

Moses Alone
Parashat Shmot
Saturday, January 6, 2024

The opening Parasha of Sefer Shmoth is a rich and exciting narrative. The challenge of this Parasha is which section should I choose to interpret. There are so many stories that are interesting and not hard to understand, but at the same beg for interpretation.

This week I decided to focus in on one of the Parsha's more puzzling, if not most puzzling, stories. It comes just after God prevails upon Moses to accept the mantle of leadership and to return to Moses. The section that I have chosen is just nine verses long but can be divided into three sections of three verses each. I ask you to turn to Exodus 4:18-26 on page 335 in the Etz Hayim Humash.

יח וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב אֶל-יִתְרוֹ חוֹתָנוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֵלָכָה נָא וְאִשׁוּבָה אֶל-אֶחָי אֲשֶׁר-בְּמִצְרָיִם, וְאֶרְאֶה, הֲעוֹדִים חַיִּים; וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה, לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם.

18 And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father-in-law, and said unto him: 'Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brothers who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive.' And Yitro said to Moses: 'Go in peace.'

יט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן, לֵךְ שָׁב מִצְרָיִם: כִּי-מָתוּ, כָּל-הָאֲנָשִׁים, הַמְּבַקְשִׁים, אֶת-נַפְשְׁךָ.

19 And the LORD said unto Moses in Midian: 'Go, return into Egypt; for all the men are dead who sought your life.'

כ וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-בָּנָיו, וַיִּרְכָּבֵם עַל-הַחֲמֹר, וַיָּשָׁב, אֶרְצָה מִצְרָיִם; וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מִטַּה הָאֱלֹהִים, בְּיָדוֹ.

20 And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God in his hand.

כא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, בְּלָכְתְּךָ לָשׁוּב מִצְרָיִמָה, רְאֵה כָּל-הַמִּפְתִּים אֲשֶׁר-שָׂמֵתִי בְיָדְךָ וַעֲשִׂיתָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה; וְאֲנִי אֶחְזַק אֶת-לְבָבוֹ, וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת-הָעָם.

21 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'When you go back into Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your hand; but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go.'

כב וְאָמַרְתָּ, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה: כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה, בְּנִי
בְּכָרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

22 And you shall say to Pharaoh: Thus says the LORD: Israel is My son, My first-born.

כג וְאָמַר אֵלָיִךְ, שְׁלַח אֶת-בְּנִי וְיַעֲבֹדַנִּי,
וְתִמְאַן, לְשַׁלְּחוֹ--הֲנֵה אֶנְכִי הָרֵג, אֶת-בְּנִיךְ
בְּכָרְךָ.

23 And I say to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; but if you will refuse to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your first-born.'--

כד וַיְהִי בַדְרֹד, בְּמִלּוֹן; וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה,
וַיִּבְקֹשׂ הֶמְיָתוֹ.

24 And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him.

כה וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צַפְרָה צָר, וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת-עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ,
וַתַּגַּע, לְרַגְלָיו; וַתֹּאמֶר, כִּי חַתָּן-דָּמִים אַתָּה
לִּי.

25 Then Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood you are to me.'

כו וַיִּרְא, מִמֶּנּוּ; אִזֵּי, אָמַרְהָ, חַתָּן דָּמִים,
לְמוֹלַת. [\[פ\]](#)

26 So when He let him alone, she then said: 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.' [\[P\]](#)

Notice the sequence of events in verses 18-20. What is odd about the sequence? What might it come to teach us? Moses decides to leave; but then God tells him to leave and offers a fact that the people who want you dead are dead. Moses was having second thoughts about going back to Egypt. Maybe he was afraid that there were people waiting to kill him. Or maybe he was still deeply ambivalent about taking on the role of leader? Then he leaves with his family along with the staff that provokes wonders.

In the next section, we read for the first time what will become a major motif in the story; Pharaoh hardening his heart. Why not work a miracle so the Israelites are released quickly without conflict or struggle? Points to make: God needs the struggle to last; otherwise people might think Pharaoh released the Israelites. God needs the struggle so that the Israelites will be persuaded to leave when the time comes. They need to know that God has the power to fulfill his promises. From the perspective of justice, Pharaoh needs to be punished for his enslavement of the Israelites. The Israelites and the world need punishment; punishment is one of the ways we hold people accountable for their crimes. This is how we show that chattel slavery is wrong.

The metaphor of “hardening the heart” means to encourage someone else or oneself. It means to give them the courage to be resolute, to stand fast, not to give in. In our context, it means that Pharaoh encourages himself to continue to be Pharaoh and to act as Pharaoh. It means that God encourages Pharaoh to be himself, not to change. We will see later that during the

first 5 plagues, Pharaoh encourages himself to continue to be Pharaoh; during the last five plagues God steps in to encourage Pharaoh.

Then God reveals to Moses the ultimate punishment-the ultimate wonder. The punishment is tied to the relationship between God and the Israelites. This is the first time in the Torah that God presents Himself as a parent and that we are His children. Real parents and children don't choose their progeny or their parents. But God has chosen us; we are His first born. But implicit in the metaphor is that God has other children whom he can love as well. The first born metaphor introduces to Moses and to us, the reader, the idea of being chosen. Implicit in being chosen is that we may have a larger role to play. The ultimate goal will not be leaving Egypt. It won't be just living in the land. It will be instead a holy nation.

Why tell this to Moses while he is on his way back to Egypt? God tells this to Moses to alert him that this is not going to be easy. There is going to be a conflict; Pharaoh will not relent easily or quickly. This will become a titanic struggle. Get ready for that. Through the metaphor of first born, God gives Moses a hint that this is not just about leaving slavery and Egypt. God may have other expectations from us as well. This is not just about a ticket out of slavery and oppression. It will be much more.

Then we come to the strangest and most arguably the most cryptic story in the Torah. We learn a few verses before, that the people who want you dead are dead. But that doesn't mean that God wants to let you off the hook? Somehow you Moses have failed God so much so that God is so angry, He wants to destroy Moses.

It seems to me that it goes back to Moses' ambivalence. How do these short stories highlight his ambivalence. Earlier in the chapter, after Moses keeps giving reasons not to accept the leadership role and God gives plausible responses to Moses' concerns, God in a fit of exasperation tells Moses you have to go. No more questions, no more dialogue. You have no choice.

But he is still ambivalent. One source of ambivalence is not circumcising his son. This goes back to the very first question that Moses poses at the burning bush. "Who am I?" Am I Egyptian, am I an Israelite? Am I shepherd or a potential leader of a people? Is Moses fully committed to God and his vision for the Israelites? A vision that has not been fully revealed yet.

God wants him to commit. Moses doesn't by himself. Tzipora understands what is at stake. Here is a Midianite woman does the ritual which proves the commitment to God and His vision.

There is another sign of Moses' ambivalence. He takes his family with him. After this incident his family disappears and reappears after they leave Egypt at Sinai. In order for him to be a leader he must separate himself from his family and they from him. He returns to Egypt by himself to meet his older brother, whom he does not know.

For me one of the striking themes of the Parasha is Moses' aloneness or his loneliness. Moses is alone in Pharaoh's court; he is alone at the burning bush; he is alone on the road back to Egypt, and he is alone in Egypt, alone with a brother he does not know. Leadership requires an inner strength to be alone, especially when there is confrontation and conflict. Leadership requires a faith in the vision; otherwise why bother. God only hints at the vision in these opening chapters.