

Shemot

The enslavement of the Jews serves as a tragic backdrop as this week's Parsha focuses on the life of our teacher Moshe. Shemot is volume I of the definitive biography as it covers the strange story of Moshe's privileged childhood in Pharaoh's palace, his escape from Egypt as a wanted fugitive, and finally his unexpected return as the new leader of the Jewish People. We know that this is just the beginning. Moshe is destined to march the Jews out of Egypt, bring down the Torah from Sinai and lead the Jews across the desert to the Land of Israel. Certainly he was blessed with an extraordinary soul, as the Torah itself states, "She saw that he was good" (Shemot 2:2). However, he was no robot. G-d has no interest in robots. He was a man with free will just like the rest of us. Moshe worked on himself and developed spiritually for a full eighty years before G-d revealed Himself to him at the Burning Bush. Fortunately, the Torah does provide some details of Moshe's life prior to his career as a prophet. Maybe we can gain a little insight into what it was about Moshe that G-d liked so much.

The first thing we learn about Moshe's activities out of the palace is that he kills a ruthless Egyptian taskmaster in order to save the life of a Jew. Next we are told of his reprimanding a Jew who was fighting with a fellow Jew. It seems that the Torah wants to first illustrate the depth of Moshe's love for his people before we can hear about his preaching. Admonishment must come from a place of love, not anger.

Moshe then flees Egypt (from exile to exile!) to escape the death penalty for his "crime." He arrives at a well in Midian in the nick of time to rescue some damsels in distress. The girls go home and tell their father that an "Egyptian man" saved them from abusive shepherds. Their father, Yitro, invites Moshe into his home where Moshe eventually marries his daughter, Tziporah.

The Midrash is troubled that Moshe would be described by Yitro's daughters as an "Egyptian man." He wasn't Egyptian, he was Jewish. The Midrash gives the following parable. A man is bitten by a wild ass and runs in search of water to cleanse his wound. He comes upon a river and sees a child drowning. After the man saves the child, the child says to him, "If not for you I would have died in that river." The man responds, "It was not I that saved you, rather it was the wild ass that bit me that saved you." So too, continues the Midrash, when the daughters of Yitro thanked Moshe for saving them from the shepherds, Moshe replied, "Don't thank me. Thank the Egyptian guy I killed." This is why the girls told their father that an "Egyptian man" saved them (Shemot Rabba 1:39).

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Rabbi Matisyahu Solomon points out that this Midrash reveals something very special about Moshe. Even when Moshe acted heroically he still managed to avoid the trap of becoming self-centered. In his humility he would not take credit for the rescue and instead referred to the Egyptian man whose misdeeds set the events in motion. He taught the daughters of Yitro not to have a narrow vision; step back and see the big picture of Divine Providence.

Here was G-d's man for the redemption! Moshe, the humblest of men (Bamidbar 12:3), is always acutely aware of G-d's Hand directing events and would never accept any credit for the Exodus. (Maybe that's why Moshe is not even mentioned in the Haggadah.) This would also be just the right kind of person to receive the Torah and give it over to the Jewish people. Moshe's humility would ensure the purity of the Torah. He was capable of faithfully transmitting the Torah from G-d to the Jewish people without any personal input.

To sum up: Moshe's love for his people is so deep he is ready to risk everything to save a Jewish life. He is a man of action and has the confidence to kill an enemy and admonish a fellow Jew, but yet, he is humble, uncomfortable with honors, always crediting events to Divine Providence. These are the ingredients that make for a successful prophet, Torah scholar and Jewish leader.

The Torah has given us a glimpse of the greatness Moshe achieved even before he heard G-d's Voice at the Burning Bush. Of course, it is not the Torah's purpose to provide us with a fascinating biographical sketch for our reading pleasure on Shabbat morning. We cannot be satisfied with learning about Moshe; it is incumbent upon us to learn from Moshe.

Shabbat Shalom
The JSN Team

