

THE SELECTION OF MOSHEH

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I

WHY MOSHEH?

In Parashat Sh'mot we are introduced to the central personality of the Humash - Mosheh Rabbenu. Mosheh's position as consummate leader and foremost prophet (Av laN'vi'im) is unrivaled, unchallenged and unquestioned within our tradition. What we are not told - at least not explicitly - is why Mosheh (if that is his real name - see Sh'mot Rabbah 1:20) was selected to lead the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt, to Sinai and (ideally) into the Land. In this shiur, we will attempt to find textual clues to explain the reason for his selection as Eved Hashem (the servant of God) at this critical point in our history.

WHY THE REPETITION?

Let's begin with another question, addressed by some of the Rishonim: The Torah listed the names of all of the members of Ya'akov's household who descended to Egypt (B'resheet 46:10-27). Why does our new Humash - Sh'mot - begin with a partial recount of those names (1:1-4)?

Rashi responds that this demonstrates God's love for His children, that he counts them during their lives and, again, after their deaths. As Ramban points out, this is a profound piece of homiletics which reflects the special relationship that Ya'akov's family has with God - but it isn't the p'shat(straightforward) explanation of the repetition. (Perhaps Ramban was bothered by the extensive list in B'resheet as opposed to the brief list in Sh'mot).

Ramban explains that the theme of Sefer Sh'mot is G'ulah - redemption (he refers to Sh'mot as Sefer haG'ulah - see his introduction to Sefer Sh'mot). Therefore, the story needs to "pick up" from the onset of the exile, in order to allow the Sefer to be thematically whole. The reason that only a few names are mentioned in Sh'mot is that this is a thumbnail sketch and reminder of what we already know from B'resheet - sort of a "previously in our story" introduction to the next episode.

There may be something else implied by this brief recounting which will also help us figure out why Mosheh was the ideal leader to reverse the fortunes of the house of Ya'akov - but, first, a much larger question:

WHY DIPLOMACY?

The goal of Mosheh's mission seems to be to lead B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt and to bring them to Sinai to worship God (see 3:12) - and then to the Land (3:8). Why must this job be done with diplomacy - and with the protracted and painful negotiations with Pharaoh which take a long time (according to the Midrash - one year) and take a terrible toll in human suffering? Why couldn't the omnipotent God just take the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt in one fell swoop? Surely our imaginations can easily conjure up a picture of swift and immediate redemption and exodus - but that wasn't God's plan. Why did God elect to employ a diplomat and to command him to negotiate with Pharaoh?

II

THE PURPOSE OF THE EXODUS

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the exodus was not merely to liberate this nation of slaves - or even to resettle them in their ancestral Land - it was to bring them to Sinai:

...and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain. (3:12)

The clear expectation is that the people will be willing to follow Mosheh out of Egypt, into the desert - and worship God at that place. (There is a further expectation - that they will be willing to follow him into the Land - see the Ramban on this verse.)

For this to happen, the B'nei Yisra'el will have to be fully aware of two realities: Who God is - and who they are. They must have full awareness that Hashem, the God of Yisra'el is the only power to whom they owe complete allegiance and that He controls the heavens and earth.

They must also be aware of their glorious past and even more glorious destiny. They are the direct descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov; they are destined to become God's cherished people, His treasure among the nations - and a kingdom of Kohanim (Sh'mot 19:5-6).

We may infer from the verses at the beginning of our Sefer that the B'nei Yisra'el, at this point in time, did not share either of these critical attitudes and beliefs. (This deficiency becomes clear as Mosheh tries to convince the people that they should cooperate - and they want him to leave the situation as is and accept the status quo - see 5:19-21) As a people, they were in no way prepared for this national metamorphosis. Let's examine the beginning of our Sefer to discover the self-image of the B'nei Yisra'el at the time of imminent G'ulah. We will focus on three passages in the first chapter to illustrate the point.

III

"THESE ARE THE NAMES"

These are the names of the B'nei Yisra'el who came to Egypt with Ya'akov, each with his household: Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi, and Yehudah, Yissachar, Z'vulun, and Binyamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. (1:1-4)

If we compare this brief list with the (nearly) exhaustive list of the seventy members of Ya'akov's household who descended to Egypt (B'resheet 46:10-27), we note two glaring differences:

(A) The B'resheet list is complete, including grandsons, a granddaughter - and several family events (e.g. the death of Er and Onan, v. 12). The second list, on the other hand, only lists the direct sons of Ya'akov. (see the end of section V for the answer)

(B) This one is a bit more subtle. The order of the list in B'resheet is the children of Leah, the children of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid), the children of Rachel and the children of Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid). In other words, the order is by mothers: The house of Leah and the house of Rachel. This is a reasonable order, given that Leah not only bore the most children but that her children were the oldest. In our verse, a slight change has taken place: The first two verses include the sons of Leah and the one (descending) son of Rachel (Yoseph was already in Egypt). The last verse lists the four sons of the handmaids. What has changed here?

If we look back at B'resheet 37:2 (see my shiur on Parashat Mikketz), we see that the children of the handmaids were set apart from the rest of the sons. As we explained, this was because there was a clear-cut class distinction within the family - sons of the wives (Rachel and Leah) occupying a favored status as opposed to the sons of the handmaids. In times of trouble (the famine), this distinction was erased (indicated by the order of the listing in B'resheet) but, now that the family was firmly settled into life in Egypt, those old differences resurfaced. Setting the tone for our story, we are presented with families which do not see themselves as equal and are not united.

IV

"VAYISH'R'TZU"

Then Yoseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the B'nei Yisra'el *paru* (were fruitful) *vayish'r'tzu* (???); *vayirbu* (they multiplied) and *vaya'atz'mu bim'od m'od* (grew exceedingly strong), so that the land was filled with them. (1:6-7)

Rashi, commenting on the many verbs used to describe the amazing growth of the B'nei Yisra'el (which explains how we get from 70 people to a nation of several million at the time of the exodus), quotes the Midrash that the women would have sextuplets (playing on the six words used here).

S'forno has a different explanation. *Paru* (were fruitful) indicates having children, *vayirbu* (multiplied) indicates having many children and *vaya'atz'mu* indicates demographic and physical strength - all positive terms. *Vayishr'tzu*, however, is a pejorative term. A *sheretz* is a rodent, commonly used as the archetype of impurity (e.g. *tovel v'sheretz b'yado* - see BT Ta'anit 16a, MT Teshuvah 2:3). S'forno explains that the whole generation which died (v. 6) refers to the entire group of 70 who had come from the Land. Once that link was broken, the people "turned to the ways of rodents, running (there is a Hebrew words play here) to the pit of despair."

It is unclear whether S'forno means that they engaged in the worst aspects of Egyptian culture or that they lost their sense of dignity and pride - but that becomes clear in his explanation of our third passage.

V

"LET US DEAL WISELY"

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yoseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. (1:8-11)

The core of Pharaoh's speech here is phrased oddly: "...in the event of war, [they will] join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Why would a conquering nation want to - or even need to - escape? Rashi is bothered by this and explains that Pharaoh's intent was that the B'nei Yisra'el would throw the Egyptians out - but he didn't want to utter these horrifying words, so he turned them around. Ramban has a different approach; he explains that the concern is that the B'nei Yisra'el will "fleece the land" with the other enemies and will take the booty with them when they leave.

S'forno has a different approach to the verse. He reads the phrase: "...or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us..." as a parenthetical thought. In other words, Pharaoh's statement to the people was Let us deal wisely and get them out of the land - and his motivation for this was the concern of a fifth column in his land.

To that end, the Egyptians appointed taskmasters over the B'nei Yisra'el in order to afflict them - figuring that that would inspire them to leave. After all, what reason did they have to stay? Their ancestral and promised land was fertile again (the famine was long since over) and it was now clear that they were unwanted in Egypt. How surprised Pharaoh and the Egyptians were when the B'nei Yisra'el acquiesced to the human tax and complied with the orders to build cities for Pharaoh!

Once the Egyptians saw that these descendants of political and spiritual giants, (and of their former

viceroys), were willing to accept this humiliating work - everything spiraled down. (The astounding parallel to the horrific tragedy of our century are too obvious to mention...) They were made slaves (again, no word of protest, rebellion or flight from the B'nei Yisra'el) and finally were the objects of limited genocide! The only protest we hear is from the midwives (who were possibly Egyptian women - [Avrabanel - after all, why would Pharaoh entrust this heinous mission to Jewish women?]) In addition, their reference to the Hebrew women [v. 19 - *Ivriot*] seems to be exclusive). As S'forno explains, the B'nei Yisra'el had totally lost their sense of self-worth, dignity and mission - and were already enslaved to the ideals of the Egyptian culture and polis. They were more concerned with successfully remaining in Egypt and gaining the approval of their Egyptian king than with maintaining their own heritage and legacy.

S'forno also uses this approach to explain the beginning verses: "And these are the names..." that only these names (the sons of Ya'akov) were worthy of mention - but the other members of the family (including grandchildren) weren't worthy, as their righteousness was not of the same caliber as their parents. (This explains the first question in section III above).

VI

"Hashem IS JUST AND I AM WICKED"

We can summarize the "failings" of the B'nei Yisra'el as three:

- A lack of dignity
- A self-induced subjugation to Pharaoh and Egyptian culture
- Continued tribalism

The B'nei Yisra'el were captive to the influence of Pharaoh and his court. In order to move the people into an awareness of their own mission and pride - and of the ultimate power of their God - they had to hear the Egyptians declare the power and justice of God and admit to their (Egypt's) own failings. This is the constant theme of the diplomatic interaction between Mosheh and Pharaoh - and B'nei Yisra'el will not be ready to leave (and move on to Sinai and the Land) until their biggest cultural icon (Pharaoh) comes to them in the middle of the night and begs them to leave, accepting the justice of their God and His decree.

In order to enable this, the diplomat would have to be someone who had a sense of dignity, was comfortable within the court of Pharaoh - and who understood the essential unity of the nation.

VII

ENTER MOSHEH

Adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, Mosheh was familiar with court protocol and etiquette. He had a sense of dignity, since he was not subject to the decrees of slavery - nor was he culturally enslaved to the Pharaoh - which is often the blessing of those who are inside. (Think about how many people are star-struck and successfully encouraged to buy products endorsed by the glitterati - but those who work behind the scenes of the corridors of power and influence are not nearly as awed by the stars).

As an outsider, he also understood the basic unity of the B'nei Yisra'el. Note how the Torah describes his interest in seeing the plight of the people: "Mosheh grew and went out among his brothers..." (2:11);

For Mosheh, it wasn't a case of seeing how the Levites or Danites were faring - all of them were (equally) his brothers. (This is easy to understand, when we compare the way members of a large Jewish community identify themselves as opposed to those in a small rural area. Those of us who have the luxury of living in a densely populated community identify ourselves - and claim allegiance - with a particular stream of thought, synagogue or school. Jews living in remote areas, on the other hand, first and foremost see themselves as Jews and point to their "fellows" in the city - they understand the essential unity of our people which often eludes the city folk.)

Mosheh was the perfect candidate who could unify the people, represent them with dignity in the court and battle Pharaoh on his own turf until the king of Egypt would declare:

"Hashem is just and I am my people are wicked" (9:27).

There is one other piece of information which we are given in the opening chapters which clarifies the special place of Mosheh at this juncture of our history.

VIII

THE UNDERCURRENT OF B'RESHEET: FRACTURED BROTHERHOOD

Throughout Sefer B'resheet, we find a common story line regarding family relationships. The younger brother is favored over the older brother - and neither brother is comfortable with that outcome.

We first meet Kayyin and Hevel (Chapter 4), where the reaction (fratricide) is the most extreme. God favors Hevel's offering - and Kayyin kills him in response.

Next, we meet Yishma'el and Yitzchak (Chapter 21). Although Yishma'el doesn't attack Yitzchak, we never find a rapprochement between the two. The only time they meet again is at their father's burial.

We then meet Esav and Ya'akov (Chapters 25-35). Even though Esav threatens to kill Ya'akov (which fits with Esav's impetuous nature), they are eventually reconciled - after which they go their separate

ways.

Next come Yoseph and his brothers (Chapters 37-50) - surely the most developed and complex fraternal relationship(s) in B'resheet. In this case, the brothers are eventually reconciled and stay together.

Fittingly, Sefer B'resheet ends with another younger-older scene, depicting the favoring of Ephraim over M'nasheh (Chapter 48). We are given no information about either one's reaction to grandfather's blessing - and it seems that things are improving in this vein as time goes on.

IX

MOSHEH, AHARON AND MIRIAM - WORKING TOGETHER

Now, at the beginning of Sh'mot, we are introduced to Mosheh. He is clearly favored by his parents, as he is described as "good" at his birth, they make every effort to shield him and then, relying on some form of divine intervention, send him down the Nile. His older brother and sister have every reason to be jealous (following the B'resheet model - and the present state of the inter-tribal relations) - yet his sister (who is mentioned but not even named in the second chapter) looks after him and ensures his safety and continued relationship with family. When Mosheh is finally sent by God to Pharaoh, he refuses unless his older brother is included in the mission. God tells him that Aharon will rejoice upon seeing him (4:14) - and, as the commentators explain, he would rejoice over Mosheh's selection as God's messenger and not harbor any jealousy.

For his part, Mosheh includes both of his older siblings in the exodus and leadership of the people. Aharon is one of his right-hand men (Sh'mot 24:14) and Miriam leads the women (15:20).

Mosheh, Aharon and Miriam have finally corrected the tragic and destructive history of sibling rivalry - which is what got us to Egypt in the first place (Yoseph being sold by his brothers).

This only serves to underscore the enormity of the tragedy when Mosheh's leadership begins to unravel (see Bamidbar 12). It only happens when Aharon and Miriam speak ill of Mosheh, exhibiting jealousy over his unique relationship with God. Even the family which led us from slavery to freedom and to an appreciation of our own great mission couldn't fully escape the legacy of B'resheet.

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