

PRINCE OF EGYPT?

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Shemos

Prince of Egypt?

In this week's parashah we meet Moshe Rabbeinu and learn about his early experiences. We read (2:10-12), "The boy grew up and she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and he was a son to her. She called his name 'Moshe,' as she said, 'For I drew him from the water.' It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brethren. He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." Rashi z"l explains that the expression, "the boy grew," refers to growing up physically while the expression, "Moshe grew up," refers to being appointed overseer over Pharaoh's house. Ramban z"l comments on the phrase, "[He] went out to his brethren and observed their burdens," as follows: "He was told that he was Jewish, so he wanted to see them, for they were his brethren. Then he saw their suffering and toil, and he couldn't stand it; therefore he killed the Egyptian oppressor."

R' Menachem Genack shlita (Englewood, New Jersey) writes: In this light, we can interpret the phrase, "He turned this way and that," to mean, "He looked at the Egyptian man and the Egyptian culture in which he had grown up, and he looked at the oppressed Jew -- "and [he] saw that there was no man," i.e., in his eyes, the Egyptian man was not an important man, not a representative of a culture worthy of his respect but rather the representative of a contemptible culture. This reflects Moshe's greatness, for he was able to abandon the culture in which he had grown up in favor of a path of truth and righteousness.

Later in the parashah, the daughters of Yitro call Moshe an "Egyptian man." Midrash Rabbah faults Moshe for this and states that this was why he did not merit burial in Eretz Yisrael. Perhaps, writes R' Genack, this criticism is for the fact that Moshe *ever* considered himself to be Egyptian.

On the other hand, the name by which we know Moshe is not the name he was given by his parents--Toviah or Avigdor--but specifically the name that an Egyptian princess gave him. Perhaps, suggests R' Genack, this is meant to remind us that Moshe could have been an Egyptian prince but had the courage to abandon his privileged position and come to the rescue of an oppressed Jewish slave.

(Birkat Yitzchak)

"The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, the first of whom was called 'Shifrah' and the second of whom was called was 'Puah'." (1:15)

Rashi z"l writes: "Shifrah was Yocheved [the mother of Moshe] . . . Puah was Miriam [the sister of Moshe]."

R' Ovadia of Bartenura z"l (1445-1515; Italy and Yerushalayim; Mishnah commentator) asks: How did Rashi know this? He answers:

"Shifrah" connotes goodness and beauty, and befits someone with the name "Yocheved," which connotes "honor." "Puah" implies crying, which parallels "Miriam," from the root meaning to raise one's voice. (Amar Nakeh)

What forced Rashi to abandon the peshat / straightforward meaning of the verse, i.e., that Shifrah and Puah were the midwives real names?

R' Eliyahu Mizrachi z"l (1450-1526) writes that Rashi must have had a tradition to this effect. (Mizrachi)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes that the Torah is intended to teach, not to create mystery. Since we don't find any other information in the Torah about Shifrah and Puah [for example, their fathers' names or their tribe], they must have been people who are already known to us. (Gur Aryeh)

R' Menachem Mendel Schneerson z"l (1902-1994; Lubavitcher Rebbe) answers: The verse is difficult to understand literally. Were there only two midwives for a nation of hundreds of thousands?

He explains: The reality was, as Shifrah and Puah say later (verse 19), that the Jewish women did not need midwives. Why then were two midwives appointed? To calm pregnant women with the knowledge that there would be midwives available if necessary.

If the mere knowledge that two midwives existed was sufficient to bring comfort to tens of thousands of women (or more), it follows that those two midwives must have been known for their righteous and good standing in the community. That is why Rashi concluded that they were Yocheved and Miriam. (Beurei Ha'chumash)

"Moshe was frightened and he thought, 'Indeed, the matter is known!'" (2:14)

Rashi comments: "Now I know that which I have been puzzled about, i.e., I what way has Yisrael sinned more than all the 70 nations, that they should be oppressed by this crushing servitude? But now I see that they deserve this."

R' Yisrael Isserlin z"l (1390-1460; Austria; author of Terumat Ha'deshen) asks: Didn't Moshe know that exile had been decreed upon Avraham's descendants? He explains:

The Torah says that children will not be killed for their fathers' sins. How, then, was this exile possible? When Moshe saw that Bnei Yisrael spoke lashon hara, the same sin that Yaakov's sons committed, he understood, for our Sages teach that children who emulate their fathers' sins *will* be punished for their fathers' sins as well. (Beurei Maharai)

"Hashem said to Moshe in Midian, 'Go, return to Egypt, for all the people who seek your life have died.'" (4:19)

Moshe needed to return to Egypt to save the Jewish People. Why, then, was it relevant that those who sought to take his life had died? R' Meir Simcha Hakohen z"l (1843-1926; rabbi of Dvinsk, Latvia; known as the "Ohr Samei'ach") answers: This proves that a person is not obligated to endanger his life even if the entire Jewish People is counting on him.

R' Meir Simcha continues: We read (4:24), "It was on the way, in the lodging-place, that Hashem encountered him and sought to kill him (i.e., Moshe)." Our Sages explain that Moshe was liable for not circumcising his son the moment he reached the hotel. Why had Moshe not circumcised his son before leaving Midian? He reasoned, consistent with the above interpretation: "If I am not obligated to risk my own life to save the Jewish People, certainly I should not endanger my son's life by circumcising him immediately before traveling." And, Hashem apparently agreed with this. Moshe is faulted only for not circumcising his son the moment they settled down. (Meshech Chochmah)

R' Meir Dan Plotsky z"l (1866-1928; Poland) disagrees with the Ohr Samei'ach and writes that a person *is* obligated to endanger his life to save the Jewish People. As proof, he cites the fact that Pinchas endangered his life to kill Zimri, thus ending the plague that had stricken the nation (see Bemidbar ch.25).

The question arises, however: If Pinchas was only doing what he was obligated to do, why was he deserving of special reward? R' Plotsky answers: We know that saving lives takes precedence over all of the mitzvot. But, we might have thought that this is true only when the resulting salvation is "natural" [such as driving a seriously injured person to the hospital on Shabbat]. But, when Pinchas killed Zimri, he had no reason to think that he was directly saving lives, i.e., ending the plague that had struck Bnei Yisrael, as there was only a spiritual, not a natural, connection between the two.

Thus, Hashem had to make a special announcement that Pinchas had done the right thing.

R' Plotsky adds, parenthetically: When two events have a cause-and-effect relationship that has no natural explanation, we call that a "segulah." He relates: A chassid once asked the Gerrer Rebbe known as the Sfas Emes (R' Yehuda Leib Alter z"l; 1847-1905) for a segulah for a sick relative. The Rebbe replied, "I don't know anything about segulot, except for the one mentioned in the Torah (Shmot 19:5), 'And now, if you listen well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me a segulah [in that context meaning: 'the most beloved treasure'] of all peoples, for the entire world is Mine'." (Kli Chemdah: Parashat Pinchas)

Memories of Yerushalayim

R' Ben-Zion Yadler z"l (1871-1962; the "Maggid / preacher of Yerushalayim"), describes in his memoir, B'tuv Yerushalayim, his role in establishing and supervising the eruv in Yerushalayim. The following is an open letter he published on 18 Sivan 5696 / June 8, 1936 during a period of Arab rioting:

Our brethren, the inhabitants of Yerushalayim, the Holy City, may it be built and established!

As is well known, there existed until now a general outer eruv, located far from the areas inhabited by Jews, encircling Yerushalayim and all of its neighborhoods, near and far. Because of this, it was permitted until now to carry on Shabbat throughout the city, from one neighborhood to another, as well as within neighborhoods--even neighborhoods without their own eruv--and on every street in Yerushalayim without exception.

Now, however, because of the situation which exists in our Holy Land, we painfully recognize that there is no guarantor that the general eruv is intact. Obviously, it is impossible to supervise and inspect the eruv far from the areas inhabited by Jews. Also, as is known, they [the Arabs or the British] are presently uprooting the telephone lines and telegraph lines; who can guarantee, therefore, that the eruv strings surrounding Yerushalayim will not be severed? It is known that if the eruv string is severed in even one place, carrying is forbidden in all the neighborhoods and streets of Yerushalayim that relied until now on the general eruv. Moreover, even in private courtyards, carrying is forbidden unless each courtyard makes an eruv chatzeirot of its own.

Therefore, there is no alternative other than for every neighborhood to make an eruv of its own. Thereafter, all the neighborhoods can be joined together by an inner eruv within the area inhabited by Jews. Then it will be possible to supervise it at all times and to fix at all times that which needs to be fixed. In this way, it will be possible to carry on Shabbat on the streets within the populated area of Yerushalayim.

The one appointed over eruvin, en-Zion Yadler

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