

FUNNY, YOU DON'T LOOK JEWISH!

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The son of an Israelite woman went out among the Bnei Yisrael – and he was the son of an Egyptian man. They fought in the camp, the son of the Israelite woman and an Israelite man. The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name of G-d, and blasphemed, so they brought him to Moshe. The name of his mother was Shlomis bas Divri of the tribe of Dan.^[2]

There are many surprises in these few *pesukim*. Not surprising is that all of the problems are solved when they are read according to the teaching of Chazal.

Consider these:

We are told that the protagonist here “went out.” Went out from where?

People are identified in the Torah by the group to which they belong. That association is determined by the father, not the mother. We would have expected the Torah to record him as the son of an Egyptian man (which would fix his group status) and a Jewish woman.

Why is his lineage given in such a roundabout manner: “and he was the son of an Egyptian man?” The Torah could have more efficiently combined his parents, and stated that “the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man went out.”

If we already know that he “went out among the *Bnei Yisrael*,” is it not obvious that “they fought in the camp?” The camp is where the *Bnei Yisrael* all lived!

Matters of law had to be brought to Moshe. Prisoners did not. Why did they bring the blasphemer to Moshe, rather than just ask him about a point of law?

Why are we first told – multiple times! – about his being the son of some anonymous Jewish woman. In the end, we are told her name. Why, then, the anonymity to begin with?

We are familiar with Chazal's understanding of this narrative. The Egyptian was none other than the one killed by Moshe, who witnessed his cruel treatment of a Jewish slave – Shlomis' husband. The relationship between the perpetrator and the victim was not by chance. The Egyptian had been taking advantage of Shlomis, until discovered by her husband, at which point the Egyptian mercilessly turned on him. The blasphemer was the product of the illicit union. He wished to hide his sordid roots, and tried passing himself off as just another member of the tribe of Dan, entitled to live among them. They would have none of it. They were on to him. They told him that tribal

membership followed the father; in his case, his paternal legacy was a stained identity.

Chazal offer no source for this approach. This is not uncommon at all. They were the recipients of a *mesorah* from Sinai; they need no better authority than that. We would accept their approach on that basis alone. When we examine the text more closely, however, we see that their understanding of the *parshah* explains away all the difficulties that we listed.

The story begins with the villain "going out." He had determined to go outside of his previous invisibility, and to claim full membership in his mother's *shevet*. The sequence in which his mother and father are introduced is precise. He wanted to assert his rights through his mother, despite the fact that his father was an Egyptian. This began a fight "in the camp," i.e. it concerned his rights of residence within the camp of Dan. The text underscores that the dispute was between "the son of the Israelite woman and an Israelite man" because that points to the positions of the contesting parties. One tried to assert rights as the son of his mother. The other rejected any claim to membership in Dan, and argued that he was entitled to no more than some general, amorphous identity as "an Israelite man," outside the boundaries of any particular tribe.

They brought him to Moshe, because his very appearance gave him away. Moshe, like everyone else, was able to see that this person did not come from the same stock as his disputants.

It did not end there. Looking at him, Moshe saw more than non-Jewish features. He recognized in the son the similarity in some features to his mother. Moshe remembered the details surrounding the Egyptian taskmaster that he had eliminated. He was able to place the blasphemer in the specific context of a woman who had been victimized by an Egyptian, necessitating Moshe's intervention. The fuller back-story about the blasphemer became apparent to Moshe.

He understood the implications of the lineage of this man. This is what the Torah alludes to in the last line cited above. "The name of his mother was Shlomis bas Divri of the tribe of Dan." Moshe understood this person's background, and the anger that seethed inside him.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711.
2. Vayikra 24:10-12.