

MOSHE'S MITZVAH; MOSHE'S MISTAKE

Yitro 5779

I.

A few weeks ago, just before we began reading *Sefer Shemot*, I set you all a challenge: read the story of *yetziat mitzrayim* as a *story*. Pay attention to its narrative beats, note the character development, what didn't you ever notice before? If you've been doing so, the opening *pesukim* to this morning's *parashah* would have struck you.

וַיִּקַּח יִתְרֹ חַתָּן מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-צִפּוֹרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ מֹשֶׁה אַחֵר שְׁלוּחָיָהּ: וְאֵת שְׁנֵי בָנָיָהּ...

So Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after she had been sent home, and her two sons ... (Ex. 18:2-3).

The entire time that we've been reading the story of the Exodus, Moshe's family aren't there! During all of the pivotal moments in the history of the Jewish people, the epoch-defining experiences – the plagues, the first Pesach, the splitting of the *yam suf* – Moshe's family: his wife Tzipporah and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, are absent. Indeed, the *gemara* in *Zevachim* (116a) notes that, according to several members of Chazal who do not require the Torah's narratives to be sequential, Moshe's family don't turn up until after the giving of the Torah! They aren't present for any of the major experiences of the Jewish people! Why?

Though there are several answers that explain their absence by appealing to the narrative itself, I once heard a beautiful answer to this question quoted in the name of one of the Hassidic Rebbes of Belz. Just a few weeks ago, God tells Moshe that one of the major purposes of the plagues is that,

וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן-בְּנֶךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת-אֹתוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר-
שַׁמְתִּי בָּם וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה:

and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I dis-played My signs among them – in order that you may know that I am the LORD.” (Ex. 10:2)

This rationale, to pass on the story of *yetziat mitzrayim* to the next generation, is the central *mitzvah* of Pesach, *ve-higgadeta le-vinkha*. Those of us blessed with children are obligated in telling them the story of the Exodus so that its impact is felt by them, too. None of us were present leaving Egypt, but we heard it from our parents, who heard it from theirs – and such a chain goes on back almost all the way to those who left Egypt.

I say “almost” because for many of the generation who left Egypt, their children were with them. They, too, experienced *yetziat mitzrayim*. There's no need for anyone to fulfil *ve-higgadeta le-vinkha* until children are born! Save one person. Moshe. His children weren't present. And so, Moshe is the

first person to fulfil this command; he's the first person to pass down to the next generation the majesty of God's deliverance.

I take no credit for this answer – I heard it from someone else. But I think it's beautiful. And there was a moment a few Pesachs ago where I really connected with this idea. It was Yair's first Pesach and I was about to perform a *mitzvah* first performed by Moshe Rabbenu himself. I was inspired.

But then there was a moment where I doubted everything. When I began to question how beautiful this idea was. Because Jewish history doesn't end at this point in the Torah. It continues. And its continuation reveals something shocking and disturbing. Something that, if it weren't in the verses themselves, we could never say.

Moshe Rabbenu may be the first person to fulfil *ve-higgadeta le-vinkha*, to pass on to his sons the wonders of God and what it means to be a Jew, the beauty of a life committed to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*.

But it doesn't seem like he did a very good job.

II.

At the end of its eighteenth chapter, the Book of Judges, *Sefer Shoftim*, tells us about a family of *ovdei avodah zara*, idol worshipers, whose patriarch, we are told, is Yehonatan ben Gershom ben Menashe (v. 30). It's strange that we get, not just his father but also his grandfather, but there's also a really interesting Masoretic quirk. If you were to open a Tanakh and look at the verse in which we encounter Yehonatan, the nun in Menashe's name is in superscript: it's elevated (מישה). The reason, as explained by *Chazal* in *Bava Batra* (109b) and even noted by *Artscroll* – who usually go to great lengths to hide these kinds of things – is that Yehonatan is not the grandson of some unknown Menashe but rather, if you remove that elevated nun from his name, the grandson of none other than Moshe Rabbenu himself! In a bid to save Moshe the embarrassment of having an idolatrous grandson, tradition obscures his name, but preserves his true identity at the same time.

But how could this be? How could one of the grandsons of Moshe Rabbenu lead his entire family to a life of *avodah zara*? Where did everything go wrong? How did Moshe of all people, when passing on to the next generations the beauty of a life committed to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*, end up having a family member walk down a different path?

I believe the answer lies in the other piece of information we know about the idolatrous priest Yehonatan: his father. Moshe has two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. But not only does Tanakh preserve Yehonatan's grandfather, but also which of Moshe's sons was his father. There is something specific to Gershom and not Eliezer that led his son to life of *avodah zara*.

III.

We know only two things about Moshe's sons: their names and what their names mean, both of which we learned this morning. That's it. That's all the Torah gives us in order to paint our picture of their personalities. But that's all we need. Because the meaning behind their names, I'd argue, expresses their religious personalities.

Eliezer is called so because, as the Torah tells us:

כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי וַיַּצִּילֵנִי מִיַּחַרְב פְּרָעֹה

The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.
(Ex. 18:4)

This is a pure expression of gratitude. And that's how Eliezer views life; that's the message of Judaism he passes on to his family. Regardless of any challenges and difficulties he may face, it's important to just be thankful to and appreciate God.

But Gershom has a different perspective. He's called Gershom because,

גֵר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיָה

I was a stranger in a strange land. (v. 3)

This is Gershom's Judaism. He is Jewish, but everything around him is foreign, is strange, is unwelcome. The whole world is an *eretz nokhriyah*, a strange and simply wrong land. It must be avoided. It offers nothing but futility and must be shunned at all costs. It's false. It's morally bankrupt. It's nothing but *tumah* – it's all impure. And Gershom is a *ger*, a stranger, within it. He is as alien to it as it is to him.

This is the message Gershom passes on to his children. "Treat the world with suspicion. Its ways are corrupt. You don't belong in it." And, sometimes that works. Sometimes the next generation drinks the cool-aid, and they, too, see themselves as strangers and see the wider world as wicked. But, sometimes, the next generation ventures out a bit further, and they discover a bit of the outside world that doesn't fit the descriptions they were taught.

They see honesty. They see morality. It may be a bit different to their own but, nonetheless, it's moral. They see, *chokmah*, wisdom. And they realize that the world they had been told existed beyond their own four *amot*, beyond their bubble, was a lie.

And then they start to think something different. If it's not all corrupt, if it's not all futile – like we were told – then the opposite must be true! It must all be embraced! We must open our arms to everything and taste all the delights and express all the ideals the wider world offers. One unsophisticated worldview is replaced by another, lacking just as much nuance and complexity.

That's how Yehonatan, son of Gershom, grandson of Moshe Rabbenu, was tempted by the other side. That's how he led his family to a life of *avodah zara*. He realized that the worldview expressed by his father Gershom couldn't stand up to scrutiny.

IV.

So, what is an appropriate view of the outside world? If we reject the view of Gershom, that we must see ourselves as strangers to the wider world, but also reject the full embrace of society, what message should we tell ourselves and our children about the world around us?

I've read before the words of R. Aharon Lichtenstein, a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion who was widely considered the ideological leader of Modern Orthodoxy before his passing in 2015, and some of you read his essay this past summer during our Must-Reads series. His words, for me, also state the correct Jewish view of the wider world.

Who can fail to be inspired by the ethical idealism of Plato, the passionate fervor of Augustine, or the visionary grandeur of Milton? Who can remain unenlightened by the lucidity of Aristotle, the profundity of Shakespeare, or the incisiveness of Newman? There is *chokhmah ba-goyim*, and we ignore it at our loss. ... To deny that many fields have been better cultivated by non-Jewish than by Jewish writers is to be stubbornly, and unnecessarily chauvinistic. There is nothing in our medieval poetry to rival Dante, and nothing in our modern literature to compare with Kant, and we would do well to admit it. We have our own genius, and we have bent it to the noblest of pursuits, the development of Torah. But we cannot be expected to do everything.

We must realize that the wider world enriches, rather than threatens our Judaism. The challenges it brings, the layers of complexity it adds, nourish – not starve – our relationship with *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*.

Moshe's failure lies not in his teaching but in Gershom's interpretation. To read *Torat Moshe*, Moshe's Torah, as encouraging alienation is misinterpretation.

So then how should we read it? How should we live our lives?

V.

I want you to consider everything I've said today as just Part I. Merely the introduction to what will hopefully be a series of *derashot* on this topic. Over the next few weeks I want to devote this space to discussing this very question: how do we articulate a positive vision of Orthodoxy in the modern world – one that is unapologetic in its observance, yet active in its engagement with the wider world?

Next week we'll see that the answer begins in the unlikeliest of places: the unexciting, formulaic, and mundane laws of *Parashat Mishpatim*.