

פרשת שמות

OVERVIEW

The second book, Exodus, concentrates on the history of Yaakov's descendants who formed a united people in Egypt (Goshen). A changed in government is followed by a wave of anti-Jewish measures. The cruelest is the extermination of all newborn male children. The two Jewish midwives embark on a secret campaign to circumvent the inhuman law. To Amram, a Levite, a son is born, Moshe. Miraculously saved, the boy is taken to the royal palace by the king's daughter where he receives a princely education.

Meanwhile the tempo of persecution increases. Vicious harassment and hard slave labor are used to break the morale of the unwanted settlers. Moshe witnesses an assault on a Jewish worker by an Egyptian overseer; he kills him. When his deed becomes known he flees to Midian where he becomes a shepherd and marries Tziporah, the daughter of a local priest Yithro. At a burning thornbush Moshe is summoned by G-d who orders him to go to Egypt and intervene on behalf of his oppressed brethren. Accompanied by his brother Aharon he appears before Pharaoh to plead for the release of the Jews. The result is intensification of the anti-Jewish measures.

COMMENTARY

The Beginning of slavery

A new wind blows in Egypt since the triumphant arrival of Yaakov, the father of the "provider". A new king assumes power "who knew nothing of Joseph". (It would appear that this Pharaoh was of non-Egyptian origin, for an Egyptian dynasty would have known of Joseph's fame). The people - as distinct from the king - knew about Joseph and what he had done for them in the past. They considered the Jews as benefactors, not intruders and they did not see the Jewish prosperity as a threat to their own security. The first appearance of a vicious antisemitism did not have its roots in the people but in the nation's upper echelons, especially among those who were keen on creating unrest in the country as a way of diverting attention from their poor management of the Egyptian economy.

Among major factors in the gathering storm of hatred were the Israelites' excessive birthrate (1:9) and the suspicion that they would make common cause with an enemy in the case of a surprise attack (1:10). There was in fact solid reason to fear this mass of strong and healthy shepherds who contrasted sharply with their pampered and flabby upper-class Egyptians. The surest way to stir up the people against the Jews was to spread rumors of espionage and collusion with a foreign power. This was certain to touch a raw nerve in the average citizen who feared nothing more than a sudden and potentially fatal attack against an unsuspecting and militarily unprepared nation.

Repressive Measures

The authorities announced three severe anti-Jewish laws:

- a) Jews are no longer free and equal citizens. In effect they were outlawed and reduced to slavery.
- b) The Jewish fertility rate will be drastically reduced through the systematic killing of every newborn male. Formally, this was a legal move inasmuch as the child would disappear before it could be registered by the civil clerk. As far as the state was concerned a non-registered infant was not born. Thus there was no murder and the public conscience was at ease.
- c) The Jews are condemned to perform forced labor of a harshness intended to crush their strength and reduce their ability to increase their ranks.

The Midwives

Cynically, Pharaoh turns to Jewish midwives to serve as "accomplices" in the devilish plan. They are charged with eliminating every male infant immediately after the birth. Pharaoh counts on their fear of punishment for the success of the scheme. However the midwives risk their lives by doubling their efforts to keep even weak babies alive. There were no stillborn babies during this terrible period (1:20).

Moshe's birth

"And there was a man of the house of Levi and took (to wife) the daughter of Levi; she became a mother and she bore a son". Mystery surrounds Moshe's birth. The text tells us neither the name of the father nor of the mother. Only later (6:20) are we told of Moshe's parentage. It seems that our Sidrah wishes to describe the atmosphere in the Jewish quarter marked by a dogged struggle against the oppressor. According to the Midrash the men separated from their wives in order not to produce sons who were doomed to die at birth. Thus a couple's resumption of marital relations was both an act of faith and a bold challenge to the enemy. As a reflection of the conditions prevalent at that period, the Torah refrains from mentioning the names of Moshe's parents at this point.

The infant was a well-behaved child in that he did not arouse the curiosity of the neighbors by his crying. It was a child one could risk to hide from the watchful eyes of the Egyptian officers.

The Egyptian Princess

The calm confidence shown by Moshe's parents even before his birth is again evident in the scene at the bank of the Nile. After placing the chest containing the infant in the water, the mother leaves. She cannot bear to witness whatever would happen next. Her daughter,

Miriam, overcoming her anxiety, hides behind a bush near the river. Is there an inner voice that tells her that the child will live? Miriam reflects the attitude of the Jewish woman who relies on her faith in divine guidance in the most perilous circumstances.

Miriam is right. The Egyptian princess arrives to bathe in the river. It may be assumed that the place where the infant was placed in the water was reserved for the use of the royal ladies and that Miriam was aware of it. This would explain her decision to remain close to the scene in the hope that the princess, at the sight of the little chest bobbing in the water, would have pity on the child. And behold, she takes the child in her arms and at once gives him the name that he would carry for the rest of his life: "Moshe", literally, "He who saved from the water" (and not as frequently translated "he who is saved from the water"). It is Moshe who will intervene and rescue, Moshe who will never forget his own miraculous survival. Thus, at his "Second birth", the princess unwittingly bestows a title on Moshe that projects his future as the great leader of his people.

The killing of the Egyptian

Two outstanding qualities mark the Jewish prophet: a scrupulous sense of justice and total personal independence. Moshe's fateful action after an uneventful childhood in the royal palace demonstrates these distinctive traits. His whole being revolts as he witnesses the inhuman treatment of the Jewish slaves, his brethren. His exalted position, a brilliant career, wealth and glory, all this means nothing to him when the issue is justice and humanity. Yet the verse tells us "he turned this way and that, and when he saw that no one was there, he slew the Mitzrite...." Why take such precaution when his conscience commands him to intervene, regardless of the consequences?

Moshe is not a hothead who risks his life unnecessarily. He is bold but not reckless. He knows that patience is needed to ensure the maximum effect of one's action. He also knows that the testimony of witnesses would feed the fires of increased Jewish persecution and result in his own incarceration and conviction. It is wise foresight when he makes certain that there are no witnesses to testify against him.

The burning thorn bush

At Horeb, G-d's mountain, Moshe is told for the first time of the mission to bring the Jewish people out of Mitzrayim. He realizes at once the historic significance of his task and the challenge to a liberated Israel. The divine order emanated from a thorn bush in whose core blazed the divine fire. In the symbolic language of the Torah, the thorn bush represents humbleness and submissiveness. The divine fire manifests itself even during extreme suffering (thorns).

Moshe is told to take off his shoes. This was to express his total surrender to the significance of this site from where his personality would evolve to its fullest potential. Sacredness cannot prevail without a physical

frame that, in turn, forms the vessel containing man's spirituality. Through his bodily contact with the thorn bush Moshe is inspired to attain the ideal to which his life will be dedicated.

The Name of G-d

Moshe's assignment is a twofold one. Primarily, he is to obtain Pharaoh's agreement to an immediate abolishment of Israel's enslavement. Israel itself will be the next object of the mission. It is a task that Moshe views with trepidation. He senses that he is somewhat estranged from his fellow Jews whose suffering-filled existence he had not shared. He does not know whether the Abrahamic legacy was still alive among the people. "When they will say to me: what is His name?" "I shall be that which I wish to be". This expresses G-d's uniqueness in that all other beings are what they HAVE to be; their existence is bound up with the Will of the One Who alone can, say not merely "I am" but "I shall be that which I wish to be", speaking in terms of the future which is totally dependent on His Will.

Man's freedom is entirely conditioned on the total freedom of G-d. G-d entrusts His world to the beings made free through the act of creation. From this knowledge and recognition, man draws his physical and moral independence that enables him to fill the role assigned to him by his Creator.

The circumcision of Moshe's son

This obscure passage becomes clear when one considers the place of the "Milah" in Jewish religious life. Few of the other commandments equal it in importance. Even Shabbos and Yom Kippur give it preference. In his enthusiasm to begin his historic assignment, Moshe is ready to set aside temporarily every activity even including Milah, which might delay his mission. He is in a hurry to go to Egypt in order to confront Pharaoh and persuade Israel to follow his lead. Yet the overwhelming happening at the thorn bush should have taught him the supremacy of the law above everything else. By wrongly interpreting his mission's order of priority Moshe bears a heavy burden of guilt. With an intuition characteristic of women, Tziporah takes quiet action and thereby saves him whom she rightly calls "the bridegroom reclaimed through the blood".

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