your brother?</i>	Emboldened, Moses asks a Hebrew aggressor, <i>Why do you smite your brother?</i>	
Cain responds, <i>I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper.</i>	The aggressor responds: <i>Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?</i>	
The human story is defined by killing life.	The Israelite story is defined by saving life.	

he buried him in the sand. This should probably be translated more precisely as **he hid him in the sand**, and if that is the case, Moses' goal in going out the following day may have been to retrieve the body, create an alibi, or dispose of it some other way. But alas, he encountered the two feuding Hebrews instead. A sand burial would have preserved the body somewhat but was still an indignity, considering the elaborate death rites of elite Egyptians. A fitting end for human cruelty.

Shabbat Shalom! Am Yisrael Hay!

to hard labor, and was beating him, seeking to kill him. Moses was looking at him and watching him, and he saw by means of the Divine Spirit what he had done at his home and saw what he was going to do to him in the field. He said: 'This one is certainly liable for execution, as it is written: "One who strikes a person shall be put to death" (Leviticus 24:21).

³From Exodus 1:11- **וַיִּשְׂמוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עַנּוֹתוֹ בְּסַבְלָתָם** *-So they set taskmasters over it, to afflict it with their burdens.* If the text wanted to specify a **taskmaster** instead of a **man**, it would have used the word, **taskmaster**.

⁴Umberto Cassuto and others. ⁵Meklenberg, *Haktav Ve-Hakabalah*.

עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי! שַׁבַּת שְׁלוֹמִים!

