

Coming of Age and Searching for Oneself

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The seminal event in Moshe's coming of age, the action that simultaneously reveals to us his true essential nature, as well as the types of actions that he is destined to undertake throughout his life, appears in Shemot, 2:11. "And it came to pass in those days, and Moshe grew and he WENT OUT to his brothers, and he SAW (/understood) (1) regarding their burdens, and he SAW an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man of his brothers." Moshe's curiosity that leads him to leave the safety and insularity of the Egyptian royal palace in order to see for himself the condition of Jewish suffering, sets in motion a chain of events whereby he kills an Egyptian taskmaster (2:12), realizes that his violent act of personal intervention has become public knowledge (2:14), and flees for his life to Midyan (2:15). The Tora has described a young person "going out" and "looking around" before, with disastrous results—(Beraishit 34:1) "And Dina the daughter of Leah, who was born to Yaakov WENT OUT TO SEE among the daughters of the land." Dina's adolescent desire to see her peers and contemporaries in settings and contexts other than those of her own family home in which she was growing up, was categorized as part of the process by which an adolescent explores his/her identity, values, and commitments. Not only does the individual reflect upon the lifestyle that s/he knows well in terms of a possible pattern of behavior in the years to come, but s/he is also interested in being able to compare and contrast these experiences and behaviors with those of others at a similar stage of life.

Consequently, it is not difficult to imagine that Moshe too must have been beset with serious questions regarding his true identity when he reached adolescence. Although Shemot Rabba 1:27 presents hypotheses that Moshe was either 20 or 40 (2) when he went out to see about his brothers, it is reasonable to approach the verb "G-D-L" in Shemot 2:11 in a manner similar to how it is understood in Beraishit 25:27, "And the youths 'VAYIGDELU' (GREW), and Eisav was a man knowledgeable of hunting, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man dwelling in tents." RaShI comments on the chronological stage of development being described by the verse in Beraishit:

"As long as they were small, their particular preferences and actions could not be discerned and no one could draw any conclusions about their inherent natures. When they reached the

age of 13, (3) this one (Yaakov) headed for the houses of study and this one (Eisav) turned towards idolatry.” (4)

Therefore, it is likely that Moshe was similarly only 13 at the time when he decided to undertake his fateful expedition to “see” his brethren, and thereby obtain a greater understanding about himself.

Yet what is less than clear is HOW Moshe came to know that he was Jewish in the first place to the extent that he should identify with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and wish to keep abreast of their situation. Nechama Leibowitz, ZaTzaL (5) articulates the problem succinctly:

The Tora does not recount how Moshe, who was raised by Bat Pharaoh and before whom all doors of opportunity were open, reached the decision to abandon his lofty social position, “his opportunities for a bright future”, and to instead identify with a group of oppressed and downtrodden individuals, to whom he may have been related by birth, but not in terms of his education and lifestyle. The Tora does not reveal whether these concerns developed over a long period and were the result of intense inner conflicts, or the consequence of a sudden, precipitous decision that was immediately acted upon. The Tora is not a psychological novel and does not come to satisfy biographical curiosity, and consequently all that is stated regarding Moshe’s leaving one group (the Egyptians) and identifying with another (the Jews) is the single verse, 2:11.

Shemot 2:10 notes that while Moshe’s infant years were spent in the care of his mother Yocheved, she returned him to Pharaoh’s daughter when “he had grown”. Since Yocheved was specifically recruited to serve as Moshe’s nursemaid (2:7-9) it is most likely that he had to be given back to the royal family once he was weaned. To obtain a sense of the length of time weaning a child might take, one could consider the case of Shmuel as a correlative. Chana vows that should HaShem finally Grace her with a child, she would dedicate him to serve in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) during his entire life (I Shmuel 1:11). However, Chana insists on keeping the newborn with her (Ibid. 22) “Ad Yigamel HaNa’ar” (until the youth is weaned). RaShI and RaDaK define this amount of time as typically a period of 24 months, the view attributed to R. Eliezer in Ketubot 60a.

But how much of a sense of Jewish identity could Yocheved, Amram and/or any other family member have imparted to Moshe during the two short years at the beginning of his life? (6) How cognitively astute could he possibly

have been? What would he remember, beyond some dim recollections of people and sensory experiences?

Amos Chacham, in his commentary to Sefer Shemot, (7) speculates that Bat Pharaoh, Moshe's royal patron, was responsible for his interest in the Jews, and that she acted in a manner strikingly consistent with modern attitudes with respect to allowing adopted children to become acquainted with their biological parents: (8)

It is customary for members of the royal family to travel throughout the lands of their kingdom in order to be aware of the situations of their subjects. And Moshe chose to check up on his brothers. Based upon this, it is reasonable to conclude that Pharaoh's daughter did not conceal Moshe's true identity, i.e., that he was a Jew, from him. Consequently even while in Pharaoh's palace, he might have been aware of his parents and family.

A curious Midrashic insight (Shemot Rabba 3:1 interpreting Shemot 3:6, "And He Said: I Am the God of YOUR FATHER") implies that Moshe at age 80 (7:7) still remembered his father Amram's voice, and therefore must have had some sort of significant relationship with him beyond those initial formative years when he was being nursed in the family home, prior to being brought to the Egyptian palace:

Said R. Yehoshua HaKohen bar Nechemia: The moment when HaShem Revealed Himself to Moshe, Moshe was a complete novice with respect to prophecy. Said the Holy One, Blessed Be He: If I Reveal Myself to him in a loud voice, I will Frighten him; in a soft voice, he will not properly respect prophecy. What did He Do? He Revealed Himself to him in the VOICE OF HIS FATHER. Moshe said: Here I am, what does father wish? (9) Said Hashem: I Am not your father. I Am the God of your father. I have Come to you in a manner that would attract you in order that you not be frightened.

Is it possible that Moshe conducted clandestine meetings with Amram over the years? In line with Amos Chacham's approach, did Pharaoh's daughter even facilitate such meetings? Unfortunately, textual evidence for any such interaction is sorely lacking, but is intriguing to consider, nevertheless.

Another possibility for what constituted the catalyst for Moshe's awareness of his connection to the Jewish people could be his curiosity about his circumcision. Although there are Rabbinic sources that suggest that the

Jews in Egypt had ceased to practice this particular ritual—see e.g., RaShI on 12:6—such sources are countered by others that suggest, that at least in Moshe’s case, the practice was still being observed. One such alternative view is expressed in association with 2:6, where Pharaoh’s daughter, upon finding Moshe in the basket that his mother had devised so that she could hide him among the reeds, exclaims, “This is one of the Hebrew children.” Commentators offer various possibilities regarding why she drew such a conclusion, and many of them focus upon her noticing Moshe’s circumcision:

- a. RaShBaM: She saw that he was a boy and circumcised, which led her to conclude that he had been abandoned not because his parents did not want him, but rather to save him from the decree against Jewish boys.
- b. Ibn Ezra: ...His limbs were well-developed, explaining the use of the term “Na’ar” (youth) as opposed to “Yeled” (boy) (in Shemot 2:6); she saw that he was circumcised, and because of his overall beauty, she had compassion for him.
- c. RaMBaN: She recognized that he had been hidden in order to either attempt to save him, or at least not have to watch as he is put to death. Why would an Egyptian child be treated in such a manner? There are those who say that she saw that he was circumcised, but this would mean that she had to remove his clothing before making such an observation, and there is no need to read such an action into the text (when all that is stated is that the basket was “opened”.) (It would appear that RaMBaN does not negate from a logical standpoint the view that Bat Pharaoh drew her conclusion about Moshe’s identity from his circumcision. The commentator just believes that the Biblical text does not bear out such a conclusion. However, if Moshe had been left in the basket covered by or swaddled in a blanket, it is reasonable to imagine that at least part of the covering had become undone and therefore the circumcision was readily apparent as soon as the basket was opened--yb.)

The assumption that Moshe’s circumcision was what distinguished him from other Egyptian children is based upon the premise that the Jews were the only ones to practice circumcision in contrast to the other cultures in the Middle East. Amos Chacham (10) rejects this assumption and writes, “(after citing RaShBaM’s approach) ...but this is not a perfect answer, for it is known that many of the Egyptians themselves circumcised their children. (11)

When Amos Chacham himself (12) suggests that Bat Pharaoh decided that Moshe was a Jewish child based upon his facial appearance or by the

clothing which he was wearing, another possible explanation for Moshe's sense of alienation from the Egyptian majority presents itself. To what extent were the Jews physically distinct from their Egyptian masters? When Avraham and Sara had to leave Canaan and travel to Egypt due to a severe famine, he comments to his wife in Beraishit 12:11 that he now recognizes how beautiful she is. Among the various hypotheses regarding what precipitated such a realization after several years of marriage, Ibn Ezra suggests that Sara's beauty, unremarkable as it may have been in Canaan, was extremely noticeable in Egypt because "human physiognomies differ due to climate and atmosphere." However a counterargument against insisting upon Moshe's possessing a unique "Jewish look" could be offered based upon an aspect of the story of Yosef, as well as a later incident in Moshe's life. When Yosef becomes administrative ruler of Egypt and personally supervises the distribution of food during the years of famine, there is never any indication in the accounts of his interactions with his brothers that they suspect him of being anything other than an Egyptian—see e.g., 42:8, 30; 43:26; 44:14—until he explicitly reveals his identity in 45:3. If Jews possessed a distinct "look" or racial profile distinct from Egyptians, wouldn't the brothers have been curious about Yosef's identity? Similarly, when Moshe saves Yitro's daughters from the shepherds' harassment in Shemot 2:17, they report to their father that "an Egyptian man" saved them (2:19), never suspecting that Moshe was anything but Egyptian. Never having met him before, and not knowing anything about his past history, why would they have been so certain that he was Egyptian unless he completely looked the part? While stereotypes and preconceptions sometimes cause one to overlook obvious characteristics or indicators, it is also possible that in this case there were no physical indicators of specific cultural origin.

Don Yitzchak Abrabanel's creative interpretation of 2:10 suggests yet another possible basis for Moshe's quest to find out more about his origins. Whereas the verse is understood by most commentators as attributing to Bat Pharaoh the naming of Moshe, particularly in light of the verse's explanation of the name as connoting "from the water I drew him up", Abrabanel contends that it was Yocheved, Moshe's birth mother who named him. The commentator argues that with regard to proper names of characters, it would not make sense for the Tora to translate the names given in another language to Hebrew. Consequently, if Moshe was the name by which everyone referred to him, then it must have been a Hebrew name, rather than one translated from the Egyptian, a name bestowed upon him by someone who spoke Hebrew, Yocheved, as opposed to Bat Pharaoh who was most probably not conversant in this language. (13) Having a Hebrew name could hardly have been lost upon this boy, and when he became an adolescent, it is understandable that he would

make a concerted effort to uncover his true origins and his relationship with his people.

Perhaps the reason why the Tora is not specific about what brought about Moshe's search for his identity is that the search itself is more important than what brings it about. And just as the Tora describes such searches undertaken by various Biblical personalities, similar developmental issues play themselves out in every human being's life at one point or another. What is of importance as far as the Tora is concerned is the manner in which the individual hopefully finally does develop into a committed, caring, and devoted member of his family and community. May we merit strengthening the development of our own identities as well as those of our children and community to be able to improve the state of the Jewish people as well as all of humanity by means of devotion to Tora and Mitzvot.

Shabbat Shalom.

(1) "Seeing" and "hearing" in the Bible often connotes not only sensory perceptions, but cognitive ones. Just as there is a debate in Berachot 15a as to whether the intent of the Tora when it declares (Devarim 6:4) "HEAR Oh Israel.." is that the words of the "Shema" prayer are to be recited loudly enough so that they can be heard at least by the one reciting them, or is it sufficient that these words be UNDERSTOOD, as opposed to literally heard.

(2) Perhaps assuming that Moshe was only a teenager would make it difficult to understand how he would be able to physically overcome the Egyptian taskmaster. However, the view that instead of striking him physically, Moshe pronounced the Tetragrammaton in order to kill his adversary, e.g., Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Shemot, Chapt. 9, would alleviate the issue of how much physical strength would be needed on the part of Moshe to accomplish this feat. Nevertheless, it could still be maintained that a certain modicum of maturity would be required before Moshe would have been initiated into the mystical nature of the Divine Name and how It could be utilized in such a manner. R. Menachem Kasher, in fn. 81 on Shemot 2 in his compilation, Tora Shleima, (p. 73) finds sources that provide the following alternatives for Moshe's age at this time: 12, 18, 20, 21, 29, 32, 40, 50, 60, leading to the conclusion that to establish this fact beyond a doubt will be impossible. Nevertheless, as has already been explained, a strong case can be made for this taking place when Moshe was younger rather than older.

(3) Traditional commentators are bothered by the assumption that Eisav was already engaged in idolatry at the age of 13. The standard interpretation of Beraishit 15:15 "and you will buried at a good old age" is that despite Avraham's living quantitatively only to the age of 175 (25:7), which is relatively short when compared to the age of Terach, Avraham's father at the time of his passing, 205, and that of Avraham's son Yitzchak when he died, 180 (35:28), qualitatively not seeing his grandson Eisav diverting from the traditions that Avraham had developed, would constitute a benefit. Yet if it is assumed that already at 13 Eisav was grievously sinning, this would mean that Avraham was alive to notice: Avraham lived for 175 years; he was 100 at the time of the birth of Yitzchak (21:5); Yitzchak was 60 when Eisav was born (25:26), making Avraham 160 at that

juncture. This means that Eisav was 15 at the time of Avraham's death. Positing that he already was engaged in idolatry at 13 results in creating the possibility that Avraham would find out, obviating the promise of his being buried at "a good old age"! Talmud Yerushalmi, cited by Ba'alei Tosafot, both quoted in Malka Shel Tora, (Yeshayahu Deitch, Vol. 1, Zohar Press, Yerushalayim, 5742, p. 400) suggest that initially Eisav sinned secretly, and only after Avraham's death did he publicize his beliefs and rituals. The Vilna Gaon (Ibid.) interprets that Eisav spent between 13 and 15 studying the premises and assumptions of idolatry and only began to practice these observances once Avraham had died. This latter view again reinforces the theme of experimentation and exploration that oftentimes mark the adolescent years. What is less clear is why should Yaakov have taken one path, and Eisav the diametrically opposed other? To what extent were these paths independently and deliberately chosen for themselves, as opposed to constituting a contrary set of practices and beliefs in contrast to that of the sibling twin? This particular dichotomy between the twins is already posited to have existed in utero. Consider RaShI on 25:22: "'VaYitrotzetzu HaBanim BeKirbah' (and the children struggled within her)--...and our Rabbis interpreted the phrase as an expression of 'Ritza' (running), i.e., when she (Rivka) would pass the portals of the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would run and struggle to emerge; when she would pass the entrance to an idolatrous temple, Eisav would run and struggle to emerge..."

(4) The simple meaning of "a man knowledgeable of hunting, a man of the field" does not appear to immediately bring to mind associations with idolatry. While it could be maintained that this thesis/anti-thesis tension is fabricated exclusively from its starting point, i.e., if Yaakov is associated with the tents of Tora and study, then Eisav must be the opposite, and therefore this means idolatry. Another line of reasoning that could lead to associating the act of hunting with idolatry would be based upon Nimrod who a) is the first individual categorized as a hunter (10:9), b) that the Tower of Babel is built in his kingdom (10:10) and therefore possibly at his initiative, and that the Rabbis viewed the Tower as designed to "wage war with Heaven" (Midrash Tanchuma [Buber], Parshat Noach #28—Said R. Shimon bar Yochai: They took an idol and placed it at the top of the Tower. They said: If HaShem Decrees upon us Decrees, this will stand in opposition to Him and stop Him. This expression, (11:4) "And we will make for ourselves a NAME" is associated with idolatry, as it states, (Shemot 23:13) "And the NAMES of other gods do not mention.") In addition, Nimrod is identified as the potentate who casts Avraham into a furnace due to the latter's refusal to acknowledge idolatrous gods—see e.g., RaShI on Beraishit 11:28.

(5) "VaYigdal Moshe VaYetzeh El Echav", in Iyunim Chadashim B'Sefer Shemot, Jewish Agency, Yerushalayim, 5730, p. 34.

(6) Although in Ketubot 60b, R. Yehoshua's view that nursing could last until the child was 4 or 5 is cited along with that of R. Eliezer, and were we to assume that Moshe remained with Amram and Yocheved until this point, perhaps more lasting impressions may have been made upon him in terms of cultural and religious identity, would Pharaoh's daughter have allowed Moshe to be taken care of for so long?

(7) Da'at Mikra, Sefer Shemot, Vol. 1, Mosad HaRav Kook, Yerushalayim, 5751, pp. 23-24.

(8) "One of the misconceptions that adoptive parents have," says Marshall Schechter, M.D., professor emeritus in child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of

Pennsylvania School of Medicine, “is that they have done something to make the child want to search. They haven’t. Everyone needs to know that they are part of a continuum of a family...As more is learned about genetics, scientists are discovering that many talents and personality traits have a genetic basis. So it should not be surprising that TEENAGERS who focus on developing an identity should begin thinking about their origin.”— http://naic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/f_adoles/f_adolese.cfm

(9) Shemot Rabba 45:5 presents the same conceptual idea with slight variations:

a. The statement is attributed to R. Yehuda son of R. Nechemia.

b. Moshe’s response to God’s Call is: “Father has come from Egypt (it is unclear if the punctuation at the end of this exclamation should be a “!” or a “?”).

(10) Da’at Mikra, p. 21, fn. 8*.

(11) While anthropologists and archaeologists have demonstrated that circumcision was practiced throughout the Middle East, it appears to have served as a puberty rite rather than as a ritual carried out on newborns. Consequently, in order to refute the approach of the traditional commentators that Bat Pharoah was able to recognize Moshe’s Jewishness by his circumcision, it must not only be demonstrated that circumcision was an Egyptian practice, but that it was also performed on very young children.

(12) Da’at Mikra, p. 21.

(13) Both Yocheved and Bat Pharoah are subjects in Shemot 2:10 and therefore the pronoun “she” with respect to the giving of the name could apply to either of them equally.