

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHEMOT

**“For the God of my father has been my aid
and saved me from Pharaoh’s sword”**

By Rav Gad Eldad

a. Yosef vs. Moshe

Sefer Shemot opens with an introduction that is already familiar to us from *Sefer Bereishit*.

And these are the names of the children of Yisrael who came to Egypt; with Yaakov, every man with his household... And all the souls that came out of the loins of Yaakov were seventy souls, for Yosef was already in Egypt. (*Shemot* 1:1-5)

At the beginning of his commentary on *Sefer Shemot*, the Ramban explains that this introduction represents a literary technique to create continuity between the two *chumashim*, connecting the beginning of *Sefer Shemot* to the events recounted in *Sefer Bereishit*.

The list of those headed for Egypt in *Sefer Bereishit* draws a distinction between the family of Yaakov, who were coming from afar, and Yosef, who was already in Egypt. The text has followed the events of Yosef’s life since he was taken from his family, via all that has happened to him in this foreign land, to the stage where he reaches his royal station and become the savior of his starving family and brings them out of Canaan to Egypt.

Mirroring this “summary” of Yosef’s life, the list in *Sefer Shemot* offers a “preview” of the events to come. After the introductory data are presented, the reader discovers that the genealogical list is meant as the background to a parallel narrative. Moshe, too, is separated from his family and reaches the Egyptian palace. Ultimately, Moshe will also become the savior of his people; he will close the circle by leading them back in the opposite direction – from Egypt back to Canaan.

And just as the Torah followed the events of the savior in *Sefer Bereishit* until his path met up again with his family and he was able to save them, the text similarly follows the events of Moshe’s life far away from his home and family, until he comes back to Egypt with his God-given mission of leading *Bnei Yisrael* out, to freedom.¹

On the other hand, the details of their stories are quite

different. Yosef’s expulsion from his family is surrounded by a cloud of jealousy and hatred, while Moshe is placed gently, with great love, outside of the family circle in order to save him from the hostile environment. We do not know how Moshe’s Hebrew identity was maintained in Pharaoh’s palace, but there is no mistaking its power. When he leaves his “ivory tower” with the express purpose of viewing the suffering of his brethren, he manages to act as a savior on a small scale:

And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown, that he went out to his brothers, and he looked upon their burdens, and he noticed an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers. And he looked this way and that, and when he saw that there was no man, he struck the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. (*Shemot* 2:11-12)

As a result of this intervention, the next day he finds himself in mortal danger and is forced to flee:

And when he went out the second day, behold, two men of the Hebrews strove together. And he said to him that was in the wrong, “Why do you smite your fellow?” And he said, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me, and you killed the Egyptian?” And Moshe feared and said, “Surely this thing is known.” And when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moshe. But Moshe fled from before Pharaoh and dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well.” (*Shemot* 2:13-15)

With this episode in mind, we would expect that when God entrusts Moshe with the mission of bringing *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt, it will feel like a perfect fit. As the figure who made the first move in saving *Bnei Yisrael* from the Egyptians, it seems only natural that Moshe should be the one to complete the task.

b. Why does Moshe try to evade his mission?

It is therefore quite surprising and perplexing to read the lengthy and somewhat tiresome dialogue that Moshe maintains with God in an attempt to evade this mission.

At first he tries to refuse out of modesty, then he raises all sorts of difficulties relating to the stages of the mission and its chances of success, and finally he mentions his difficulty in speaking. When he runs out of excuses, he still tries to maintain his refusal, finally incurring God’s anger and His command that Moshe simply obey:

And he said, “O my Lord, send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send.” And the Lord’s anger burned against Moshe, and He said, “Is not Aharon the levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. And you shall speak to him, and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do...” (*4:13-15*)

¹ R. Yoel bin-Nun addresses the similarity between the life story of Yosef and that of Moshe in his article, “*Maavak Ha-Zehut shel Moshe: Eizeh Yeled lo Nimol U-Madu’a?*” *Megadim* 50, n. 28. We will refer to his article below.

We witness this crisis and are at a loss to understand what has happened to Moshe, savior of Israel. What has happened to the courage he showed when he killed the Egyptian?

Chazal explain that the behavior of *Bnei Yisrael* had caused Moshe to become disillusioned. Commenting on the verse:

And he said, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" **And Moshe feared, and said, "Surely this thing is known"** (2:14)

Rashi explains Moshe's reaction as follows:

"And Moshe feared" – in the plain sense. It also alludes to his concern at this evidence of evil informers among *Bnei Yisrael*, making him wonder whether perhaps they were not worthy of being redeemed.

"Surely this thing is known" – meaning, his killing of the Egyptian. It also alludes to Moshe's sudden insight: "The matter that I had wondered about is now clear to me. How have *Bnei Yisrael* sinned, more than any of the seventy nations, such that they are subjected to heavy labor? Now I see that they are deserving of it." (Rashi, ad loc.)

Rashi repeats this idea in his explanation of Moshe's first attempt to evade his mission. Commenting on the verse,

And Moshe said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt?" (3:11),

Rashi explains:

"Who am I" – In what way am I important enough to talk with kings?

"And that I should bring *Bnei Yisrael*..." – Even if I am important, how do *Bnei Yisrael* merit for a miracle to be performed for them, that I might bring them out of Egypt? (Rashi, ad loc.)

According to this view, Moshe's reluctance to take on the mission was based on substantive reasons.

An alternative approach focuses on Moshe's own life story and points to a personal crisis. This approach is presented in two different ways. It starts with the *midrash*, which again focuses on a comparison between Yosef and Moshe (*Devarim Rabba, Va'etchanan* 2) and criticizes Moshe for his "Egyptian" appearance (as evidenced in the words of Yitro's daughters: "An Egyptian man delivered us..." – *Shemot* 2:19) and the fact that he makes no effort to counter this impression. Moshe then marries a local woman, and the description of his integration into routine life in Midian is devoid of any noticeable resistance or special effort on his part to retain his identity.

And Moshe was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moshe Tzipora, his daughter. And she bore him a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, "I

have been a stranger in a foreign land..." And Moshe kept the flock of Yitro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock far away into the desert, and he came to the mountain of God, to Chorev. (2:21-3:1)

In light of this description, some scholars have proposed that following his trauma and disillusionment, all Moshe wanted was to dwell peacefully in Midian, forgoing his commitment to his brethren.

In contrast, other scholars develop the idea that Moshe remained loyal to his people throughout, but found himself in the midst of a culture that sought to assimilate him within itself, among other ways through strong family bonds. Moshe was thus forced to postpone his aspiration to help his people.

According to both views, the crisis that Moshe experienced was an altogether personal and private one.²

All of the above notwithstanding, from a plain reading of the text it appears that Moshe fled Egypt for fear of Pharaoh's revenge:

Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moshe. But **Moshe fled from before Pharaoh**, and dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. (2:15)

For this reason, God encourages Moshe by assuring him that the danger has passed:

And the Lord said to Moshe in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt, **for all the men are dead who sought your life.**" And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt, and Moshe took the staff of God in his hand. (4:19-20)

Whatever the explanation for Moshe's initial reluctance may be, we are once again reminded of the story of Yosef. Although the brothers "happen" to appear before him, Yosef, too, takes his time reverting to his identity as one of them, meanwhile maintaining his appearance as the Egyptian viceroy. Both Yosef and Moshe, before becoming saviors and imprinting their legacy on Jewish history, had to do some hard thinking before making their decision.

However, while Yosef deliberates as to the best way of dealing with mortals, Moshe grapples with the demand of God Himself, eventually incurring God's anger:

And he said, "O my Lord, send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send." And the Lord's anger burned against Moshe, and He said, "Is not Aharon the levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart." (4:13-15)

It is therefore quite surprising that Moshe emerges

² R. Yaakov Medan, *Ki Karov Eleikha*, pp. 34-42, proposes the first interpretation, while R. Yoel bin-Nun (see above, n. 1) argues for the second. However, he offers no explanation for Moshe's opposition to the mission that God wants to entrust him with.

unharmful from this encounter.³ Chazal comment on this:

“And the Lord’s anger burned” – R. Yehoshua ben Karcha said, Every time the Torah mentions anger (*charon af*), there is some indication of its impact, but here no mention is made of any impact and we find no punishment arising from this anger. R. Yossi answered him: Here too we find the impact: ‘Is not Aharon the levite your brother...’ – Aharon was destined to be a Levi, not the Kohen, while the *kehuna* (priesthood) was meant to emerge from you. Now it will not be so; rather, he will be the Kohen, and you – a Levi.” (Rashi 4:14)

Let us consider this point from a different angle.

c. Double meaning of the names given to Moshe’s sons

Unlike the story of Yosef, the years of Moshe’s crisis are concealed from us. However, on two occasions during this time he speaks: upon naming his children.

And Moshe was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moshe Tziphora, his daughter. And she bore him a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land.” (2:21-22)

The name of Moshe’s second son, Eliezer, appears only many chapters later. When Moshe meets up with his family again, after the Exodus from Egypt, we read:

And when Yitro, priest of Midian, Moshe’s father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel, His people, and that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt, then Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, took Tziphora, Moshe’s wife, after he had sent her back, and her two sons – of whom the name of the one was Gershom (for he said, I have been a stranger in a foreign land), and the name of the other was Eliezer (for the God of my father was my Help, and delivered me from Pharaoh’s sword)... (28:1-4).

A number of questions arise here. First, why is Eliezer’s name, and the reason for it, not mentioned at the time of his birth?⁴ Second, why does the Torah repeat Gershom’s name and the reason for it, after recording all of this already at the time of his birth?

Although there are instances in which the Torah gives an interpretation for a name that is different from its original meaning,⁵ it is rare to find the text repeating verbatim the reason for name already given and explained previously. This points to

³ R. Ze’ev Witman, in his article “*Beni Bekhori Yisrael*,” *Megadim* 48, pp. 37-45, develops the idea proposed by Rashbam and Shadal that the incident in the lodge on the way to Egypt, in which Moshe nearly loses his life, is a punishment for his reluctance to take on God’s mission.

⁴ R. Yosef Bekhor Shor (cited in R. bin-Nun’s article [see n. 1 above], n. 30) explains that Moshe gave this name to his second son and not the first, after he knew he had been saved completely from Pharaoh’s decree of death. However, this fails to explain why the Torah conceals the name up until the meeting with Yitro. When Eliezer was born, Pharaoh was already dead – as God had informed Moshe.

⁵ See M. Garsiel, *Midreshei Shemot Ba-Mikra* (Ramat-Gan, 1978). See also Yoel Elitzur, *Makom Be-Parasha*, p 71, concerning the names of the sons of Yaakov.

the possibility that, within the given context, we may detect a new meaning within those same words.

Attention should be paid to the fact that the reason given for Gershom’s name is formulated in the past tense, “I was a stranger (*ger hayiti*) in a foreign land,” even though at the time that Gershom is born and the name is given, Moshe is still a stranger in Midian.⁶ Perhaps the text is hinting that the reason for the name, appearing as it does at Gershom’s birth, is actually a sort of aside that portends its proper place – the second time that it is stated. On this later occasion, when Moshe is encamped with all of *Bnei Yisrael* in the wilderness, the use of the past tense is clearly appropriate: he had been a stranger in a foreign land. But Gershom is given his name at birth, in Midian. The logical order, then, would be for the formulation in *Parashat Yitro* to refer back to the reason given in *Parashat Shemot*, rather than the other way around. For this reason, it seems, Chizkuni comments:

“I was a stranger” – [in the sense of] “I am,” as in “I have given money [*nataiti kesef*],” “I have raised my hand [*harimoti yad*],” “and now I have become [*hayiti*] two camps,” and many other examples. (*Chizkuni* 18:3)

On this basis, we might propose the following hypothesis: The explanations for the names of Moshe’s two sons in *Parashat Yitro* are formulated in a deliberately ambiguous manner. This ambiguity hints to a change that took place in their meaning, in keeping with the events of the narrative. At the time of Gershom’s birth, Moshe referred to his situation at that time as a stranger in the land of Midian, where he was exiled. It may even be that when he gave Gershom his name, his actual words were formulated in the present tense: “for I am a stranger in a foreign land.” The formulation in the past tense, as it appears in *Parashat Yitro*, allows for a broader intention behind the name. By the time Moshe is leading *Bnei Yisrael* through the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt, the name can be understood in its plain sense, in the past tense, as referring to both Midian and Egypt.⁷

d. Eliezer’s name and Moshe’s journey

We shall now propose a similar idea with regard to the name Eliezer. To this end, let us go back to the conclusion of the “argument” between Moshe and God concerning the mission to Egypt:

And he said, “O my Lord, send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send.” And the Lord’s anger

⁶ Even if Moshe had decided to settle in Midian, it seems unlikely that he would describe his time in Egypt as a stay in a “foreign land,” since he was born and raised there. R. Yaakov Medan (see above, n. 2) understands the “foreign land” as a reference to Midian, and seeks to prove on this basis that Moshe regarded Egypt as his homeland, since at this point in time he had lost his Hebrew identity. R. Elchanan Samet (*Iyunim Be-Parashot ha-Shavu’a*, 3rd series, pp. 281-284) regards the “foreign land” as a reference to Egypt, since, according to his analysis, at this time Moshe had arrived at the awareness that Egypt was foreign to him.

⁷ This interpretation, proposing a change in the meaning of the name, was proposed already by M.D. Cassuto (*Perush Le-Sefer Shemot*, p. 417), but without attention to the formulation of the name in the past tense. Another attempt at an insight into the change in name is proposed in the *Da’at Mikra* commentary.

burned against Moshe, and He said, "Is not Aharon the levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. And you shall speak to him, and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do..." And Moshe went and returned to Yeter, his father-in-law, and said to him, "Let me go, I pray you, and return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive." And Yitro said to Moshe, "Go in peace." And the Lord said to Moshe in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt, **for all the men are dead who sought your life.**" And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt, and Moshe took the staff of God in his hand. (4:13-20)

Moshe first refuses to go, and he is rebuked. Then he decides to take on the mission, and he approaches his father-in-law to inform him of his intentions. Although he had already made up his mind to go, God appears to him once again, commanding him once again to go to Egypt. And it is specifically at this point that God now adds the information that the people who sought to kill him are dead. Why is it necessary for God to state this now that Moshe has already agreed to go?⁸

We might offer the following explanation. In the wake of God's anger, Moshe accepts the mission – but this does not necessarily mean that he is now convinced that he is the right man for the task. The text repeats the command to Moshe, specifically to negate any conditioning of one upon the other. Moshe has already decided to go, such that God's command is seemingly superfluous. However, God's command comes as he makes his decision, thereby reinforcing it and confirming that he has decided correctly, and that he will have success.⁹

Once Moshe has overcome his fears and decides to accept the mission, God retroactively demonstrates understanding for his doubts and tells him that the danger which he had originally fled, and which he now still fears, has passed.¹⁰

Now Moshe is making his way to Egypt, still not convinced that he is worthy of this task. He proceeds, filled with

⁸ According to R. Zeev Weitman (see above, n. 3), this additional command is necessary because Moshe deviated from the original command, which was to set out for Egypt immediately, choosing instead to ask Yitro's permission first. See also the proposals of R. Mordechai Breuer (*Pirkei Mikraot*, pp. 34-43) and R. Yaakov Medan (see above, n. 2, pp. 71-72).

⁹ Attention should be paid to the fact that God's command relates to Moshe's words to Yitro, since it repeats the same verbs that Moshe had used in describing his mission to his father-in-law:

And Moshe went and returned to Yeter his father-in-law and said to him, "Let me **go** (*elakha*), I pray you, **and return** (*ve-ashuva*) to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive." And Yitro said to Moshe, "Go in peace." And the Lord said of Moshe in Midian, "**Go, return** (*lekh shuv*) to Egypt, for all the men are dead who sought your life." (*Shemot* 4:18-19)

¹⁰ Admittedly, Moshe does not raise this consideration anywhere in his list of reservations. Perhaps he feared to raise such an issue, preferring to concentrate on aspects of the mission itself. However, God's own mention of this dimension indicates the understanding that He shows for Moshe's hesitation after the fact. God informs Moshe that the threat that he himself had feared to raise no longer exists.

doubts as to his chances of success – after all, "I am not a man of words..." However, at least it comes as some relief to know that the main obstacle has been removed; he is safe from Pharaoh's sword.

A short time later, with the birth of his son, Moshe commemorates this situation by naming the child Eliezer:

"For the God of my father has been my aid and saved me from Pharaoh's sword." (*Shemot* 18:4)

The current significance of the name is not praise for what happened in the past, but rather a plea for the future. Moshe, full of doubts as to what might come of his mission, draws encouragement from his own salvation from Pharaoh's sword, and encourages himself with the knowledge that the God of his father has been his aid.

It is possible that the sentiment behind the name was stated even more explicitly at the time: "May the God of my father be my aid, just as He delivered me from Pharaoh's sword!" The text deliberately omits the time stamp from the first part of the verse, so that Moshe's words may be read either as a declaration or forward-oriented call of encouragement concerning the future – that God should continue to be his aid – or as praise for the past – for helping him previously.

This is the difference between the moment when Eliezer is given his name, and the moment when the name is presented to the reader in *Parashat Yitro* – echoing the similar distinction discussed above with regard to the name Gershom.

The letters of Eliezer's name clearly indicate the connection to Divine aid, while the matter of deliverance is merely an auxiliary idea with no explicit reflection in the name. Now the reader understands the name as an expression of thanksgiving, for all of God's help throughout Moshe's mission and his struggle with Pharaoh, up until the final victory. At the time when the name was given, on the other hand, it was more of a declaration or request awaiting fulfillment. Only now has the name justified itself in full.

It may be that the Torah avoids explaining Eliezer's name in its original form until its meaning becomes entirely clear and the prayer turns into thanksgiving. (In the case of Gershom, the meaning is set forth from the start, pointing to the way in which both names should be understood.)

e. **The decision is what matters**

In conclusion, let us propose another reason for the Torah omitting the mention and explanation of Eliezer's name at the seemingly appropriate chronological point in time. With the name "Eliezer," Moshe gives further expression to doubts which, with time, came to nothing. By ignoring the name at that stage in the narrative, the Torah expresses an attitude towards the argument between Moshe and God.

Moshe had not been quick to accept the mission. He deliberated and protested to the point that God grew angry with him. However, this anger made no impression – because the Torah reflects recognition of the fact that to deliberate and doubt is to be human. Even if a person draws the process out endlessly, incurring God's anger, ultimately what matters in God's eyes is the result of his actions and how he decides the

matter one way or the other; in the determination that he shows in carrying out his given task.

Hence, there is no point in setting deliberations and doubts in stone. Rather, the Torah commemorates them retroactively in their formulation as thanksgiving and praise. Moshe did dare to argue, but in the end he also dared to decide. He also proved his wholehearted reconciliation with his decision, through his utter devotion to the very end.

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