

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

by Rabbi Jeff Kirshblum

"And it was in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers and saw their burdens. He saw an Egyptian man strike a Hebrew man, (one) of his brethren. (Moshe) turned this way and that way and when he saw that no man (was watching), He smote the Egyptian and hid (his body) in the sand" (2:11-12).

"(Moshe) went out the second day and behold two Hebrew men were fighting. He said to the wicked one: Why do you strike your friend? (The wicked one) replied: Who appointed you to be a man, an officer, or a judge over us? Will you kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (2:13-14).

"And Moshe feared and said that surely the matter (that I killed the Egyptian) is known" (2:15).

"When Pharaoh heard this matter he sought to kill Moshe. Moshe fled from Pharaoh and he dwelled in the land of Midian" (2:15).

The Biblical narrative is quite simple and straightforward. However, upon reflection there seems to be several incongruities.

1. Hebrew slaves were beaten constantly by their Egyptian taskmasters. It was a common occurrence. What struck Moshe as being so unique about one Egyptian beating upon a Hebrew slave?
2. The Hebrew slaves were toiling in the city of Pi Ramses. It was a great city with thousands of citizens, tens of thousands of slaves, and a multitude of Egyptian taskmasters. When Moshe looked around to see if anyone was watching, how could it be that no one was there?
3. The verse confirmed the fact that no one was there. If so, how did the two Hebrews, who were quarreling the next day, know that Moshe had killed an Egyptian?
4. What was the quarrel between these two Hebrews?
5. Moshe said, "Surely this matter is known," concerning the matter of him killing the Egyptian. He then fled the land of Egypt. The Midrashic interpretation is that Moshe said to himself, "Surely, now, I know this matter. I used to wonder why Israel deserved to be punished with this harsh slavery. Now I know" (Rashi 2:15). Moshe realized that the time was not ripe for Israel's redemption from Egypt and therefore he fled the country. What was it that Moshe realized that caused him to think this way?

There are a few additional questions from the Torah that on the surface seem to be unrelated.

1. During the plague of pestilence that afflicted the cattle, the verse says, "All the cattle of the Egyptians died but from the cattle of the Children of Israel not one died" (9:6). The next verse seems to be contradictory when it states, "And Pharaoh sent out and behold none from the cattle of the Israelites died, except one" (9:7, translation according to Vilna Gaon in Kol Eliyahu).
2. In the Parsha of Emor (Vayikra 24:10-12), we find the following story as explained by Rashi. The son of Shlomis, an Israelite woman, and an Egyptian father, converted to join the Israelites. However, the converted son was not accepted by the Children of Israel. In anger, the son blasphemed G-d. Moshe did not want to render judgment until he consulted G-d. Why did the son have to convert: his mother was Jewish? According to Jewish law, lineage is determined by the mother's blood line.
3. Why did Moshe refrain from rendering judgment?

The following account (based on Rashi 2:11,13; Vayikra 24:10) offers a "behind the scenes" viewpoint that clarifies all these questions.

There was an Egyptian taskmaster, who desired one of the Hebrew wives. Her name was Shlomis bas Divri, the wife of Dasan. The Egyptian devised a plan to get Dasan out of the house early in the morning so that the Egyptian could secretly meet with Shlomis. The Egyptian woke Dasan up very early in the morning and told Dasan that he was late for his work. Dasan departed and the Egyptian went to Shlomis. Dasan realized that it was too early to begin his work and so he returned to his house. He discovered his wife together with the Egyptian.

Pharaoh had decreed that no Egyptian should defile himself by having relations with a Hebrew woman. According to Egyptian law, lineage was determined by the mother's nationality. Why should the Egyptians increase the numbers of the Hebrews? The Egyptian taskmaster feared that Dasan would get word to Pharaoh that he had relations with a Hebrew. The Egyptian began striking Dasan in an attempt to kill him.

Dasan fled outside but the Egyptian caught him and the beating continued. It was still very early in the morning. Moshe came at that very moment. Moshe realized that the beating of the Hebrew could not be justified: the time for labor had not begun. Moshe saw that no one was around and thought it was safe to kill the Egyptian in order to save Dasan.

The following day Moshe went into the fields and saw two Hebrews fighting. The two men were Dasan and his brother-in-law, Aviram. On the previous day, Dasan's wife, Shlomis, feared retribution from her husband and so she fled to her brother, Aviram, for protection. Dasan was striking his brother-in-law for protecting Shlomis.

Again, Moshe happened to pass by and sought to intervene. Dasan thought it was audacious of Moshe to step in where he was not asked. Dasan taunted Moshe, "Who appointed you to be a man, an officer, or a judge over us? Will you kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Those were the words of

ingratitude expressed by Dasan, the very man whose life Moshe had saved the previous day.

Moshe realized that Dasan was representative of the Israelites. They had no sense of gratitude. How could such a nation be worthy of leaving Egypt and standing before Mt. Sinai. At Sinai they would hear the Ten Commandments and the words of the Torah. The whole Torah is based on a sense of gratitude, "hakaras ha'tov." The opening words of the Ten Commandments are: "I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of Egypt." G-d is telling the Children of Israel that they should feel a sense of thankfulness and gratitude towards Him for delivering them from slavery. They owed G-d a commitment, a commitment to His Torah. But, if the Israelites had no sense of gratitude, then they would not feel any sense of obligation to commit to upholding G-d's law.

It would take another 40 years of bitter enslavement, the worst 40 years of their 210 year enslavement, before the Children of Israel would cultivate a feeling of gratitude. The redemption would have to wait until then.

Shlomis became pregnant from that encounter with the Egyptian. She gave birth to a son who was considered a Hebrew by Egyptian law. However, Ramban (Vayikra 24:10) mentions an opinion that before the giving of the Torah, Jewish tradition only recognized the bloodlines of the father. Therefore, according to Jewish law the child was an Egyptian.

During the plague of pestilence, the cattle of all the Egyptians perished, including the cattle of Shlomis's son. However, Pharaoh considered the son to be Jewish. When Pharaoh investigated the results of the plague, "...none from the cattle of the Israelites died, except one."

Years later, the son of Shlomis converted. After he committed the grievous sin of blasphemy, he was brought before Moshe. Moshe felt that he had to disqualify himself from rendering an independent judgment. Moshe had been personally involved with that family. Many years earlier, he had killed the child's father in the sands of Egypt.

This account leaves us with a major point of reflection. We cannot help but think what would have happened if Dasan had not said "Who appointed you to be a man, an officer, or a judge over us?" What if he had said, "Thank you Moshe, thank you for saving my life." The Children of Israel would have been spared 40 years of suffering.

THE EXODUS AS A FOUNDATION IN FAITH

Understanding and appreciating the story of the Exodus is one of the major underpinnings of the Torah and Judaism. The Exodus is mentioned in the first of the Ten Commandments. "I am the L-rd your G-d who brought you out of Egypt." The festive atmosphere that highlights the Jewish year is Pesach, which commemorates the Exodus. Pesach is a communal event, which brings and binds the family together.

The Tefillin, which are bound on our arms, opposite our hearts, and upon our heads, contain the mention of the Exodus. Shabbos is the day of the week which commemorates the story of the

Exodus. In the second tablets, in the commandment of Shabbos, it reads, "And you shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the L-rd your G-d has taken you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the L-rd your G-d, has commanded you to make the Sabbath day" (Devarim 5:15). The holiday of Succos commemorates the Exodus, "Let your generations know that in booths I caused the Children of Israel to dwell when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (Vayikra 23:42). The portion of the Torah that tells of the mitzvah of Tzitzis ends with the obligation to recall the Exodus. There is a mitzvah to recall the Exodus twice every day of the year (Brochos 12b). So many mitzvos, great and seemingly small, have a connection with the story of the Exodus. The question to be asked is why is that great historical event so deeply intertwined with Judaism's religious philosophy?

Ramban (13:6) addresses that very question. He mentions four groups of non-believers:

The first group does not believe G-d exists. In their misguided opinion, the universe was always here. No one created it.

The second group believes that G-d created the universe but has no knowledge or interest in what occurs within that universe.

The third group believes that G-d may be aware of what is happening in the universe but has He no control over it.

The fourth group believes that G-d may have control over the universe, altering nature when He sees fit, but He does not communicate with lowly man nor can lowly man communicate with Him.

The events of the Exodus refute the claim of each group of non-believers.

Every time Moshe and Aaron appear before Pharaoh they express to him a prophecy related to them by G-d. Every plague that they forecast comes to fruition. In the end, Pharaoh, who was reluctant to grant freedom to the Jews, not only begrudgingly grants them their freedom, but hurries the Children of Israel along on their way.

Prophecy indicates that G-d and man can and do communicate with each other. The fourth group is disproved. The plagues indicate that G-d obviously has control above and beyond nature. The third group is disproved. G-d's messages to Pharaoh reveal that G-d is aware of what is happening in the universe. The second group is disproved. The first group, who did not believe G-d even exists, are obviously disproved. We can now readily see that the story of the Exodus has great religious and philosophical ramifications.

But there is even more...

The Children of Israel suffered greatly in Egypt. G-d redeemed them. They were now a free and independent nation on their way to Mt. Sinai and then on their way to their homeland. The Israelites were expected to be thankful to G-d and to express their gratitude to G-d. But can man communicate with G-d? Is there any point in man trying to convey his thanks to the All-mighty? Is there any point in man trying to develop a personal relationship with G-d? The story of the Exodus, the story of Moshe's conversations with G-d, shows that indeed man can communicate with his Creator.

Ramban concludes that the key function of the mitzvos is to help us develop a sense of appreciation for things that G-d has done for us and to allow us to develop a personal relationship with Him.

The fourth group did not believe that G-d and Man could communicate with each other. On the theological scale of importance, this may not seem to be a very significant concept; but, it is vital.

If one believes that G-d does not communicate with man, then that implies that G-d does not care about man. Communication is a very basic form of expressing love, concern, or displeasure. G-d certainly does concern himself with man's activities and He expresses that concern through communication: not necessarily verbal. G-d has many ways to let His feelings be known to us.

If one believes that man cannot communicate with G-d, then all prayers, whether a prayer of request or simply an expression of thankfulness, is useless. Prayer allows us to develop a personal relationship with our Creator. It is a very important theological concept.

All of Torah is based on the premise that G-d communicated with Moshe and gave him the Torah. If one believes that G-d cannot communicate with man, then the Torah is not of Divine origin. The Divine nature of Torah is the very foundation of traditional Judaism.

Moshe told Pharaoh about each plague in advance of each occurrence. That demonstrated that G-d had in fact communicated with Moshe. It was a lesson for the Israelites as well as for the Egyptians.

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