YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Shemot**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**From Midian To Egypt**

Translated by David Strauss

### I. From Midian to the Lodging-place

And Moshe went and returned to Yitro his father-in-law, and said to him: “Let me go, I pray you, and return to my brothers that are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive.”

And Yitro said to Moshe: “Go in peace.”

And the Lord said to Moshe in Midian: “Go, return into Egypt; for all the men are dead that sought your life.” And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moshe took the rod of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moshe: “When you go back into Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your hand; but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go. And you shall say to Pharaoh: ‘Thus says the Lord: “Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn.”’”

And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Tzippora took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: “Surely a bridegroom of blood are you to me.” So He let him alone. Then she said: “A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision.” (*Shemot* 4:18-26)

Verse 19 in this section, in which Moshe is commanded a second time to return to Egypt, is difficult to understand. After the incident of the Burning Bush, at which time God promises Moshe to be with him and resolutely commands him to go to Pharaoh, why does He tell him a second time in Midian to return to Egypt? Moreover, Moshe has already decided to return and has already received Yitro's blessing for the journey. What reason is there then for this second command to return to Egypt? Furthermore, many commentators (Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni) assume that the words, "for all the men are dead that sought your life," refer to the death of the king of Egypt, mentioned at the end of Chapter 2. If the death of the king of Egypt is important to strengthen Moshe’s resolve to go on God's mission, why doesn't God mention this at the Burning Bush, when Moshe objects: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh" (*Shemot* 3:11)?

For others reasons as well, which we will not spell out at this time, it is difficult to read the verses one after the other as they are written. I propose that they be read as follows:

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| And Moshe went and returned to Yitro his father-in-law, and said to him: “Let me go, I pray you, and return to my brothers that are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive.”And Yitro said to Moshe: “Go in peace.” |  |
|  | And the Lord said to Moshe in Midian: “Go, return into Egypt; for all the men are dead that sought your life.” And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt. |
| And Moshe took the rod of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moshe: “When you go back into Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your hand; but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go. And you shall say to Pharaoh: ‘Thus says the Lord: “Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn.”’” |  |
|  | And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Tzippora took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: “Surely a bridegroom of blood are you to me.” So He let him alone. Then she said: “A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision.” |

The verses are arranged here in exactly the same order that they appear in the Torah, but in two columns.[[1]](#footnote-1) The left column by itself and the right column by itself present us with two different stories, which might have occurred at two different times, but the Torah joins them together in order to give a fuller picture of Moshe's departure from Midian to Egypt on the two occasions under discussion.

The story that interests us right now is the story in the left column. Moshe goes from the Burning Bush to ask for Yitro's permission to return to Egypt, but he tells him nothing about God's revelation at the Bush or about His plan to take Israel out of Egypt. He explains that he wishes to go to Egypt because he longs to visit his brothers. He takes his rod and goes on his own on God's mission, leaving his family in Midian.[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to our understanding, the second story takes place much later — decades later, as we shall explain elsewhere. Moshe is persecuted, not by the Pharaoh who dies at the end of Chapter 2, but by his heir, who adds to the burden cast upon the people of Israel with the decree concerning the straw.

He then returns to Midian, and when God informs him of the death of those who sought to kill him, he returns once again to Egypt, this time with his wife and children. On the way there, the incident occurs involving Moshe's younger son who had not been circumcised, and it is only circumcision that enables Moshe to continue the process of redemption, just as the people of Israel are not redeemed until they are circumcised. The two stories are joined into one in order to allude that God intends to kill Moshe's firstborn as well because of the delay at the lodging-house, just as he threatens Pharaoh that He will kill his firstborn if he delays sending out the people of Israel to serve Him.[[3]](#footnote-3) Once again, circumcision saved Moshe's firstborn from the Plague of the Firstborn, just as it, together with the paschal offering, would save Israel from the Plague of the Firstborn in Egypt.

### II. The Meeting AT the Mountain of God

And the Lord said to Aharon: “Go into the wilderness to meet Moshe. And he went, and met him at the mountain of God, and kissed him.” (*Shemot* 4:27)

"And he went, and met him at the mountain of God, and kissed him." This is what is written: "Lovingkindness and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (*Tehillim* 85:11). "Lovingkindness" — this is Aharon, as it is stated: "Your Tummim and Your Urim be with Your pious ones" (*Devarim* 33:8). "And truth" — this is Moshe, as it is stated: "He is trusted in all My house" (*Bamidbar* 12:7). Thus: "Lovingkindness and truth are met together." "

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other." "Righteousness" — this is Moshe, as it is stated: "He executed the righteousness of the Lord" (*Devarim* 33:21). "And peace" — this is Aharon, as it is stated: "He walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (*Malakhi* 2:6). (*Shemot Rabba* 5:10)

The warm meeting of Moshe and Aharon at the mountain of God stands in contrast to all the stories in the Book of *Bereishit* which describe a younger brother’s receiving the most important appointment (like that of Moshe), but arousing thereby the envy and hatred of his older sibling (as opposed to Aharon, who is happy for Moshe and kisses him). Kayin and Hevel, Esav and Ya’akov, and Yosef and his brothers are all examples of brothers in a similar situation, but in which jealousy prevails. Moshe and Aharon in the Book of *Shemot* are a counter-example, which attests to the extent to which brothers can love each other and work together without either one’s being concerned about his own honor.

Let us examine more closely the standings of the two brothers and their different roles.

Rashi cites the Midrash in connection with Moshe's request of God: "Oh Lord, send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send" (*Shemot* 4:13):

“By the hand” — by the hand of him whom You are accustomed to send, namely, Aharon.

Aharon is the presumptive messenger of God to the people of Israel prior to Moshe's arrival. The source of this assumption of Rashi is in the prophecy of the man of God to Eli the Kohen:

And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him: “Thus says the Lord: Did I reveal Myself unto the house of your father, when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest, to go up unto My altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before Me?” (I *Shemuel* 2:27-28)

According to what is stated in this prophecy, the priestly family of Aharon and his descendants is chosen already at the time of Israel's slavery in Egypt. Indeed, the Midrashic sources point to the fact that the tribe of Levi is the tribe that preserves the traditions of the Patriarchs. This tribe is apparently the only tribe which does not leave the land of Goshen to find livelihood on the banks of the Nile. Thus writes the Ramban in the wake of the *midrash* about the tribe of Levi in Egypt:

In the case of Levi, he mentions his generations and his years, and the generations of the fathers of the prophets and their years to their honor. And furthermore, they themselves were supremely pious, worthy of mention like the Patriarchs themselves. (Ramban, *Shemot* 6:14)

The Ramban bases this on the fact that in Chapter 6, Reuven and Shimon and their families are listed briefly, while the genealogy of the tribe of Levi is spelled out in great detail, including references to the principal women (Yokheved, Elisheva and the daughters of Putiel). The Torah also lists the lifespans of all the links in the chain, from Levi, through Kehat and Amram, to Aharon and Moshe. The tribe of Levi continues in the Book of *Shemot* the style that the Torah uses to discuss the Patriarchs, a style that includes the details of their children, their wives, and the years of their lives. Elsewhere, we noted that the Torah relates to Yehuda and to Yosef as heirs to the chain of the Patriarchs. However, in the book of *Shemot*, the tribe of Levi replaces them as heir to the legacy of the Patriarchs, both in knowledge and in practical observance, as it does not contaminate itself with the impurity of Egypt. Midrashic sources describe the unique standing of the tribe of Levi in general and of Amram in particular. We will cite some of them:

"For they have observed Your word, and keep Your covenant" (*Devarim* 33:9)… They objected to Israel in Egypt about their idol worship. From where do we know that Israel worshipped idols in Egypt? As it is stated: "And I said to them: Cast you away every man the detestable things of his eyes" (*Yechezkel* 20:7). And from where do we know that the tribe of Levi objected to them? As it is stated: "Is there not Aharon your brother the Levite? I know that he can speak well" (*Shemot* 4:14). What is meant by: "he can speak well (*dabber yedabber*)"? He spoke (*dabber*) and objected to them in Egypt, and he will speak (*yedabber*)and object in the wilderness. (*Midrash Tanna'im*, *Devarim* 13)

A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river" (*Shemot* 1:22) he said: “In vain do we labor!” He arose and divorced his wife. All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. (*Sota* 12a)

The chain of the tradition passes by way of Levi to Kehat and Amram. From Amram, the tradition passes to Aharon his son, for Moshe does not grow up in his house, but rather in the house of the daughter of Pharaoh, and from there he flees to Midian. As we saw in the prophecy of the man of God to Eli, God reveals Himself to Aharon already in Egypt and sends him to the people of Israel to tell them His word. Among the people of Israel during the time of their bondage in Egypt, Aharon is the backbone of the tradition of Grandpa Israel, the Patriarch Ya’akov, of the ancient and more recent prophecies of redemption, of the stories about the land of Canaan, and of the belief in one God, the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov.

Moshe comes to the people of Israel from the outside. He meets them for the first time when he leaves the royal palace, but this encounter lasts for only two days. Now he is about to meet them after not having seen his people for decades. He represents nothing of the ancient traditions of Israel. He has even failed to circumcise his own son. Until God appears to him in the Burning Bush, he does not even know God's name. But Moshe presents the people with the clear and explicit revelation of God, with the explicit promise to redeem them. Moshe is the one who hears at Sinai the word "I," and by the power of that word he comes to redeem the people. As the *Zohar* puts it, Moshe is the king's best fried at his wedding, whereas Aharon is the best friend of the queen, the people of Israel.

The meeting of Moshe and Aharon at the mountain of God is a meeting of brothers who have not seen each other since childhood. It is also the meeting of lovingkindness and truth, of righteousness and peace, as *Chazal* put it in the *midrash* cited earlier. The meeting of Moshe and Aharon is also a meeting of the tradition of Grandpa Israel, the hope and faith that burn in the inner hearts of the downtrodden people and in the Burning Bush in the wilderness, together with the revelation of God that is about to overturn the world order and start history anew.

1. Compare this to the words of my revered teacher, Rav Mordechai Breuer, in his book, *Pirkei Mikra'ot* (Alon Shevut: 2009), Chap. 5 (pp. 34-43). Our division of the text is similar, but our interpretations differ. Let the reader decide between the two. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We will deal elsewhere with the details concerning this mission, and especially the question why God informs Moshe about only the Plague of the Firstborn, when in fact that plague is preceded by nine other plagues. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compare this to the explanation of Shadal, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)