YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Shemot**

**Moshe Rabbeinu at the Beginning of his Mission**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

Translated by David Strauss

**I.**

And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moshe, and said: “Because I drew him out [*meshitihu*] of the water.” (*Shemot* 2:10)

The commentaries pondered the name Moshe. Did Pharaoh's daughter give him a Hebrew name? If so, why didn't she call him Mashui, "drawn out," seeing that he was drawn out of the water?

Owing to these difficulties, the Ibn Ezra, and to an even greater extent the Malbim, attempted to decipher the Egyptian meaning of the name Moshe. The Malbim, based on Philo and Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*, argues that in Egyptian the name means: "the one who was taken out of the water." Others interpret the name as "seed of the river" or as one who was born to some god whose name was deliberately omitted from Moshe's name.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Chizkuni is the only commentary that I have seen who argues that it was Yocheved, the boy's mother, who named the child, and that is why he was given a Hebrew name. He writes further that Pharaoh's daughter explained the Hebrew name, and did not change it to Mashui, because she hoped that Moshe would yet draw out the people of Israel from their subjugation to Egypt. The difficulties with his explanation are obvious.

I heard from my revered father that the word *meshitihu* in this verse does not mean, "I drew him out," in which case the statement would have had to have been made by Pharaoh's daughter, as it was she who drew him out of the water. Rather *meshitihu* here means, "You drew him out." Moshe's mother named him, as it was she who brought him to Pharaoh's daughter when he was two or three years old, after he was weaned, and a child at that age has a name; she herself explained the name to Pharaoh's daughter: "You drew him out." But Yocheved's intention was like that of the prophecy of her daughter Miryam – that the newborn child would deliver Israel.

This is indeed how the prophet Yeshayahu later interpreted the name:

Then His people remembered the days of old, the days of Moshe: Where is He that brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of His flock? Where is He that put His holy spirit in the midst of them? (*Yeshayahu* 63:11)

Yeshayahu interpreted Moshe's name as connected not to his being drawn out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter, but to his bringing the people of Israel out of the sea at the time of the splitting of the Sea of Suf.

**II.**

And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown up, that he went out to his brothers and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And he went out the second day and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to the one who did the wrong, “Why do you smite your fellow?” And he said, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you think to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moshe feared and said, “Surely the thing is known!” Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moshe. But Moshe fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midyan; and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midyan had seven daughters; and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moshe stood up and helped them and watered their flock. (*Shemot* 2:11-17)

The Torah does not reveal to us how old Moshe was when he killed the Egyptian and when he fled from the house of Pharaoh immediately thereafter. *Chazal*, followed by the Ramban, offer three opinions on the matter – 12, 20, or 40 years-old.[[2]](#footnote-2) We will adopt the middle opinion, which seems most reasonable to us – that Moshe was about twenty years old at that time. This age fits with what is stated here, that "Moshe was grown up," and also with the fact that at this same point in his life he marries Tzipora.

Moshe's action on the first day presents him as one who is fit to deliver Israel from Egypt. "With a strong hand and an outstretched arm," he smites the Egyptian who was abusing the Israelite. God acts in the same manner at the time of the exodus when He smites Egypt and delivers Israel from their hands. With this act, Moshe demonstrates that he is the son of Yocheved – whom *Chazal* identify with the midwife Shifra – who raised the banner of silent rebellion against Pharaoh and his decrees and saved the sons of Israel from his hand.

On the second day, Moshe rebukes the Hebrew man who is beating his brother. Thus, he teaches him the great principle of the Torah that R. Akiva would later expound from the verse, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (*Vayikra* 19:18), or the Torah principle as it was formulated by Hillel: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow" (*Shabbat* 31a).[[3]](#footnote-3) In doing so, Moshe sets himself as worthy of giving the Torah to Israel. With this act he demonstrates that he is the son of Amram, whom *Chazal* saw as the leading Torah authority of the generation and as continuing the chain of tradition that stretched from the patriarchs to the people of Israel in the generation of their bondage.

**III.**

Let us move on from Moshe's actions to the people of Israel's response to his actions, as reflected in the words of the Hebrew man who beat his brother:

And he said, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you think to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?” (*Shemot* 2:14)

It may be understood that we are dealing here with a lone villain, Datan ben Eliav.[[4]](#footnote-4) If so, we are exempt from dealing with his words. But it may be worthwhile listening to the beater's words, despite his wickedness.

When Moshe beat the Egyptian a day or two earlier, the *pasuk* describes: "And he looked this way and that way, and he saw that there was no man" (*Shemot* 2:12). The "man" in question might have been an Egyptian informer; when Moshe did not see such a person, he struck the Egyptian. But the matter can be understood differently: Moshe checked whether there was anyone who might save the battered Hebrew man. The "man," a term which in Scripture denotes importance, could have been a man of Israel. There were many Hebrews standing alongside their beaten brother, but no "man" was willing to confront the Egyptian taskmaster and stop him from beating their brother.

Moshe understood that his brothers' main problem was that they were terribly afraid of the Egyptian taskmasters. They were enslaved to Egypt not only in body, but also in soul. They were ready to be endlessly humiliated, provided that the whip did not land on their backs. The son of Yocheved – who defied Pharaoh and the decree relating to the midwives – understood that on the road to salvation, the first thing that must be done is to break the barrier of fear.

The Egyptians knew that the taskmaster was beaten to death, even though they did not find his body. The taskmaster did not return home that night, and the next day he did not return to work. The Egyptians immediately understood that the barrier of fear had to be restored. For this purpose, they had to impose exceedingly harsh decrees against the Hebrews, at least in the vicinity from which the taskmaster had disappeared. Everyone there was suspected of participating in the uprising. The condition of the Hebrews was worsened by Moshe's deed; nevertheless, no one informed on him. Now, when he began to offer reproach in an internal quarrel between two Hebrews and demanded that they listen to him, the beater argued that no one had appointed him as a judge. Since he was not suffering from bondage, he was not entitled to take steps that brought great suffering upon his enslaved brothers.

The beater was a wicked man. But his words may reflect – even if not in the harshness that he uttered them – displeasure with and suspicion of Moshe, who raised the banner of rebellion, thereby endangering his Hebrew brothers without their consent. They did not cooperate with him, and at this stage, they were even prepared to hand him over to the Egyptians.

If we examine the mindset of the enslaved Hebrews through later halakhic glasses, we may conclude that it reflects a Tannaitic disagreement during the period of Israel's servitude to Rome:

If heathens said to a group [of Jews], "Give us one of you and we shall kill him, and if not, we will kill all of you," they should let themselves all be killed and not deliver to them one soul from Israel. But if they designated [the person] to them – for example, Sheva ben Bikhri – they should give him to them and not let themselves be killed. R. Yehuda said: … But in a case when he is inside and they are inside, since he will be killed and they [other Jews] will be killed, they should give him to them and not let themselves all be killed… R. Shimon said: So did she [the wise woman of Avel Beit Ma’akha] say to them [Yoav and his army]:[[5]](#footnote-5) Anyone who rebels against the monarchy of the house of David is liable to [receive] the death penalty. (*Tosefta Terumot* 7:20)

The circumstances in the case discussed in the Tosefta are not the same as in our case. But it follows from the Tosefta that R. Yehuda argued that in certain situations, a Jew can be delivered into the hands of foreign authorities in order to save the public at large. R. Shimon (bar Yochai) maintains that if the Jew is not liable to the death penalty according to Jewish law, he may not be handed over, even if this will put the lives of the public at large in jeopardy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Although the resemblance between the Tannaitic disagreement to the dispute between Moshe and his enslaved brothers is not complete, there are similarities.

The dispute between Moshe and his enslaved brothers can be likened in part to the disagreement between Shimshon and the people of Yehuda (his mother's family) in the fight against the Pelishtim:

Then the Pelishtim went up, and pitched in Yehuda, and spread themselves against Lechi. And the men of Yehuda said, “Why are you come up against us?” And they said, “To bind Shimshon are we come up, to do to him as he has done to us.” Then three thousand men of Yehuda went down to the cleft of the rock of Eitam and said to Shimshon, “Know you not that the Pelishtim are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?”... And they said to him, “We are come down to bind you, that we may deliver you into the hand of the Pelishtim.” And Shimshon said to them, “Swear to me that you will not fall upon me yourselves.” And they spoke to him, saying, “No, but we will bind you fast and deliver you into their hand; but surely we will not kill you.” And they bound him with two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock. (*Shoftim* 15:9-13)

Shimshon's brothers do not recognize his rebellion against Pelishti rule, and they deliver him into the hands of the Pelishtim for fear of endangering the community at large, rather than stand behind him and fight the Pelishtim together.

The informing on Moshe, who had smote the Egyptian and rescued the Hebrew from his hands, was the stage at which Moshe despaired of his Hebrew brothers and fled to the land of Midyan – from his perspective, permanently.

Perhaps this is what Rashi means in his short words:

"And Moshe feared" – Explain it in its literal sense [i.e. he was afraid of Pharaoh]. A midrashic explanation is: He felt distressed because he saw that there were wicked men among the Israelites, common informers. He said: Since this is so, perhaps they are not worthy of being delivered. (Rashi, *Shemot* 2:14; and in sharper formulation in *Shemot Rabba* 1:30)

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A late "*midrash*," probably from the Cairo Geniza, which is not included among the classical *midrashim* of *Chazal,* views Moshe's killing of the Egyptian as an act of murder and accounts thereby for the decree issued against Moshe to die in the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land.

It seems that this *midrash* isolates – from our perspective, without justification – Moshe's action involving the Egyptian taskmaster from its broader context, Egypt's enslavement of Israel. This bondage included death decrees against the children of the Hebrews and presumably did not relate with stringency to those taskmasters who beat their Hebrew slaves to death. It can be assumed that many of the Israelites died or were permanently maimed. It is possible that a private case of an Egyptian cruelly beating a slave justifies a more lenient ruling against the beater.[[7]](#footnote-7) But here the Egyptian taskmaster was a soldier in an enemy army, which was doing everything possible to destroy Israel, and this was the way Moshe had to relate to him when he effectively offered to lead Israel while they were in bondage. Moshe acted correctly, not the Hebrew who struck his fellow Hebrew and defied Moshe, and not the later "*midrash*," which for some reason followed in his footsteps.

**IV.**

But Moshe fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelled in the land of Midyan; and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midyan had seven daughters; and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moshe stood up and helped them and watered their flock. And when they came to Reuel their father, he said, “How is it that you are come so soon today?” And they said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and moreover he drew water for us and watered the flock.” (*Shemot* 2:15-19)

The incident at the well, apart from its primary result – Moshe's joining with Yitro, the priest of Midyan, and his family – seems to complete a series of three consecutive acts in which Moshe intervenes in order to rescue a victim from his abuser: killing the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew, rebuking the Hebrew who was beating his brother, and rescuing the daughters of Yitro from the hands of the shepherds. We saw above that the first two incidents express Moshe's power to strike at Egypt and remove Israel from its midst and to give Israel the Torah. What is the nature of the third incident, apart from Moshe's very readiness for the third time now to rescue the oppressed party from his oppressor?

The conflict between the shepherds and Yitro's daughters at the well can be understood against the backdrop of the power advantage enjoyed by men over women and their ability to utilize the water drawn by the women for their own needs. On the other hand, it can be seen, as it was seen by *Chazal* (*Tanchuma Shemot* 11), as a religious conflict between the Midyanite priest who abandoned his idolatrous practices and those who remained true to their idol worship, but I have not found a hint to this in the text itself.

We will offer another explanation of the conflict between the shepherds and Yitro's daughters, in light of the verse that precedes Shaul's battle against Amalek:

And Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.” So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. (I *Shemuel* 15:6)

The term "Kenites" in the verse refers to the descendants of Yitro (*Shoftim* 1:16; 4:11). The Midyanite family of Yitro did not live among its people, but rather among the Amalekite tribes in the wilderness. It would seem that they were treated in a humiliating manner as second-class citizens, as a family of foreigners. When the daughters of Yitro came to draw water from the well and the Amalekite shepherds arrived there, the shepherds considered themselves entitled to chase away the foreign daughters and take the water for themselves, just as the shepherds of Gerar did to Yitzchak's shepherds when they settled in their land.

Moshe could not bear the injustice committed against the foreign daughters, and he rescued them with his physical strength. This was the first war against Amalek conducted by a representative of the Jewish People, and it was a signpost for later generations in their fight against the desert savages, who tried to turn the wilderness into a land without laws and without borders.

**V.**

While in the land of Midyan, Moshe married Tzipora, effectively joining the Kenite tribe and spending many years grazing his father-in-law's flocks. Throughout this innocent and peaceful period, the Egyptian taskmasters were beating Moshe's Hebrew brothers and issuing decrees against their children, while Moshe was tending to Yitro's sheep and goats. The reader may wonder: Where was Moshe's national consciousness and conscience during these years? Had he forgotten his brothers' suffering in their bondage? A non-canonical *aggada* tells us of the many years that Moshe reigned as king in the land of Kush.[[8]](#footnote-8) The question becomes stronger: Did Moshe forget his Hebrew origins?

It is possible to explain Moshe's behavior as the result of circumstances beyond his control, as he could not return to Egypt, where he was wanted for the killing of the Egyptian. But it is difficult for us to accept this simple answer.

The answer to this question lies in the comment of Rashi and the *midrash* cited above: When his Hebrew brother informed against him, Moshe despaired of his people and no longer considered himself a part of it. It should be remembered that Moshe grew to the age of two or three in the bosom of his Jewish mother, but from that time on he became a "child held captive among the gentiles," and he apparently grew up without a Jewish national identity and without *mitzvot.* His sudden encounter with his brother who was being beaten by his taskmaster might have reminded him of his Hebrew origins, but his encounter the next day with the Hebrew who was striking his brother and informing on him severed the weak connection that was created between him and his people, and Moshe sought out a different identity. This understanding may explain several difficulties:

1) Yitro's daughters tell their father that an Egyptian man rescued them from the hands of the shepherds:

And they said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and moreover he drew water for us and watered the flock.” (*Shemot* 2:19)

Assuming that Moshe heard their words at some point, he should have protested and insisted on being identified as a Hebrew and not as an Egyptian. *Chazal* caught him on this when he wanted to enter the Promised Land:

R. Levi said: He [Moshe] said before Him [God]: Master of the Universe, the bones of Yosef are entering the Land and am I not to enter the Land? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: He who acknowledged his land is to be buried in his land, and he who did not acknowledge his land is not to be buried in his land. Yosef acknowledged His land – from where do we know this? His mistress said: "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to mock us" (*Bereishit* 39:14), and he did not deny this, but rather [he said]: "For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews" (*Bereishit* 40:15). He is to be buried in his land. From where do we know this? "And the bones of Yosef, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, they buried in Shechem" (*Yehoshua* 24:32). You, who did not acknowledge your land, are not to be buried in your land. How so? The daughters of Yitro said: "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds," and he heard this and remained silent. Therefore, he was not buried in his land. (*Devarim Rabba,* *Vaetchanan* 2)

2) Moshe called his eldest son Gershom:

And she bore a son and he called his name Gershom; for he said, “I have been a stranger in a strange land.” (*Shemot* 2:22)

The name that Moshe gave his eldest son proclaims that the land of Midyan is a strange land, but the land of Egypt from which he fled is his homeland. This is also expressed in a *midrash* that states that Moshe agreed not to circumcise his son Gershom,[[9]](#footnote-9) which might reflect Moshe's agreement that Yitro raise him to worship idols.

3) At the burning bush, Moshe asks:

“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (*Shemot* 3:11)

Rashi explains Moshe's second question as follows:

How has Israel merited that a miracle should be wrought for them and that I should bring them forth from Egypt?

In other words, Moshe continues to alienate himself from the salvation of Israel.

As mentioned, it is possible that at this stage Moshe distances himself from his Hebrew origins and from his responsibility for his Hebrew brothers for the reasons spelled out above. The burning bush, and the call, "I am the God of your father" (*Shemot* 3:6), returns him to his roots and stirs up his powers to serve as God's agent to redeem the people of Israel.

1. Cited by S. Achitov, *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, s.v. *Moshe* (Jerusalem, 5728), vol. 5, p. 496. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Shemot Rabba* 5:2; 1:27); *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Va’era* 17; Ramban, *Shemot* 2:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also *Sifra, Kedoshim* 2:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the understanding of several *midrashim*. See, for example, *Mekhilta De-Rashbi* 18:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Shemuel II* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This disagrement brings to mind another Tannaitic dispute:

   R. Yehuda opened by observing: How fine are the works of this people! They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths. R. Yose was silent. R. Shimon ben Yochai answered and said: All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places, to set harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves; bridges, to levy tolls for them. (*Shabbat* 33b)

   R. Yehuda was willing, after the fact, to accept Roman rule, to view it as a decree from heaven, and to try to see the good in it. R. Shimon ben Yochai, in contrast, saw in it humiliating subjugation that necessitates a unification of the ranks that would eventually lead to rebellion. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this context, we will not consider the details of the laws pertaining to a descendant of Noach in this situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Targum Yerushalmi (known as Targum Yonatan), *Bemidbar* 12:1; Rashbam and Chizkuni, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Targum Yerushalmi (Targum Yonatan) on *Shemot* 4:24; and *Midrash Aggada* on *Shemot* 18:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)