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HIR - The Bayit

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A professor named Joseph Campbell once told the following story:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.[n](#)

What's the name of this hero? According to Professor Campbell, he doesn't have one name. He has thousands. They include: Buddha. Superman. Odysseus. Jesus. Harry Potter. And yes, Moses.

You see, professor Campbell popularized an idea called the Monomyth. The idea of the monomyth is that the stories we tell in religious settings like churches and synagogues, and the ones we tell in cultural settings like movies and books, aren't independent. They're really 1 big story, mono- singular, myth, story. And that story that Campbell told, that he includes the story we read today in sefer shemot, he calls that the hero's journey. Theorists who analyze stories this way use intricate schemes to map out the narratives, some as complicated as 17 steps, giving each part of the monomyth a name, like: crossing the first threshold, the road of trials, and apotheosis. It's a powerful tool, and it yields some interesting results – after all, there are similarities between religious and cultural stories. So powerful that George Lucas, the writer of Star Wars, drew heavily upon Campbell's ideas in writing the story for Star Wars.

Of course, if we take this idea to its logical end it spells trouble for what we're doing here this morning. If Buddha, Harry Potter, Moshe, our religious and cultural stories all follow the same structure and really have the same meaning, then there's no particular spiritual value in any one story. For Campbell, the spiritual truth you would get from learning this week's parsha, the

beginning of Moshe's story, is the same as you would get from learning any other. If it's all the same, why learn from the Torah? Maybe we should learn from Harry Potter or watch Star Wars? Does the Torah have something profound and unique to teach us, different from any other book or story, that will not just entertain us, but will teach us, shape us, transform us?

Let's look closely at 3 parts of Moshe's story, and compare them to two prime examples of the monomyth: the story of Buddha, a religious hero and Harry Potter, a cultural, secular one. We don't have time to analyze all 17 steps today, but I'd like to look at three key elements of the heroic story.

We'll find some similarities, we will also find critical divergences from the story we read this morning and the dominant monomyths, and therein will lie all the difference.

The three structural elements I'd like to look at are:

1. origins
2. discovery of identity and purpose
3. the great confrontation

Let's start from the beginning: birth.

A most pure virgin is awakened in the middle of the night, by a holy spirit. That spirit impregnates her, and from that pregnancy, a child is born who will transform the world. What story is this? Buddha! And Krishna, and the Egyptian Sun God Ra, and Lao Tzu in China, and of course Jesus.

The virgin birth of the hero is a powerful idea – the hero is special, magical the only one who can save us!!

Not so with our religious hero. Moshe is the opposite.

וילך איש, מבית לוי; ויקח, את-בת-לוי. ב ותהר האשה, ותלד בן; ותרא אתו כי-טוב הוא

No virgin birth here. No angels or magic in the pshat of our parsha. Just a couple of muggles making a Moshe just like how each of us was born. in the pshat, his birth could not be more ordinary.

After the miracle birth story, in the monomyth there is a common theme - the discovery of a hidden, true identity. So far, fit's into our parsha pretty well. Moshe thinks he's Egyptian and then somehow learns he's Jewish. However, there is a key difference - Normally it goes like this - the child living in a normal world is really from a higher world, a better world. To become his full self, the hero must learn about his higher identity and become what he was destined to be, he must transcend. Think about Harry Potter - he lives his childhood amongst "normal" people, boring, stupid, normal people. He's a nobody, unpopular, until he discovers that he really has wizard blood, he really belongs to a higher, more special, more magical race. Superman, again Jesus, Luke Skywalker, all examples of this theme.

Not so Moshe Rabbeinu. In fact, his story is the exact opposite. Instead of a flight from a boring and base "real" world up into a fantastic world of might and magic, Moshe begins in Pharaoh's house, in the world of fantasy, might and magic, and descends into the "real" world. What does he see? Magical creatures or sensual delights?

ויגדל משה ויצא אל-אחיו, וירא, בסבלתם

And it came about in those days, and Moshe grew and went out to his brethren and saw their suffering;

He sees pain. Injustice. That's where his journey begins.

Moshe's realization is not that he is different than everyone else, better than anyone else. His realization is that he is **just like** everyone else. And with that realization comes responsibility,

and the seeds of the third piece I'd like to look at today, Moshe's greatest challenge and triumph.

In all these stories, a lot of exciting things happen. Challenges, setbacks, encounters, chapters, sequels, prequels, but there is almost always some kind of climactic battle or showdown.

A showdown with Mara the God of evil and death for the Buddha, or Jesus and the Devil. In contemporary stories it's the final encounter with the bad guy. The fistfight atop the skyscraper with the evil genius while the timer on the nuclear bomb ticks down to zero. Harry Potter's final duel with Voldermort, with the fate of humanity in the balance. This is the ultimate test, and of course hero emerges victorious. By drawing on his own inner strength and might to defeat the bad guy, the story shows that he is the true hero, that he is the one, the savior.

Again with Moshe, something different happens.

Moshe has many battles and challenges during his leadership of the Jewish people - the battle with Pharaoh, kriyat yam suf, Amalek, a rebellious people, and more

But what is Moshe's greatest moment? For many readers, myself included, the climax of Moshe's story is this moment, on Har Sinai, right after we learn about the golden calf. God says:

וַעֲתָה הַנִּיחָה לִּי, וַיִּחַר-אֶפֶי בְּהֵם וְאָכְלָם; וְאָעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ, לְגוֹי גָדוֹל.

Wow. Imagine that you're Moshe right now - Imagine how tempting that must have been. To finally get rid of these murmuring, ungrateful people and go off with God, and start something new, fresh, without weakness. He could have been more powerful than Pharaoh.... Moshe's greatest struggle I would argue is not with a demon or a terrorist. I would argue that his greatest struggle is with himself - with the temptation of becoming his own nation. All he had to do is say yes to God. But instead: וַיִּחַל מֹשֶׁה *And Moshe pleaded with God* - don't do this!

It's not about me, says Moshe. It's about Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. It's about your promise to them, and to these people here. It's about you.

And with a statement more powerful than any sword: ; וְאִם-אֵין--מַחְנִי נָא, מִסְפָּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ .

And if not, erase me from this book!

His climactic moment is not really one of triumph or power, violence, or victory. It's a moment of restraint. Humility, and compassion. It's a moment of invoking others in order to save a rebellious, stiff necked, confused, am yisrael.

What a story. What a familiar, yet totally different kind of story.

We've laid out a few divergences between Moshe's story and others:

- Moshe's normal birth instead of a miraculous one
- Moshe's descent to suffering and ordinariness from a world of magic and privilege instead of the other way around
- A triumph won through mercy and compassion instead of might and power.

I'll leave you to think over your Shabbos table about what some of these differences might mean.

But I'll leave you with one thought. I'd like to suggest, that the function of many, if not most, of the stories we tell in our culture, are to escape reality. It might be a religious escape – this world is an illusion. The only real world is the next world.. All your problems here will be erased if you accept this, believe that. We have the answer. And the same with our fictions. We escape this world into a world where people are magical, young, beautiful, where everything is magical and possible. Unlike this world.

The story of Moshe, and the story of Shemot, is the opposite. Paroh represents the fantasy that Moshe and God together destroy. Perhaps instead of escaping reality, Shemot is about escaping fantasy and emerging into the real.

Maybe that's why this book is so special. It's a story unlike any other, a story that millions of people have used throughout history to fuel their own liberations and to shatter the fantasy that one people has the right to oppress another, from the Pilgrims, to the abolitionists, to the civil rights movement, to soviet Jewry, again and again. Sefer Shemot - a story like none other, that fuels revolution and topples pharaohs.

Which brings me to a final difference: The end. The classic myth ends. Odysseus returns home. Buddha becomes enlightened and shares the gift to the world. Harry Potter defeats Voldermort and all are safe. But Moshe Rabbeinu? His story ends just before... just before we enter eretz yisrael, just before we enter the promised land... and then we start it over. His story is never really finished, leaving us, Moshe's students, to write the next chapters. *B'chol dor vador, chayav at adam lirot at atzmo keelo hu yatza mi mitzrayim*. For every person to journey together with our hero, as we leave Egypt, in every generation.