

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

I used to say, only half in jest, that the proof that Moses was the greatest of the prophets was that when God asked him to lead the Jewish people, he refused four times: Who am I to lead? They will not believe in me. I am not a man of words. Please send someone else.

It is as if Moses knew with uncanny precision what he would be letting himself in for. Somehow he sensed in advance that it may be hard to be a Jew, but to be a leader of Jews is almost impossible.

How did Moses know this? The answer lies many years back in his youth. It was then when, having grown up, he went out to see his people for the first time. He saw them enslaved, being forced into heavy labour.

He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He intervened and saved his life. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting, and again he intervened. This time the man he stopped said to him, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?"

Note that Moses had not yet even thought of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged. And these are the first recorded words spoken to Moses by a fellow Jew. That was his reward for saving the life of an Israelite the day before.

And though God persuaded Moses, or ordered him, to lead, it never ceased to be difficult, and often demoralising. Moses was faced with over forty years spent leading a group of people who were prone to criticise their situations, sin and rebel, and argue among themselves.

In an appalling show of ingratitude, the Israelites complain several times in the book of Shemot, after witnessing miraculous acts from God and his appointed leader. At Marah they complain that the water is bitter. Then, in more aggressive terms, they protest at the lack of food ('If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death'). Later, at Refidim, they grumble at the absence of water, prompting Moses to say to God, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!'

In Devarim, Moses recalls the time when he said to God: "How can I myself bear Your problems, Your burdens and Your disputes all by myself" (Deut. 1:12). And then in Beha'alotcha, Moses suffers what I have

often called an emotional breakdown: "He asked the Lord, 'Why have You brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do You tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land You promised on oath to their ancestors?... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me -- if I have found favour in Your eyes -- and do not let me face my own ruin.'" (Num. 11:11-15)

And this was said, don't forget, by the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Why are Jews almost impossible to lead?

The answer was given by the greatest rebel against Moses' leadership, Korach. Listen carefully to what he and his associates say: "They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord assembly?'" (Num. 16:3)

Korach's motives were wrong. He spoke like a democrat but what he wanted was to be an autocrat. He wanted to be a leader himself. But there is a hint in his words of what is at stake.

Jews are a nation of strong individuals. "The whole community is holy, every one of them." They always were. They still are. That is their strength and their weakness. There were times when they found it difficult to serve God. But they certainly would not serve anyone less. They were the "stiff-necked" people, and people with stiff necks find it hard to bow down.

The Prophets would not bow down to Kings. Mordechai would not bow down to Haman. The Maccabees would not bow down to the Greeks. Their successors would not bow down to the Romans. Jews are fiercely individualistic. At times this makes them unconquerable. It also makes them almost ungovernable, almost impossible to lead.

That is what Moses discovered in his youth when, trying to help his people, their first response was to say, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?" That is why he was so hesitant to take on the challenge of leadership, and why he refused four times.

There has been much debate in British and American Jewry recently about whether there should be an agreed collective stance of unconditional support for

the state and government of Israel, or whether our public position should reflect the deep differences that exist among Jews today, within Israel or outside. (It should be noted for context that this essay was written by Rabbi Sacks in November 2010, amidst a widespread communal debate regarding Israel.)

My view is that Israel needs our support at this critical time. But the debate that has taken place is superfluous. Jews are a nation of strong individuals who, with rare historic exceptions, never agreed about anything. That makes them unleadable; it also makes them unconquerable. The good news and the bad go hand in hand. And if, as we believe, God loved and still loves this people despite all its faults, may we do less? *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, and God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob...” [The Opening Blessing of the “Amida”] The opening of the Amida prayer stops with Jacob’s name. But why should the patriarchal line be limited to three – why not four patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph? After all, Joseph’s role in the Genesis narrative is unquestionably central to the entire book of Genesis. A case could be made for showing that he shares a similar fate to those of all three patriarchs. Like Abraham, he lives among idolaters and must maintain his faith and traditions within a hostile environment. Like Isaac, he suffers a personal akedah, about to be slain not by his father but by his brothers, saved not by a ram but by Midianite traders. And like Jacob, who set the foundation for the twelve tribes of Israel, Joseph provided Jacob’s descendants with life and sustenance as the Grand Vizier of Egypt. Moreover, in resisting the seductive perfumes of his master Potiphar’s wife, Joseph merits the unique accolade haTzadik (literally, “the righteous one”) appended to his name. As a result, he has come to represent for all of his descendants the mastery of the spiritual over the physical. If indeed Joseph is known to us forever as Joseph the Tzadik, and being that he is the son of Jacob, why is he not considered the fourth patriarch? After all, there are four parallel matriarchs!

To understand why, we must compare and contrast him not with the patriarchs who precede him, but with the personality who, from the moment of his appearance in the book of Exodus, stands at center stage for the rest of the Torah and all of subsequent Jewish religious history: Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our Teacher.

The idea of linking Moses and Joseph comes from the Midrash. Moses, the giant liberator of Israel,

never enters the Land of Israel himself, and is even buried on Mount Nevo at the outskirts of the Promised Land – exactly where, nobody knows. Joseph, on the other hand, is buried in the heartland of Samaria – Shechem – which lives as a national shrine to this very day. Why does Joseph merit such preferred treatment?

The midrashic explanation is based on two verses that highlight contrasting aspects of their respective biographies. When Joseph was imprisoned and he spoke to the wine steward for the sake of interpreting his dream, he asked to be remembered to Pharaoh: “For indeed I was stolen away from out of the land of the Hebrews” (Gen. 40:15). Joseph does not hesitate to reveal his Jewish background.

Moses, on the other hand, after having rescued the Midianite shepherdesses, hears the women reporting to their father how “...an Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and drew water for us, and watered the flock” (Ex. 2:19). He does not correct them, saying “I am not an Egyptian but a Hebrew!” This silence, explains the Midrash, is why not even his bones may be brought back to the Land of Israel (See Midrash Devarim Raba, 2:8).

In justifying the burial of Joseph’s bones in Israel, testifying to his unflinching recognition of his roots, the Midrash may be adding a notch of pride to Joseph’s belt. But in truth, I believe that our sages are merely attempting to temper the indisputable fact that Moses is a far more “Jewish Jew” than Joseph in the most profound sense of the term.

In many ways, Joseph and Moses are contrasting personalities, mirror images of each other, with Moses rectifying the problematic steps taken by Joseph. Joseph was born in Israel, but became professionally successful in Egypt; Moses was born in Egypt, but established his place in history by taking the Jews on their way to Israel. Joseph was the insider who chose to move outside (he dreamt of Egyptian agriculture, as well as the cosmic universe). Moses was the outsider (Prince of Egypt), who insisted on coming inside (by slaying the Egyptian taskmaster). Joseph brought his family to Egypt, Moses took his people out of Egypt. Moses saw Egypt as a foreign country, and names his son Gershom “for he said I have been a stranger in a strange land” (Ex. 2:22). Joseph has at best ambiguous feelings about his early years in Canaan, naming his firstborn in Egypt Manasseh “since God has made me [allowed me to] forget completely my hardship and my parental home” (Gen. 41:51). Joseph, through his economic policies, enslaves the Egyptian farmers to Pharaoh; Moses frees the Jews from their enslavement to Pharaoh. And Joseph’s dreams are realized, whereas Moses’ dream – the vision of Israel’s redemption in Israel – remained tragically unfulfilled at the end of his life.

The truth is that for the majority of Joseph’s professional life he functions as an Egyptian, the Grand Vizier of Egypt. He may have grown up in the old home

of the patriarch Jacob, heir to the traditions of Abraham and Isaac, but from the practical point of view, his time and energies are devoted to putting Exxon, Xerox and MGM on the map. Ultimately his professional activities enable him to preserve his people, the children of Israel; but day to day, hour to hour, he is involved in strengthening and aggrandizing Egypt.

A good case could easily be made in praise of Joseph. He never loses sight of God or morality, despite the blandishments of Egyptian society. And God would even testify that He had a special task for Joseph, personally chosen to save the descendants of Jacob and the world from a relentless famine. Nevertheless, he must pay a price for being Grand Vizier of Egypt: The gold chain around his neck is Egyptian, his garments are Egyptian, his limousine is Egyptian, and even his language is Egyptian. Indeed, when his brothers come to ask for bread, an interpreter's presence is required for the interviews because his very language of discourse is Egyptian, with his countrymen totally unaware of his knowledge of Hebrew!

The difference between Moses and Joseph takes on its sharpest hue when seen against the shadow of Pharaoh. Joseph's life work consists of glorifying and exalting Pharaoh, in effect bestowing upon the Egyptian King-God the blessings of a prosperous and powerful kingdom, whose subjects are enslaved to him; Moses flees Pharaoh's court with a traitorous act against him, ultimately humiliating and degrading him by unleashing the ten plagues.

A shepherd and the son of shepherds, Joseph becomes the first Jewish prince in history, while Moses, a genuine prince of Egypt, begins his mature years as a shepherd on the run, risking his life for his commitment to free the Israelites. Jealousy and destiny force Joseph to live out his life away from his brothers, estranging himself from them. But Moses, despite his foreign, Egyptian background, nevertheless cares for his Hebrew brothers and identifies with them. As the Torah most poignantly records: "And it happened in those days [after the baby Moses was taken to the home of Pharaoh's daughter] that Moses grew up and he went out to his brothers and he saw [attempting to alleviate] their suffering." [Exodus 2:11]

Even though Joseph and Moses both change the world and preserve the Jewish people through the divine will that flows through them, their energies get channeled into different directions: Pharaoh and Egypt on the one hand, the Jewish people and Torah on the other.

This may be the significant factor in explaining why our sages stop short at calling Joseph a patriarch. He may be a tzadik, two of his sons may become the heads of tribes, and he may even deserve burial in Israel; but ultimately a hero who spends so much of his energies on behalf of Egypt cannot be called a patriarch of the Jewish nation.

It is recorded that the first chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, was tended to in his final years by an internationally known physician. His last words to the doctor were: "I yearn for the day when Jews who are great will also be great Jews." It was Moses who was undoubtedly the greatest Jew who ever lived. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It should be obvious to all that Moshe is a very unlikely choice to head the Jewish people, to redeem them from Egyptian bondage, and to bring the Torah down from Heaven to the Jewish people and eventually to all of humankind. It is also clear that Moshe would not be the likely one to guide them through the vicissitudes of war, thirst and forty years sojourn in the desert of Sinai.

Rambam writes that Moshe was of short temper. The Torah records for us that he was raised in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He kills an Egyptian and covers up his deed. He is a shepherd for a pagan priest of Midyan and marries one of his daughters. He is separated from his people for sixty years before returning to them and proclaiming himself as their leader. Not really too impressive a resume for the greatest of all humans and of the Jewish people! But there it is for all to see and study. So, what is the message that the Torah is sending to us with this narrative?

Who needs to know of his previous life before becoming the Moshe we revere? After all, the Torah does not explicitly tell us about the youth experiences of Noah, Avraham and other great men of Israel and the world. So, why all the detail – much of it not too pleasant – about the early life of Moshe? The question almost begs itself of any student of Torah. The Torah is always concise and chary of words, so this concentration of facts and stories about Moshe's early life is somewhat puzzling.

What is clear from biblical narrative and Jewish and world history generally is that Heaven does not play by our rules nor does it conduct itself by our preconceived norms and notions. We never would have chosen David as our king, Amos as our prophet or Esther as our savior from destruction. Jewish history in a great measure has been formed by unlikely heroes, unexpected champions and surprising personalities.

It is almost as if Heaven wishes to mock our pretensions and upset our conventional wisdom. Oftentimes it is our stubborn nature, our haughtiness to think that we are always privy to God's plans and methods that has led us to stray far from truth and reality. The greatness of the generation that left Egypt was that it not only believed in the God of Israel but believed in

His servant Moshe as well. Throughout his career as leader of Israel, according to Midrash, the rebels would always hold Moshe's past against him. They could not come to terms with Moshe as being their leader for he did not fit the paradigm that they had constructed for themselves. Eventually this disbelief in Moshe translated itself into a disbelief in God as well and doomed that generation to perish in the desert of Sinai. God's plans, actions and choices, so to speak, are inscrutable. The prophet taught us that God stated: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts and My ways are not your ways." Moshe's life story is a striking example of this truism. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Why, out of all places, did God reveal himself to Moses through the sneh (burning bush)? (Exodus 3:2). One possibility is that the experience seems to be a microcosm of revelation. Note the similarity in sound between sneh and Sinai, the mountain where God speaks to the Jewish People. Indeed, the revelation at the sneh and Sinai occurred in the same place: the desert of Horev. Both unfolded through the medium of fire. At the sneh, the fire was not consumed (3:2). At Sinai smoke and fire engulfed the entire mountain (19:18).

Other approaches understand the sneh as symbolic either of Egypt or of the Jewish People. On the one hand, it was akin to Egypt. Just as it is difficult to remove the hand from a thorn bush without lacerating the skin, so was it impossible to escape the "thorn bush" known as Egypt without some amount of pain and suffering (Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Exodus 3:2).

On the other hand, the sneh can be viewed as representative of the Jewish People. In Egypt, the Jews were stripped of all goods and felt so low that it was as if they were driven into the ground. The sneh is a simple bush that is also close to the ground (R. Elazar in Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Exodus 3:7).

Perhaps, too, when Moses flees after being criticized by a fellow Jew for killing the Egyptian and having his life threatened by Pharaoh, he becomes uncertain to whom he should be loyal – the Egyptians or the Jews. In fact, after he saves Jethro's daughters, they describe Moses to their father as an ish Mitzri (Egyptian man; Exodus 2:19).

Soon after, Moses sees the phenomenon of the bush that burns without end. "It is," as Gaya Aranoff Bernstein writes, "as if he suddenly has a divinely inspired insight, that he is looking at his family tree on fire, in danger of being consumed and obliterated. He has an acute awareness...that he must heed the call to

help, and leave the comforts and safety of living among non-Jews in Midian.... He realizes that despite his own reluctance and insecurity, he is uniquely positioned to help his people; he must respond to the call of his soul to help carry out the divine mission."

But the meaning of sneh that resonates most powerfully sees the sneh as symbolic not of Sinai or of Egypt or of the Jewish People but of God Himself. As long as Jews were enslaved, God could only reveal Himself in the lowly burning bush in the spirit of "I am with My people in their pain" (Psalms 91:15). God cannot be in comfort, if you will, as long as His people are in distress (Rashi, quoting Midrash Tanchuma 14).

Revelation through the sneh teaches that God is with us in the darkest moments and places. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

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Raising a Hand to Strike

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"And Moshe said to the wicked one (*rasha*), 'Why do you strike your fellow?'" (*Shemot* 2:13). The word translated "strike" (*takeh*) is technically in the future tense. From this our Sages derive that one who simply raises his hand against his neighbor is referred to as a *rasha* (a wicked person), even before actually striking him.

The prohibition of injuring another is biblical, derived from the verse: "He may be given up to forty lashes **but not more**" (*Devarim* 25:3). As is the case for all biblical prohibitions (*lavin*), a transgressor is liable to *malkot* (lashes) for transgressing, unless he is already subject to a financial penalty. Therefore, if someone causes an injury to another and the damage done is minimal (less than a *perutah*), he is liable to *malkot*. We might therefore conclude that someone who simply raises his hand against his neighbor (causing no damage and earning himself no financial liability) should incur the punishment of lashes. Why then is such a transgressor only referred to as a *rasha* but not lashed?

It is possible that the prooftext cited above is not the real source of the prohibition. Instead, it may be that the prohibition is rabbinic, with the biblical text simply serving as an *asmachta* (support). Even though according to this understanding the transgression of raising one's hand against a neighbor is only rabbinic, someone who does so is referred to as a *rasha*. This status may disqualify him to serve as a witness, and may mean that his oath is not relied upon. Alternatively, it is possible that calling him a *rasha* does not disqualify him as a witness. It may simply mean that we are permitted to refer to him as a *rasha*, which is what Moshe did.

There is another significance to a person being considered a *rasha*. The person whom he is threatening

is permitted to report him to the ruling authorities, Jewish or non-Jewish, and he is not considered a *moser* (an informer who turns in a fellow Jew to the authorities in defiance of Jewish law). Furthermore, the person being threatened is permitted to attack his attacker – not physically (as he has not yet been struck) but verbally, by name-calling. For example, he may call the threatening person a *mamzer* (a child born of an adulterous or incestuous union), even though doing so may cause his attacker more harm than the attacker would have caused him had he landed his threatened blow. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

When Moshe fled from Pharaoh, he went to מדין (Shemos 2:15). Since מדין was one of the sons Avraham had with Ketura (Bereishis 25:2), and Avraham sent these sons east (25:6), we would expect the land of מדין to be east of כנען. The proximity of מדין to מואב, as evidenced by their partnership hiring בלעם (Bamidbar 22:4) and then trying to cause the בני ישראל to sin (25:1, 26:6 and 31:15-16), supports this; since מואב was on the east side of the Dead Sea, מדין must have been east of כנען as well, in Jordan.

Another strong indication that מדין was east of כנען is the five kings/princes of מדין being described as “officers of סיוחן” (Yehoshua 13:21). If the rulers of מדין were puppets of סיוחן because סיוחן conquered מדין (see Radak), since the land סיוחן conquered was on the east side of (the northern part of) the Dead Sea, מדין must have been in that area too.

Based on the assumption that this was where Moshe fled, the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 22:4 and Tanchuma Matos 3) says that Moshe sent Pinachas to attack מדין (Bamidbar 31:6) instead of doing so himself because it would be inappropriate for Moshe to lead a campaign against מדין after having taken refuge there (similar to Aharon being the one to smite the water and the ground instead of Moshe since they had helped Moshe; see Rashi on Shemos 7:19 and 8:12). However, there is another opinion in that Midrash, which says that the מדין destroyed by Pinachas was not the same מדין Moshe fled to; Moshe sent Pinachas rather than going himself so that Pinachas could finish what he had started (when he killed Kuzbi).

The existence of a second מדין is helpful, because מדין was wiped out before בני ישראל entered the Promised Land (31:7-10), yet they were still around to cause trouble afterwards (Shoftim 6:1). If there was more than one מדין, and only one was wiped out, the other one could have been the second wave of troublemakers. However, the מדין that Gidon defeated (in Shoftim) seems to be in the same general area as the one Pinachas wiped out. Even if they weren't right next to מואב, they were still in the east, close enough to qualify for Moshe not being the one to attack them; Moshe's מדין

must be elsewhere. R' Dovid Luria, in his commentary on Bamidbar Rabba, says that the מדין that was wiped out was southeast of ארץ ישראל, while the מדין that Moshe fled to was southwest of ארץ ישראל, closer to Egypt. (He must think מדין subsequently spread back east.) This would put Moshe's מדין on the border of Egypt, and I doubt Moshe would have fled to an area so close to Egypt. Besides, Aharon and Moshe met at Mt. Sinai because it was on the way from Egypt to מדין (Shemos 4:27), and if מדין was southwest of ארץ ישראל, Mt. Sinai wouldn't be between the two. [I find it ironic that some put מדין on the Sinai Peninsula because they think מדין must be near Mt. Sinai, while others put Mt. Sinai in Saudi Arabia because they think Mt. Sinai must be near מדין. I don't think Mt. Sinai and מדין have to be that close to each other, as long as Mt. Sinai is within a few days of both Egypt and מדין, and is on the way when going from one to the other.]

Modern scholars suggest that there were different tribes of מדינים, so one tribe being wiped out wouldn't prevent another tribe from still causing problems. However, the implication (Bamidbar 31:8) is that all the kings of מדין were killed. Additionally, why would there be five kings for just one tribe? It makes more sense for each of the five kings to have ruled over one of the five sons of מדין (Bereishis 25:4), as stated by מדרש החפץ (Bamidbar 31:8); since all five kings were killed, none of the tribes would have survived.

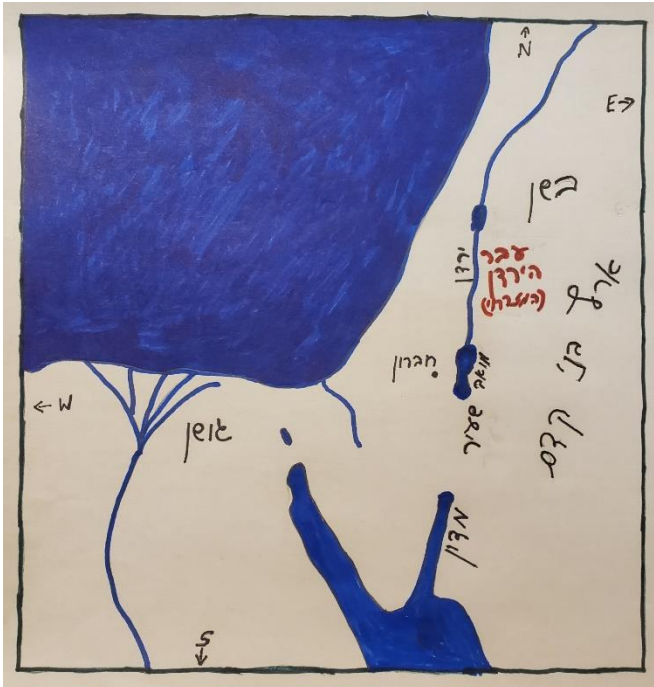
The Sifre (Bamidbar 157) says the army Moshe sent to wage war against מדין only surrounded them from three sides, not four, in order to allow the מדינים to escape (see Rambam's Hilchos Melachim 6:7). Therefore, only those who chose not to escape were wiped out, allowing מדין to continue as a nation via those who did escape (although they would need to find a new king). Nevertheless, if מדין was only in the east, why didn't Moshe warn his father-in-law to vacate the area before the war (see Sh'muel I 15:6)? [Although in Bamidbar (10:29-33) it doesn't say that his father-in-law returned home – only that he wanted to go back home – in Shemos (18:27; see Ramban on 18:1) it says he actually did go back.] On the other hand, why would multiple locations be attributed to the same nation?

When we say that Ketura's sons (which included מדין) lived “in the east,” how far north and south did they live? Being nomads (and therefore referred to as ישמעאלים, see Radak on Shoftim 8:24) who brought goods back and forth between Arabia and the Fertile Crescent, “ארץ בני קדם” (where Avraham sent the sons of Ketura) seems to have covered a lot of ground. But that doesn't mean everyone was the same. Those who were more sedentary (possibly miners, blacksmiths and/or potters rather than nomads) likely settled farther south, near the Red Sea, while those who moved from place to place throughout the year (with their flocks and/or raiding others' property) lived (and roamed) in the middle and towards the north (with only those who were nomadic

ruled by the five kings). But the area the descendants of מדין lived in formed a contiguous (or semi-contiguous) line from north to south, with this somewhat diagonal line being east of the Promised Land. It was all מדין, but those in the south were (generally speaking) different from those who lived parallel to כנען. True, Moshe's father-in-law also had flocks, but he wasn't a trader, and he preferred the more settled southern lifestyle.

Conjecture? Sure. But Josephus does say (Antiquities 2:11) that the city of מדין where Moshe fled to was adjacent to the Red Sea. And the ancient city of Madyan is on the east coast of the Gulf of Aqaba (the right leg of the northern part of the Red Sea). [This is also much closer to the Sinai Peninsula than מואב is.] So even though the מדין in Bamidbar and Shoftim was east of כנען (in Jordan), the מדין Moshe fled to seems to have been southeast of כנען, in northwest Saudi Arabia.

Rabbi Dov Kramer was raised in Kew Gardens Hills. Although no one from his family lives there anymore, there are currently Kramers in Lawrence, Kew Gardens, Far Rockaway, Columbus, Detroit, Passaic, Lakewood and Jerusalem. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer



If you look at the map above, you can see "ארץ בני קדם" in the east; the מדין that Pinachas wiped out was east of מואב, while the מדין Moshe fled to was south, by the Red Sea.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Strenuous

Some years after the B'nei Yisrael came to Egypt and settled there, the king of Egypt (Par'oh) was concerned that they would become a danger to the culture and people of Egypt. He instituted a wide-spread plan designed to limit Yisrael's growth and its spread throughout the land. Many of Par'oh's ideas will sound familiar to any historian, as these same bigoted ideas

and plans were established in many different countries. One is also reminded that Hashem saved the Jewish People time and again from its oppressors. All their plans proved eventually for naught, as Hashem's Will determined the history of our People. This became quite clear in this first persecution of the Jewish People by the Egyptians.

The Torah tells us, "So they appointed tax collectors over it in order to afflict it (the nation) with their burdens; it built storage cities for Par'oh, Pit'om and Raamses. But as much as they would afflict it, so it would increase and so it would burst forth; and they were disgusted because of the B'nei Yisrael. The Egyptians enslaved the B'nei Yisrael with crushing labor. They embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and with bricks, and with every labor of the field; all their labors that they performed with them was crushing labor." It should be noted that the word, "b'farech," is translated here as "crushing labor." The Talmud explains that the term comes from "peh-rach, a soft, persuasive mouth, trickery." This term is also translated in other ways which include, strenuously, rigor, backbreaking, and debilitating. Each of these descriptions of the work given the B'nei Yisrael played a part in its servitude.

Professor Nechama Leibovits explains that Benno Jacob described Par'oh's dilemma: that "such a step would have been monstrously illegal even for Par'oh – to enslave people who had been invited to settle in the country by royal permission and agreement." Par'oh instead chose to tax the B'nei Yisrael with hard work, building the cities of Pit'om and Raamses. It was not uncommon for leaders to tax the people for their land by making them do some work for the country. Foreigners did not own land but were taxed for occupying land belonging to others. Based on this decree, it would appear that Par'oh alone. This would be true except for the fact that the verbs used in our paragraph are in the plural: they would afflict, they enslaved, they embittered. The Ramban explains that, "any Egyptian who needed work done had the authority to take from them (the B'nei Yisrael) men to do his work." This is what the Torah implies with, "all their labors that they performed with them was crushing labor."

Two different terms are used for the servitude of the B'nei Yisrael: "avodah kasha, hard work," and "b'farech, crushing labor." Our Rabbis explain that the two different descriptions were designed for the same purpose but through different approaches. Avodah kasha was designed to wear down the strength of the nation so that the people would not have the stamina to have and raise children. This stems from Par'oh's concern that the B'nei Yisrael were becoming too populous. "Behold, the people, the B'nei Yisrael, are more numerous and stronger than we. Let us act wisely with them, lest they become numerous and it may be that if a war will occur, they, too, may join our enemies, and

wage war against us and go up from the land." Yet we see that, "as much as they would afflict it, so it would increase and so it would burst forth." When Par'oh saw that his plan had failed to produce the desired effect, he applied the second form of affliction, work that would be b'farech, strenuous, backbreaking labor. This labor was designed to break the spirit of the people.

Professor Nechama Leibovits describes the two different forms of labor: avodah kasha and b'farech. If the master would say, "Take this pile of bricks and move it to the other end of the field and when you have done that, move the bricks back to this end of the field, and do this, one million times," that is considered avodah kasha. If instead he says, "Take this pile of bricks and move it to the other end of the field, and when you have done that, move the bricks back to this end of the field, and do this until I tell you to stop," that is b'farech. If one has a set limit where he can foretell the end of his task, the work may be difficult, but it is not considered back-breaking. When no limit is set, when no end is in sight, that is debilitating and dehumanizing, even if the task serves a purpose. The Rambam, in Hilchot Avadim (Laws of Slaves) differs slightly in this explanation. He asserts that both of the above tasks are considered b'farech, as any task that appears to be unnecessary, is considered strenuous and designed to have the psychological effect of breaking one's spirit. If the task is given an explanation, even if that explanation from the master is only "I want to know how long this task will take," only then is it considered avodah kasha, difficult work but not debilitating.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explained that Par'oh never officially made the B'nei Yisrael slaves. He began with taxing the people, but the tax was to be paid with work, not with money. Par'oh began by giving the B'nei Yisrael an exalted task, namely making the two storage cities of Pit'om and Raamses. This was directly serving the king, participating in a task that every citizen of Egypt strived to perform. The work was avodah kasha, but the people proudly accepted their assignment. When that task was completed, the type of work changed. The B'nei Yisrael were reassigned to the lowly task of making common bricks, an unskilled process of mixing mud, straw, and water, and then pouring it into a mold to dry in the sun. This work was not done in groups, but individually produced at their homes. They were no longer visible to the public, received no accolades for their skills, and had little interaction even with their fellow tribesmen. This was designed to lower their self-esteem.

The Kli Yakar interprets these sentences as a progression into sin and wickedness. When Par'oh wished to deal wisely with the B'nei Yisrael, he set tax collectors among them to collect taxes which would be given to idolatry. Giving money to idolatry is equivalent in Jewish Law to worshipping an idol. This enabled the Egyptians to afflict the B'nei Yisrael without fear of retribution from Hashem. This began a slippery slope

where these same tax collectors encouraged the B'nei Yisrael to participate in idolatry with a "peh-rach, a soft, persuasive mouth," which then enabled additional affliction.

We see on college campuses today these same "tax collectors" who encourage our youth to abandon their values and their people with this same "peh-rach." May we be strong enough to resist their deceptive words and "ideas" so that we will not be afflicted without Hashem's protection. ©2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd afterwards, Moshe and Aharon came and said to Pharaoh, "So says the L-rd..." Before going to Pharaoh, Moshe and Aharon went to the Jewish People to tell them that Hashem was about to redeem them. They performed the signs they were commanded to, and the people believed them. Afterwards, they went to speak to Pharaoh, telling him that Hashem commanded the Jews to go three days into the Wilderness and sacrifice to Him.

The word, "and afterwards," stands out, and clearly it must be teaching us something of importance. We learn many things from it, such as the fact that when it came time to go to Pharaoh, one by one the elders slipped away so only Moshe and Aharon arrived at his palace. Although the elders were there before, they were not there "after." The Midrash says "after" tells us that it was Pharaoh's birthday and all the kings came to pay homage to him. The guards assumed Moshe and Aharon came to honor Pharaoh since they came after all the other kings.

Some commentaries however, find different significance in this word. They say that the word after is coming to tell us about what came before, the prerequisite for Moshe's going to Pharaoh. That prerequisite was the Emunah, the faith and trust the Jewish People had in Hashem and His salvation.

The Tzror HaMor says that Moshe was not ready to put his life on the line by going to Pharaoh until the Jews exhibited their faith. This is because one who trusts in Hashem is protected, and once they showed they trusted in Hashem, Moshe, as their messenger, would be protected.

The Ohr HaChaim points out that earlier in the Parsha (3:18), Hashem told Moshe, "They will hear your voice, and you will come before the king of Egypt." The fact that there is a pause after the word voice indicates that their listening and believing Moshe's words would happen first, before Moshe went to Pharaoh.

It gives us something to think about. Why did the belief have to come before Moshe went to Pharaoh? If it was just coming from Moshe, as the Tzror HaMor implies, that makes sense. But if Hashem was telling Moshe the sequence of events, why was it necessary for Moshe to go to Pharaoh only after the Jews heard

Hashem's message?

Likely, the two commentaries are really bringing forward the same concept. Faith and trust in Hashem is not merely a passive state, wherein I can't do anything about something so I just accept that Hashem has a plan.

Rather, bitachon is a positive action, and when a person CHOOSES to trust in Hashem, s/he is activating tremendous power in the Universe. The Jews were supposed to be taken from Egypt. Hashem had heard their cries and seen the atrocities of their enemies, but one thing was missing. They needed to trust in Hashem as their Redeemer.

When the Jews believed Moshe's words and bowed to Hashem, they lit the fuse on their own salvation. Only after that happened were they fully worthy of being redeemed. We, too, are suffering from enemies all around us. Perhaps all that is left is to put our faith in Hashem and know that He will soon redeem us.

The fields were parched and brown from lack of rain, and the crops lay wilting from thirst. Days turned into arid weeks. No rain came.

The local religious leaders called a gathering at the town square the following week, requesting everyone to bring an object of faith for inspiration. The leaders were touched to see the variety of objects clutched in prayerful hands -- prayer books, photos of tzaddikim, Tehillims.

When the hour ended, as if on magical command, a soft rain began to fall. Cheers swept the crowd as they held their treasured objects high in gratitude and praise. From the middle of the crowd one faith symbol seemed to overshadow all the others.

One man had brought an umbrella. © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Each of us lives at the center of a series of concentric circles, the closest one encompassing our immediate family members; the next, friends and neighbors; beyond that, co-religionists or fellow citizens of one's country. At a distance removed even farther is the larger circle of human beings with whom we share similar values. And further out still, the circle encompassing the rest of humanity.

I once wrote an essay contending that it is no sin - in fact, it is proper - that we feel, and demonstrate, our deepest love for the circle closest to us. And greater concern for the next circle out than for those beyond it.

Some Jews seem embarrassed at the idea of Jews acting with special alacrity on behalf of fellow Jews. But they are misguided.

In fact, I suggested, the only way to feel any concern for the "outer circles" is to hone one's love for those in one's inner one first. Exercising the "empathy"

muscle with regard to those closest to us is what allows us to have true empathy at all for those most distant.

Moshe Rabbeinu, the "most humble of all men," was not naturally given to interfering in conflicts. And yet we find him doing so thrice in the parsha: First, by killing the Mitzri who was beating a Jew; second, by berating a Jew who was hitting another Jew; third, by standing up to the non-Jewish shepherds who were bullying the non-Jewish daughters of Yisro.

A dear talmidah of mine from long ago, Tanya Farber, suggested that my observation about how empathy for those distant from us is only enabled by first feeling, and acting upon, empathy for those close to us may inform Moshe's interventions. What empowered Moshe's decision to stand up for Yisro's daughters may have been his standing up earlier for fellow Jews.

The only way to truly "love humanity," and not just mouth half-hearted concern for it, is to first concentrate on the easier, but essential and prime, endeavor of loving those to whom we are closest. © 2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI ZEV ITZKOWITZ

A Byte of Torah

[Moses] saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man, one of his brothers. He looked all around, and saw that there was no one. He hit the Egyptian and covered him with sand. (Exodus 2:11-12) The implication from this verse is that when Moses hit the Egyptian, he intended to kill him. In fact, the lethal blow was an accident. Moses just wanted to stop the Egyptian from beating the Hebrew, and did not mean to kill him. This should teach us to be careful of our actions.

Even though our intentions may very well be good, we will still be held responsible for the consequences of our actions, however unwanted and unforeseen (R. Saadia Gaon). © 1994 Rabbi Z. Itzkowitz

