

An Aspect of Moshe's Identity Issues

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Over the last two weeks, we discussed the theme of reconciliation (Parashat VaYigash) and the search for “brothers”, i.e., fellow travellers (Parashat VaYechi). Just as it was posited that in order to reconcile, you first have to be able to identify who are the individuals with whom you should pursue such a relationship, there is also a prerequisite for searching for comrades and soul-mates—the need to come to grips with who yourself might actually be. I mentioned last week¹ that there is an existential perspective from which to view a number of the questions and comments in the Tora, particularly those having to do with place, e.g., “Where are you?” and identity, e.g., “Who are you?” Identity issues are readily recognizable as underlying biblical vignettes such as:

- a) Beraishit 27:14 ff.—Yaakov masquerading as his twin brother Eisav in order to obtain a blessing from Yitzchak;
- b) Ibid. 38:14—Tamar exchanging widow's weeds for the dress of a prostitute in order to seduce Yehuda and thereby assure her place as part of the Abrahamic family;
- c) Ibid. 41:42, and concomitantly Esther 6:10—the use of royal clothing to indicate first Yosef's and then Mordechai's status or kingly reward;
- d) Ibid. 42:7—Yosef's deliberate attempt to hide his identity from his brothers when they first come down to Egypt in search of food;
- e) Ibid. 48:5—Yaakov's inability to identify his grandsons, Ephraim and Menashe. (While Yaakov's confusion could be attributed to his weakened eye sight [48:10], it might also have been a function of how the young men dressed and appeared to Yaakov.)

In all of these situations, one can speculate as to the extent to which these individuals experienced inner conflicts regarding their respective identities as well as how they felt while in disguise, i.e., had they escaped their “normal” selves and actually become someone else, perhaps even someone that they secretly wished to be or were the means by which they altered their appearance completely external and therefore irrelevant to the inner identities that they maintained throughout?²

¹ An excerpt from fn. 2 of “Implications of Acknowledging the Other as One's Brother”—Parashat VaYechi:
...Other such questions in the bible include when Yitzchak asks Yaakov, (Beraishit 27:18) “Behold who are you my son?” as well as when Yaakov anticipates that Eisav will ask Yaakov's representatives, (Ibid. 32:18) “Whose are you and where are you going and to whom do these things belong?”
While on a simple, literal level, answers to these questions can be short and empirically precise, on an existential level, what is being asked is far more profound and truthful answers will require considerable forethought and complex responses.

² Such confusions are reported to be experienced by actors in plays who find themselves actually becoming the character that they are portraying, as well as spies or other individuals who “undercover” pretend to be someone quite different from whom they actually are. In such circumstance, not only is the “audience” convinced, but even the person who is giving the performance finds himself believing to be whom he started out only saying he was.

An aspect of identity confusion that may have effected Moshe as described in Parashat Shemot, surrounds not so much the manner in which the Anonymous Narrator of the biblical text describes the man to whom is entrusted the mission to save the Jews from Egypt,³ but rather how, on two separate occasions, he is described by others,⁴ responding to or recounting particular behaviors on the part of Moshe.

On the day following his intercession to save a Jewish slave being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster (Shemot 2:11-2), Moshe inserts himself into the middle of a dispute between two Jews (Ibid. 13-4).⁵ The aggressor, who was obviously frustrated by Moshe's intervening on behalf of his intended victim by calling a halt to the fight, chillingly says to him (v. 14), "...Who appointed you a minister and judge over us? Are you going to threaten to kill me in the way that you killed the Egyptian?..." This man's comment raises the question of how Moshe indeed viewed himself vis-à-vis his co-religionists. Did he see himself as one of them, as is implied in Shemot 2:11, "...And he went out to his brothers and he particularly noticed their work-related burdens..." or did he see himself as a member of the Egyptian royal family and therefore thought of himself as higher in status than the Jewish slaves that he encountered, even as he harbored sympathy for them?⁶

This first evaluation of Moshe's actions by someone observing him, is soon followed by another incident in which Moshe intervenes on behalf of victims, and his actions are again subsequently described by a character in the narrative. When Yitro asks his daughters why they had returned home so comparatively early on this day,⁷ they answer by recounting how Moshe had saved them from their oppressors and helped them with their chores. (Shemot 2:19) "An Egyptian man saved us from the

³ In the cases of e.g., Noach (Beraishit 6:9), Avraham (26:5), Mordechai (Esther 10:3) and Iyov (Iyov 1:1) either the anonymous narrator or God Himself describes the qualities of these individuals. While with respect to the Five Books of Moshe, Jewish tradition states that these words were dictated by HaShem to Moshe, thereby making the Anonymous Narrator synonymous with God, the books of Esther and Iyov are categorized as "Ketuvim" (Writings) which are assumed to be products of a lesser level of Divine Revelation. Within the Megilla of Esther it is stated that the book was written by Mordechai himself (Esther 9:20); as for the author of Iyov, see the last portion of this essay.

⁴ The fact that we see Moshe through the eyes of those with whom he interacts, makes these incidents applications of the principle (Shkalim 3:2) "...an individual has to do things that are viewed positively by other people even as his actions are viewed positively by God..." (A similar sentiment appears in Avot 2:1.)

⁵ In all three of these cases, Moshe embodies the biblical directives of (VaYikra 19:16) "...Do not stand by as the blood of your fellow (is being shed)" and (Devarim 22:26-27) the source for protecting a victim from a "Rodef" (a pursuer.)

⁶ Ibn Ezra on Shemot 2:3 suggests that Moshe's early history was all orchestrated to assure that he would be raised in the royal palace so that he would not develop the same type of slave mentality that so handicapped so many of the generation of the Exodus. However, whether during that time a proper balance was struck between the sense of authority and royal entitlement on the one hand, and solidarity with the Jewish people on the other is an interesting matter to consider.

⁷ Certain routine activities are apparently expected to follow set patterns and take specific amounts of time, to the point where deviation from that pattern draws attention. Yitzchak asks a similar question of Yaakov in Beraishit 27:20. While Yitro and Yitzchak did not have clocks by which to measure the amount of time that the daughters and Yaakov pretending to be Eisav actually took to carry out their tasks, nevertheless they apparently had a sufficient sense of time to notice that something was different this time around.

shepherds and he also drew up water for us and watered the herd.” Existential questions that arise from this verse include: a) Did Moshe deliberately want everyone to think that he was Egyptian? b) What was on Moshe’s mind when he not only saved the women from their male counterparts, but also carried out their work responsibilities for them? Was he trying to make a particular impression?⁸ c) Was Moshe motivated purely by inner idealism and an acute sense of justice? d) Was this a particularly “Egyptian” thing to do, or perhaps reflective of some type of “Jewish” cultural value?⁹

Three approaches that consider the implications of whether Moshe might have viewed himself as either an Egyptian, a Jew or perhaps both simultaneously, can be found in a nineteenth century biblical commentary as well as two Midrashic sources.

MaLBIM¹⁰ on Shemot 2:19-20

They (the daughters of Yitro) told of his (Moshe’s) praise from three perspectives:

- a) That he was an Egyptian man, and therefore one cannot say that the honor of the priest (Yitro who is identified as a Midianite rather than an Egyptian [2:16]) was a motivating factor for Moshe, since he was of a different national origin;
- b) That he saved us;
- c) And aside from that, he drew water for us, and this shows that his saving us results from his love of justice, while his drawing water emanates from a love of kindness and righteousness.

(The commentator now inserts his own evaluation of what had been said about Moshe:)
These things speak well of our master (Moshe), that in addition to his protecting his people (intervening when the Egyptian threatened to beat a Jew to death, as well as when one Jew was abusing another), he also intervened on behalf of the persecuted, regardless of their ethnic, religious or national origin.¹¹

⁸ The test that Eliezer devises to determine an appropriate wife for Rivka (Beraishit 24) parallels Moshe’s actions. Did Moshe self-consciously water the flock with a purpose in mind, or did he do so because he was just naturally helpful?

⁹ Although Moshe was raised in Pharaoh’s palace and therefore probably received the type of education that Egyptian royalty would be given, in light of the Rabbinic comment cited by RaShI that Moshe was drawn to the burning bush because he heard his father Amram’s voice (Shemot Rabba 3:1) calling him, it is possible that he had studied Jewish ideas as well. While the Tora states that Yocheved nursed Moshe until he was weaned (Shemot 2:10), typically assumed to be at the age of two (e.g. RaShI on Beraishit 21:8), would Moshe remember his father’s voice if he had not heard it for eleven years (Shemot 2:11 describes how the boy grew [“VaYigdal] and went out to his brothers; RaShI on Beraishit 25:27 regarding when the personalities of Yaakov and Eisav could be differentiated, says that this first takes place [“VaYigdal”] when they reach puberty, or thirteen)? Consequently there is a Rabbinic tradition that Moshe received education from his father in secret either with or without Bat Pharaoh’s knowledge, thereby raising the possibility that he had been exposed to Jewish ideas along with his Egyptian training.

¹⁰ **Meir Leibush ben Jehiel Michel Weiser** (b. Volochysk, Volhynia Mar. 7, 1809; d. Kiev Sept. 18, 1879), better known by the acronym **Malbim** (Hebrew: מלבי"ם), was a Russian rabbi, preacher, and Bible commentator. The name "Malbim" is derived from the Hebrew initials of his name, and became his surname by frequent usage.

¹¹ The comment is reminiscent of Avraham’s intervening on behalf of Sodom and Amora when God Tells him that they are in danger of being destroyed. While it could be maintained that Avraham’s attention is drawn to these

(Yitro then responds to his daughters' account, and this too can be seen as complementary to Moshe:)

“And where is he?” That is to say, if he would have come back with you, I (Yitro) might have thought that his motivation for helping you was to seek a reward or strike up a relationship with myself, the priest. By virtue of the fact that he showed no interest in coming back with you demonstrates that he did what he did out of the goodness of his heart and due to his good attributes, as opposed to for any other reason. Therefore, why did you leave (behind) such an extraordinary person? Call him and let him eat bread (with us).

MaLBIM apparently considers the fact that Moshe did not disclose his true ethnic identity as a credit to him, since by doing so, he does not raise any suspicions that he might have been attempting to ingratiate himself with Yitro and his family. On the contrary, the only reason that Moshe did the “right thing” in this case, was that it was simply “right”. Perhaps even had Moshe insisted that he was Jewish, in light of the enslavement and persecution of the Jews in Egypt, suspicions could have been raised that he was some sort of escapee hoping to be taken in by Yitro's family and offered sanctuary. Still one wonders why, especially since he was running away from Egypt, Moshe allowed the impression to be made that he was an Egyptian. Might he not associated himself with some other people, unless of course if his dress was particularly distinctive, perhaps he had no other choice.

However, a Midrashic source clearly identifies Moshe's lack of clarity with regard to his nationality as a personal shortcoming:

Devarim Rabba 2:8

(The context of the Midrash is Moshe's describing how he implored God to Allow him to enter the land of Canaan, but was denied his request—Devarim 3:24)

Another interpretation:

Said R. Levi: He (Moshe) said before Him, “Master of the Universe! The remains of Yosef are to enter the land, and I am not to enter the land?”¹²

Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, “Whomever acknowledged his land, merits burial in his land; someone who did not acknowledge his land, will not be buried in his land.

Yosef acknowledged his land. How do you know this? His mistress said, (Beraishit 39:14)

“See he brought to us a Hebrew boy etc.” And he did not deny this, but rather (Ibid.

40:15—when he is speaking to the butler in prison after interpreting his dream) said, “I

cities because his nephew Lot and his family reside there, Avraham had been declared by God “Father of a multitude of nations” in Beraishit 17:5).

¹² An additional subtle irony in this particular plaint is that according to the Tora (Shemot 13:19) it was Moshe himself who saw to it that Yosef's body would be taken with the Jews upon their leaving Egypt. See Sota 13a for additional details regarding how Moshe accomplished this feat.

was stolen from the land of the Hebrews.”¹³ Therefore he earns burial in his land as it is said, (Yehoshua 24:32) “And the remains of Yosef that the Jewish people had brought up with them from Egypt, they buried in Shechem”.

You (Moshe) who didn’t acknowledge your land, do not merit being buried in your land. From where do you know this? The daughters of Yitro said, “An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds”, and he (Moshe) heard this and was silent (the Midrash assumes that not only did they tell their father about the nationality of the man that had helped them, but that the women made some mention of Moshe’s origins in his presence, and he had chosen not to disabuse them of the idea that he was Egyptian.) For this reason he was not buried in his land.¹⁴

According to this Midrash, Moshe “passed”¹⁵ as someone whom he was not, constituting a short-coming, at least for someone on his level.¹⁶ Could this have been because he was embarrassed of his origins? Was it because he had spent so much time viewing himself as an Egyptian, it was difficult for him to imagine himself as something else? Could there have been a dual identity issue, on the scale of “Egyptian Jew” vs. “Jewish Egyptian”? Whatever we might hypothesize about Moshe himself, the mindset whereby a Jew is proud of his identity rather than embarrassed by it—certainly in Pikuach Nefesh situations (where life-and-death are involved, and a correct identification could lead to being physically harmed or killed, the issue takes on greater complexity—is an ideal that this Midrash obviously advances.¹⁷ Hopefully over time, Moshe overcame his ambivalence regarding his true identity and was able to truly see himself for what he was.

¹³ What need did he have to explain this to the butler, other than he wished for this Egyptian official to understand who he, Yosef, really was.

¹⁴ R. Moshe Shternbach (Ta’am VeDa’at on Shemot 2:19, Yerushalayim, p. 13) points out that the Midrash is not suggesting that the sole reason why Moshe was not permitted to enter Canaan was his “sin” of omission regarding his ethnic identity. The Tora specifically states in BaMidbar 20:12 that Moshe’s being barred from the Promised Land was due to his actions—either hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, or insulting the Jewish people in 20:10—concerning extracting water from the boulder that accompanied them throughout their wanderings in the desert. The Midrash therefore is accounting for why his prayers to have the decree against him changed was not Accepted.

¹⁵ Although this term typically refers to an individual who wishes to hide his racial identity—

In the racial politics of the United States, racial **passing** refers to a person classified by society as a member of one racial group (most commonly those of mixed Caucasian and Afro-American heritage) choosing to identify with a group other than that assigned by social prejudice. The term was used especially in the US to describe a person of mixed-race heritage assimilating to the white majority during times when legal and social conventions classified the person as minority...

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passing_\(racial_identity\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passing_(racial_identity))

it is equally relevant to those who prefer not to acknowledge their religious or ethnic background.

¹⁶ See RaShBaM on BaMidbar 20:10.

¹⁷ I recall that when the Middle States Association evaluated the school in New York where I worked for many years, one of the challenges that the staff was given was to generate a description of the ideal student which we wished to graduate. The chemistry teacher, Dr. Dan Sarot, suggested that the graduates should possess the quality of “embracing being different from the majority.” Naturally, how to educate students to develop such a capacity is an interesting issue to address in a school’s overall program.

The most theologically interesting and creative interpretation of what Yitro's daughters say about Moshe is found in another Midrash:

Shemot Rabba 1:32

"An Egyptian man"—A parable to a person who was bitten by an "Arod"¹⁸ and he ran to put his feet into water.¹⁹ He placed them into a river and noticed a young child drowning in the water, and he extended his hand and saved him. The child said to him, "Had it not been for you, I would have already been dead!" He said to him, "It wasn't me who saved you, but rather the Arod that bit me and from whom I fled, that is what saved you."

So said the daughters of Yitro to Moshe, "Yiyasher Kochacha (lit. May your strength be straightened, i.e., may you have the strength to continue to do good deeds) that you saved us from the shepherds." Moshe said to them, "The Egyptian that I killed (in order to save the Jewish victim of a beating—Shemot 2:11-12) he is the one that saved you." And it is for this reason that they said to their father, "An Egyptian man", i.e., who caused this one to come to us? The Egyptian man that he killed.

In addition to taking note that the Midrash in Devarim posited that Moshe by saying nothing to the women after his acts of kindness constituted a sin, Shemot Rabba assumes that there was a conversation between them, and one in which Moshe reflects not only his perspective on God's Intervention in human affairs but also Moshe's extraordinary humility (BaMidbar 12:3). Rather than taking exclusive personal credit for what transpired, Moshe suggests that this was all part of some Divine²⁰ Master Plan. It is reminiscent of what Yosef tells his brothers once he reveals himself to them:

Beraishit 45:4-9

And Joseph said unto his brethren: 'Come near to me, I pray you.' And they came near. And he said: 'I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land; and there are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to give you a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God; and He hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

¹⁸ A poisonous snake or lizard.

¹⁹ It was believed in the ancient world that the antidote for the venom in the Arod's bite was to immerse the affected area in water.

²⁰ While the Midrash does not attribute to Moshe an explicit reference to God Being behind the chain of events that led him to Midyan and saving the women from their antagonists, in my view, it is certainly implied. If one believes that we live in a random universe, what is the point of linking together events as if they are deliberately interconnected? A causal understanding of the universe typically includes attribution to intertwined occurrences to some type of Divine Orchestrator.

Hasten ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him: Thus saith thy son Joseph: God hath made me lord of all Egypt; come down unto me, tarry not.

Just as Yosef must have had his moments when none of the things that were happening to him—being thrown into a pit, sold by Yishmaelim to Egyptians, serving as a slave in an Egyptian home, being accused of making unwanted sexual advances against the mistress of the house and languishing in a prison—made any sense and he wondered about his run of terrible fortune, only to begin to realize that perhaps this was all in order to achieve some long-term purpose associated with the dreams that he had while he was still a teenager in his father's house, so too Moshe might have been perturbed by his sudden fall from being an Egyptian crown prince to a wanted fugitive who has to flee to a relatively uninhabited area to avoid persecution for the crime with which he was charged. Did his helping Yitro's daughters mark the beginning of his realization that perhaps God Had bigger plans for him, a realization that was certainly confirmed by the Revelation at the burning bush in Shemot 3. Particularly when an individual is mired in multiple, seemingly insurmountable difficulties, it is challenging if not impossible to perceive the Hand of God behind what is taking place. And yet an individual of faith is called upon to persistently preserve such a belief, and optimistically await such a time when things begin to come together and make sense, as in the cases of Yosef and Moshe. I wonder if such an idea doesn't underlie the Talmud's²¹ remarkable assertion that the author of the book of Iyov is none other than Moshe Rabbeinu! Could Moshe, based upon his own formative experience, have thought about the idea that one never knows why things happen to him until some possible later point, if in fact ever, and decided to compose a book that deeply explored such a concept. Although in the book of Iyov, the protagonist is never given a reason(s) for why he was subject to so much suffering, he was satisfied to be told by God that there was some sort of rationale, even one that was beyond him, for what Iyov experienced and suffered.

We no longer live in a time of prophecy, miracles entailing the suspension of the natural order and overt Divine Revelation. Consequently it could be maintained that the leap of faith that is expected of us not only entails the possibility of some future Divine Communication accounting for the events of our lives, but the entire question of whether the universe in which we exist has any rhyme or reason at all. Yet to be provided with such challenging and engaging ideas arising from a single verse recording what Midianites thought of Moshe makes Tora study such a powerful religious experience.

²¹ Bava Batra 14b.