

Parshas Shemos

QUALITIES OF A LEADER

After being told of the nation's oppression and enslavement, the story does not introduce us to an adult Moshe the redeemer, but to a young Moshe. The Torah's cryptic inclusions are instructional as to how he came to be selected. The Midrash says that he followed a lost sheep into the wilderness, where he encountered the burning thorn bush, that wasn't consumed:

ה' ראה כי סר לראות ויקרא אליו אלוקים מתוך הסנה – The Lord saw that he had turned to look, and G-d called to him from within the thorn bush. (3: 4)

This is the very first time he is spoken to about his special mission, to become leader extraordinaire.

The Meshech Chochma in his introduction to Sefer Shemos explains that at Sinai, Moshe was so exposed to reality that he lost his free will and became something resembling an angel. This was accomplished through his crystal clear understanding of Hashem, as it were. Before this, Moshe was an ordinary man who achieved the extraordinary.

The Torah is terse when relating the stories of Moshe before he was chosen, but includes them anyhow. There is a common denominator between the stories we are told about Moshe. Killing the Egyptian officer, reprimanding squabbling Jews, and helping the 7 daughters of Yisro are all that is in the Torah, and following a lost lamb is in the Midrash. The Torah very subtly relates to us the message about the qualities a good leader possesses.

In all 3 episodes Moshe demonstrates his care to help the weak, and willingness to step in to a fight not his. Whether Moshe saw an innocent Jew being beaten, or Jews fighting, or Yisro's non-Jewish daughters being mistreated, or a thirsty lamb desperate for a drink; he would take action at his own risk. This was his quality and the trait Hashem identifies in him:

...כי סר לראות – Hashem saw that Moshe would "turn and look" – וירא ה' כי סר לראות ויקרא אליו אלוקים מתוך הסנה. This is why Hashem selected Moshe as our leader.

But Moshe's response was to decline the offer to save his people. If his defining trait was to help the downtrodden, declining the opportunity to reduce them is seemingly out of character. So why did he reject the offer?

It seems that Moshe was greater than even the initial stories let on. Moshe helped people with no ulterior motives, no self-interest. So when asked to accept the title of leadership along with all the honor it carries, he turned it down.

It is ultimately seen that Moshe's protests were legitimate; Aharon was given a large chunk of the public duties as a result.

Moshe was a natural helper, a complete giver, he wanted nothing for himself in return. Protecting the weak and helpless, with genuine self sacrifice is the defining quality of a great leader. This is the type of person the Jews needed to take them from the depths of slavery to the apex of greatness.

And it's what we need today too.

THE COMPLETE JEW

The Books of the Torah link with each other, and the conclusion of one story does not terminate it; it transitions into its logical continuation. What common theme is there between the conclusion of Bereishis and the beginning of Shemos?

The Ramban explains that the book of Exodus is known as Sefer HaGeula – the Book of Redemption, or Exodus. The name refers to how the nation of Israel achieved liberty and independence from Egypt, culminating in its receiving the Torah. But only the first quarter addresses the Exodus and independence, and the remainder addresses the Mishkan and its requirement.

Why is that categorised as the Book of Redemption?

The Ramban explains that the book measures the full extent of the Redemption; Redemption of the body is incomplete without a redemption of the soul too. The nation only graduated to distinguished status through spiritual accomplishment, only achieved once the Mishkan was built, and the Shechina rested on the camp. Hence the name 'Book of Redemption' – meaning it tracks the complete redemption – materially and spiritually.

The conclusion of Bereishis contains the same theme.

The Ksav Sofer explains that Yaakov descendants bless their children to be like Efraim and Menashe. They respectively symbolise the two perfect ways of serving Hashem. Efraim studied day and night with his grandfather, excelling at Torah study. It goes without saying that this is a staple requirement of every Jew. On the other hand, Menashe assisted Yosef with the administration and government of Egypt; a Jew also has to know how to appear and interact to the world. Menashe excelled in that department.

Yaakov wished that all his descendants excel in both aspects of Judaism, in the spiritual as well as the material sense. The connection with the book of Exodus is evident. It shows how important it is for a Jew to apply their Judaism both materially and spiritually – to be a great all-rounder!

EMBITTERED LIVES

Hashem told Avraham that his children would be enslaved in a land not their own for 400 years. Yet we find that they left after just 210 years of actual enslavement. Where are the missing 190 years?

There is an answer suggested that Egypt treated the Jews much worse than they should have, so as we say in ברוך המקום during Seder night:

גאולה וְחָשַׁב אֶת הַקֶּץ – Hashem calculated the end. What “end” is this talking about? Hashem hastened the end and reckoned off 190 – קָץ (from 400)- leaving us with 210.

In the Haggada we read how וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם – They embittered their lives (Shemos 1: 1)

The Vilna Gaon points out how this is very subtly hinted to by the notes. The notes on וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם are קדמא וואזלא, which literally means “they got up and went”. Additionally, the numerical value of this is 190! They were over-embittered to a value of 190, so they got up and went!

R’ Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld points out that the redemption from Egypt was only completed 7 days after it began, when the Red Sea parted and when Paroh and his army were destroyed, so where is this reflected in historical events?

He answers that the 400 years were counted from Yitzchak’s birth. The extra week is found at his circumcision. Yitzchak was only circumcised 7 days after his birth – so only became Jewish then, and only 400 years from then were the Jews genuinely free.

WHY WAS MOSHE CHOSEN?

Shemos transitions from Yakov and his children thriving in Egypt, to the slavery that began at their deaths. Once the slavery is in full swing, the stage is set for the hero, the redeemer, Moshe.

Curiously, the storyline does not continue as we expect; Hashem contacting Moshe. We do not find that “... there was a shepherd, from the house of Levi, Moshe...”. Instead:

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי – A man of the house of Levi went...

The man was Amram, leader of the Jews and Moshe’s father, and what follows is the story of his birth, and adoption by the Egyptian royal family. The Torah does not introduce us to an adult Moshe, but rather records his upbringing and development into who he became.

This is deliberate.

There is a very subtle description of his nature and personality, that directly resulted in his selection as being worthy of leading the Jews out of Egypt.

When Moshe is first found by Batya, the Torah describes the scene:

וַתִּרְאֶהוּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד – and she saw him, the child...

But the very the next words are:

וַהֲגִה נֶעַר בֶּכָה – and behold, he was a weeping youth.

The perception went from him being a baby to a youth in a matter of seconds by crying. Commentators note that it was a mature cry – a cry for others, his suffering brethren – that subsequently led her to conclude מִיֶּלְדֵי הָעִבְרִים הִוא – “This is a Jewish child.” (2: 1)

It is clear throughout that although brought up in the palace, he was aware that he was a Jew:

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלֵתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו – It came to pass in those days; that Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers and saw their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers (2: 11).

He recognised them as his brothers, and Rashi emphasises that seeing their burdens distressed him; it was his own kin suffering, but he was detached from it, living in the palace as a prince of Egypt! Consider the turmoil. He was both Egyptian and a Jew, yet neither as well. A walking contradiction!

He noticed his brothers suffering, and intervened when he saw a Jew being abused:

וַיִּפְּן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּזְדָּ אֶת הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל – He searched this way and that way, and he saw that there was no man; so he attacked the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” (2: 12).

He made the decision to stand with his brothers, and murdered an Egyptian, which inevitably meant that he outlawed himself off from those that had raised and nurtured him.

R’ Nathan Lopez Cardozo explains how this pasuk describes the internal conflict Moshe had. “Moshe searched (within himself), this way? (Egyptian?); that way? (or Jew?) and saw there was no (complete) man (i.e. he was neither). So he struck the Egyptian (within himself) and hid him in the sand.”

Whether or not he actually killed an Egyptian police officer, he chose to side with the Jews, thereby ostracising the Egyptian within him, as he would be rejected by them – for siding with the Jews or for murdering an Egyptian officer!

The point we can draw from this is that Moshe’s past made him into who he was. He was a product of Egypt, and he knew Egypt. In a way, he was Egypt! Yet he made the choice to become a Jew and severed his ties with Egypt, and this choice made him who he was.

After the Torah tells us his early background, he can take his place in the story – he takes sheep into the desert and displays that his care is all pervasive for all creatures. It is telling that it is only at this juncture that God speaks to him and entrusts him with liberating his people.

ALL ABOUT LEVI – WERE ALL THE JEWS ENSLAVED IN EGYPT?

Not all Jews were enslaved. When Paroh wants to be rid of Moshe and Ahron, leaders of Levi:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן לְמַה מִּשְׁתַּדְּלֵי אֶת הָעָם מִמְעֵשׂוֹ לְכוּ לְסִבְלַתֵיכֶם – The king of Egypt said to them, “Moshe and Aharon, why do you disturb the people from its work? Go to your own burdens”. (5: 4)

Rashi quotes a Midrash that the tribe of Levi were not enslaved, which was why they had their own burdens to go to.

Why were Levi exempt?

Ramban explains how every culture has elders and wise men to teach their respective laws. Paroh left Levi alone in order to allow them their role. R' Simcha Ziesel Broide notes that if Paroh could understand the importance of spiritual guides and scholars, it shouldn't be too hard for us.

Daas Zkeinim explains that the Egyptians slowly manipulated the Jews into working, rather than suddenly forcing them into slavery, which could provoke a revolution. The Jews who participated at first were then coerced to continue against their will. Yet the people from Levi, knowing that they were destined to serve Hashem, refused to compromise and cooperate. They did not participate on the first day, and never submitted.

Maharal notes that although Hashem told Avraham his descendants would be enslaved, Levi would not be included in the prophecy of slavery, as they are the "portion of Hashem," dedicated to His service. Rabbeinu Bachye states that Levi was the "tithe" of the family.

Paroh was aware of the prophecy, and knew that the nation to enslave Avraham's offspring would be severely punished. He interpreted that if he were not to enslave the entire Jewish nation, he would be free of the ramifications. His mistake was that Levi are not counted among the rest of the Jews, meaning that he did in fact fulfil the terms of the prophesy, and was punished.

The Mishneh L'Melech proves that the people who had land in earned it through slavery in Egypt. Those without a portion need not be enslaved. Levi, who were in the service of all Jews, could not privately hold land, so experiencing slavery would be pointless.

Maharil Diskin notes that the prophesy to Avraham was that the slavery would start when his offspring would be "strangers in a land not their own." The land of Goshen, where the Jews in Egypt initially lived, was originally given to Sarah as a gift by Pharaoh. The Jews there could not be "strangers" in Goshen. When the Jews multiplied, and did not want to remain isolated in Goshen, they branched out into the rest of Egypt and became involved in their society. In leaving Goshen, they fulfilled their part of the prophecy for their own enslavement. Levi, however, stayed in Goshen.

The Maharil Diskin explains that the Zohar states that enslavement occurred only to those not already "enslaved"-to Torah. The Gemara in Sanhedrin says that every person was created to toil, work, and sweat. The Mishna in Avos says that "Whoever accepts the yoke of Torah, has the yoke of the government removed." By toiling in Torah, it satisfies the requirement of effort. My Rebbe and Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Daniel Lehrfield says that proof of this is that Levi was not enslaved. Instead, they were able to study and teach the Torah they had from their fathers.

In a similar vein, Panim Yafos says that Levi learned Torah and kept the mitzvah of bris milah, whereas the rest of the Jewish nation did neither. Levi's merits protected them.

Finally, the Maskil L'David learns that the people of Levi were not fully enslaved due to Pharaoh's own daughter's intervention. In raising Moshe as her own, Basya had an affinity towards him and asked of her father to exclude Moshe's kin, Levi.

This is particularly fascinating for it implies that up until Basya took the initiative, Levi too was oppressed. The Maskil L'David explicitly writes that Levi was subjugated even after Basya's intervention, the only difference being the intensity of the work. While the rest of the Jews worked unimaginably hard, Levi only had to perform regular labor.

This would answer a bothersome question. If Levi were not oppressed at all, on Pesach, why would Kohanim and

Leviim sit and say, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...”?

The simple explanation that one could say according to the opinions that Levi was truly exempt from all labor, is that since most of the Jews went through what they did, therefore the Jews as a whole (including Levi) need to recognize and relive this on the Seder night. Another possibility, as the Chasam Sofer writes, is that there were two exiles happening in Egypt. One was physical, the other was spiritual; Bnei Yisrael had reached the 49th level of spiritual impurity due to their Egyptian surroundings and influences. If so, we can suggest that even if Levi was not enslaved physically, they certainly could have been affected and “enslaved” by Pharaoh in the spiritual sense. This would explain why Kohanim and Leviim say “Avadim hayiinu”; spiritual slaves.

According to the Maskil L’David, however, new light is shed on the matter. Levi too were physically enslaved to Pharaoh.

Even according to the other opinions, that Levi were truly free from enslavement, this does not imply that living in Egypt was a walk in the park for them. Although they may not have been enslaved or worked to death, their lives were still in danger. This is clear as we see that Moshe’s father, Amrom, went so far as to divorce his wife, because of the futility in childbirth due to the law that all male newborns be thrown into the Nile. Even after being convinced to take her back, after which they had their third child Moshe, there came a point when Yocheved could no longer hide Moshe. She was forced to abandon him on a little barge in the Nile. All this notwithstanding that their family was from Levi.

Furthermore, the Meshech Chochma proves that Moshe, concerned that the Jewish People would not believe his claims of imminent redemption, decided to bring his family to Egypt. If Levi were completely safe, what proof of divine agency would it be for Moshe to bring his family there?

Furthermore, Yalkut Shimoni says that when Aharon met Moshe on the latter’s way down to Egypt, and saw him bringing his family, he said to him, “We are pained by the distress of those Jews already in Egypt, and you want to bring in more!?” Maharal points out that from this we see that clearly life was bitter for Levi as well.

After being bothered by this question of why Kohanim and Leviim say the Haggada, I was shown the Chida’s commentary to the Haggada. כל המרבה לספר ביציאת יצרים הרי זה משובך – “All who speak plentifully of story of the exodus are praiseworthy”. The Chida writes that “כל” – “All” includes Kohanim and Leviim . Further, כל has the same initials as כהן לוי. Even they shall speak of the exodus, despite their not being oppressed. The Chida explains that although they were not oppressed, they were not able to move freely through Egypt of their own volition; so they too were freed by Hashem. Secondly, had the Jews stayed in Egypt but one more second than they did, they would have sunk to unimaginable lows and impurity which would have effected even Levi (similar to the Chasam Sofer quoted above). They too need to recognize and praise Hashem for His salvation. In fact, the Chida writes that he told this over to a Gadol, who replied that he too had thought of this interpretation, and added that converts too are included in “All.” It is for this reason that the next item in the Haggada is the story with R’ Eliezer, R’ Yehoshua, R’ Elazar Ben Azaria, R’ Akiva and R’ Tarfon who sat in Bnei Brak telling over the story of the exodus all night long. Rabi Yehoshua was a Levi, Rabi Elazar Ben Azaria and Rabi Tarfon were Kohanim, and Rabi Akiva came from converts.

From a somewhat historical standpoint, R Yaakov Kaminetzky explains at length all these goings-on regarding Levi. It was all Yosef’s doing. Yosef had a particular wisdom – that of how to stay alive spiritually in a foreign environment. He learned this from Yaakov, who in turn learned it from Shem and Ever in order to survive living with Lavan. This wisdom enabled Yosef to recognize that to insure the spiritual (not to mention physical) survival of the Jewish People, he needed to take measures to isolate and protect Levi. This was in order that they in particular

would continue to grow in Hashem's service uninhibited by anything or anyone, to be a beacon and source of guidance to the rest of the nation. It was Yosef who established the law in Egypt that clergy were to be excluded from taxes and other governmental rules and regulations. Due to Yosef's foresight, Levi played the essential role in the Jewish People's survival.

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