



## D'var Torah Parshat Sh'mot

By Orli Korn, Jan. 6, 2023

This week's parsha, Parshat Shemot, starts with all the names of the people who came to Egypt, and then Joseph's entire generation dying. Within the first 15 verses: a new pharaoh rises, who enslaves the Israelites and then orders the killing of all the baby boys. In the second perek, Moshe is born, rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, and grows up with the Egyptians in the palace. After growing up, he then kills an Egyptian taskmaster for beating an Israelite and runs away to Midian. In Midian, he marries Tziporah, has children, and then sees the burning bush and goes back to Egypt. In Egypt, he says to pharaoh, let my people go, and then pharaoh says no and makes the Israelites' work harder. (whew)

Reflecting on all of this action, (Actually, I think it could make a great movie, I would call it "Prince of Egypt") one thing I noticed was that this parsha has a couple of overly violent moments, which all turn out badly. Pharaoh enslaves an entire nation because he was worried they would join his enemies in a war, but they just end up being even more numerous. At the end of the parsha, pharaoh makes the slaves work even harder, and ends up getting plagued in the next parsha. All of these bad situations had less violent solutions, but sometimes in the moment it's hard to know the right thing to do. This is an issue that everyone struggles with, in stories from the Tanakh and also in everyday life.

One thing that people in the Tanakh might have thought is that what they did wasn't their fault because they were ordered to do it. I think this is one of the worst excuses you can make. You always have a choice. The Egyptian taskmasters followed pharaoh's orders and whipped the Jews, as it says:

וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ

but they didn't have to. The midwives proved they had a choice by doing the right thing and refusing to kill the babies, even though they were ordered to and could have been killed for not obeying. The Egyptian taskmasters probably thought they were doing the right thing because they were obeying their king. An important thing to remember is that you need to not blindly follow.

Your actions could also have good outcomes. Because Shifra and Puah saved the babies, God rewarded them with houses. Moral choices determine whether people will trust you or not. When Moshe tried to stop two Hebrews from fighting each other, they wouldn't stop, and said:

מִי שָׂמָךְ לְאִישׁ שָׂר וְשֹׁפֵט עָלֵינוּ הֲלֹהָרְגִי אֶתְּהָ אִמֶּר בְּאִשֶּׁר הִרְגַת אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי

“Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”

The Jews didn't trust him because of his previous actions. Moshe was also worried about the community elders trusting him after he talked to God in Midian. “לֹא־יֶאֱמִינוּ לִי” “they won't believe me” On the other hand, when God asked Aharon to help Moshe and get Bnei Yisrael to trust them, Aharon was able to. I think that was because of his good reputation within the kehila.

Another way to ensure better decisions is to never choose violence first, and to consider consequences before making important decisions . When Moshe killed the taskmaster, it says

וַיִּפֹּן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיִּרְא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּדְרֹשׁ אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל

“He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand”. I saw in Nehama Leibowitz’s *New Studies in Shemot* book that Naphtali Hertz Weisel says: “it looks very much like an unlawful act. Did [the Egyptian] merely striking a blow warrant killing?... What advantage would [Moshe] gain for his people by killing him in secret? It surely savoured of unlawful vengeance and anger.” She also wrote that Ramban does not even attempt to answer the moral problem involved. I agree there is a moral problem. Reading the original text, a simple interpretation could be that he didn't think about what he was doing too much. He just had an impulse and acted on it. Even though he had good intentions, that doesn't necessarily mean he did the right thing.

After attacking the taskmaster, Moshe has to run away to Midian to escape punishment. He could have possibly saved the Jews earlier if he had spoken instead of killing the taskmaster and therefore not had to run away. Even on his way to Midian, he finds some shepherds driving off Yitro’s daughters, but Moshe doesn't talk to the shepherds either, he “rose to the daughters' defense”. I understand that to mean that he didn't talk to the shepherds, he violently forced them away. At the burning bush, Moshe admits to this, saying “I am not a man of words”. Violence seemed to be good first impulse in situations of conflict. God helps Moshe learn, and makes sure he talks first and doesn't immediately try to force Pharaoh into letting the Israelites go. Even though God knew pharaoh wouldn't let Bnei Yisrael go, he still tried to show us that you should always try talking first and to let people have a chance to repent.

This lesson is something we can take to our own lives as well. If someone annoys us, don't react hastily – use language first, and tell them they're being rude or hurting your feelings. One can also demonstrate to my parents that one is ready for more autonomy by consistently making good decisions. Thinking before acting and considering consequences, especially how other people would feel, is a good way to make sure that one does the right thing.

This lesson also applies to the world at large. As we witness conflicts and violence in the world, particularly in Israel, Parashat Shemot offers an important lesson. In the parsha, God helps Moshe attempt to resolve conflict through negotiation. While this doesn't work with Pharaoh, Moshe uses this method to intervene on Bnei Yisrael’s behalf later on as a leader. We should be reminded that violence is not the only solution. It might be necessary sometimes, but we

should try other options first. That said, Aharon, known as “אוהב שלום ורודף שלום” isn't chosen as the leader of Bnei Yisrael. Action and conflict are needed sometimes. Nevertheless, this parsha urges us to reflect on the choices we make and to solve conflict in ways that prioritize people's physical safety and well-being.

Taking a beat gives a chance for people to change their minds and reset, rather than immediately escalating. And promoting dialog can be a way to earn trust with your fellow human beings. But this may be just one of the things that God was trying to teach Moshe before he could become the leader of Bnei Yisrael.

In the fifth aliyah, it becomes apparent that Moshe needs another lesson too. He is widely regarded for his humility, and indeed this is generally a good trait. However, at the incident with the burning bush we actually see that God actually gets frustrated with Moshe because of that extreme humility:

וַיַּחֲרֹאֶף ה' בְּמֹשֶׁה

Moshe was worried about being trusted by bnei yisrael. And he had difficulty in speaking. Yet, God tells him he does have trust – Aharon his brother is coming to meet him, and will be happy in his heart to see him. And Moshe's very protestation of ability to speak is one of the most poetic verses in the parasha:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי ה' לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּלִי גַם מִשְׁלִשָׁם גַּם מֵאֵז דְּבַרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כַבֵּד־פִּי וּכְבֹד לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי:

But Moses said to 'ה, “Please, O my lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

Does this sound like someone slow of tongue? God became angry with Moshe, because his (excessive) humility/self-abnegation was being used as an excuse not to serve. Perhaps what Moshe truly lacked here was self-confidence.

We should all remember that even if we feel otherwise, we have people who when they come to greet us, they will be happy in their heart. And that we have trust from bnei yisrael as well – our presence here in a minyan, a community is part of that. Jewish life is organized in requiring a group. Additionally, though many of us feel otherwise, we all have the ability to share language in one form or another, and likely better than we imagine we can. So yes, be humble – but also have the self-confidence to put yourself out there and lead as well. (Or do Roger a favor and write/deliver a drash ;))

Like God charges Moshe, we too are charged: וְעַתָּה לֵךְ – And now, go. But go forth confident in the support of those around you, to help you, to guide you, and to trust you.