

Parashas Shemos

Parsha Summary

Yisrael and Yosef's generation died, and a new king arose in Egypt who felt threatened by Bnei Yisrael. This Pharaoh established a labor tax, forcing the Israelites to build storehouses. The Egyptians worked the Israelites extremely hard, causing them much suffering. Pharaoh told two midwives to kill the Israelite baby boys, but the midwives refused to do so, and so Pharaoh decreed that all male babies born must be thrown into the river. One woman, a Levite, had a baby boy whom she tried to hide, and she placed him in a basket on the banks of the river. Pharaoh's daughter found the boy and decided to raise him, calling him "Moshe," and hired his own mother to nurse him.

When Moshe grew up, he saw how the Egyptians were oppressing his brethren; when he thought nobody was looking, he killed an Egyptian who was hitting an Israelite. Later when he saw two Israelites fighting, he admonished the one about to hit his fellow, and the Israelite responded that he knew Moshe had killed an Egyptian - and indeed, Pharaoh was seeking to kill Moshe so Moshe fled to Midian. There, he saw that the shepherd daughters of Re'uel, a Midianite priest, were being harassed by other shepherds, and so Moshe saved them and watered their sheep. Re'uel had his daughters bring Moshe home, and let Moshe marry his daughter, Tzipporah while Moshe served as Re'uel's shepherd.

Meanwhile, God heard the cries of the Israelites. While tending sheep, Moshe saw a bush on fire without burning, and when he approached, God's angel spoke to him. God told Moshe that he must return to Egypt, tell the Israelites that God will redeem them, and Moshe should command Pharaoh to release the nation. Moshe is hesitant, especially because he is hard of speech, so God provides Moshe with miraculous signs to show to the people, and eventually tells Moshe that his brother Aharon should serve as a spokesman. Moshe accedes and brings his family to Egypt, but on the way, God sought to kill him until Tzipporah circumcised her son. Aharon was told by God to meet Moshe as he came to Egypt. Moshe gave God's message to the people and they bowed in thanks, but Pharaoh responded to Moshe by increasing the workload and oppression of the Israelites.

Classic Questions

Why did God allow for/orchestrate the oppressive Egyptian exile?

- **Gemara (Nedarim 32a):** as a punishment for Avraham (cf. Maharal, *Gevuros Hashem* 9)
 - **Ramban** (Ber. 12:10) it is a punishment for Avraham having descended to Egypt and lied about his relationship with Sarah soon after he arrived in Canaan
- **R. Saadia Gaon** (to Ber. 2:8): so that the Jewish people would appreciate their freedom
- **Sifrei** (Devarim 306), **Maasei H:** to spread word of God's miracles and sanctify His name
- **Mishnas R. Eliezer** (8), **Tosafos** (Shabbos 10): to punish the Israelites for selling Yosef
- **Seforno** (1:14), **Rashi** (2:14), **Radak** (Ber. 15:14): the Jewish people, while they were in Egypt, acted sinfully and deserved to be punished with slavery
- **Ran** (to Ber. 15:13), **R. Crescas** (OH 3:1:8:2): to purify Israel through *yisurin shel ahava*
 - Cf. **Ran** (Derush 3), **Abarbanel** (Ber. 15), **Kli Yakar** (Dev. 4:20), **Arizal**
- **Shelah** (Lech Lecha 8): slavery in Egypt taught the Israelites what it would mean to be a slave, preparing them for being slaves of God

What (in the Torah's description) explains why Moshe was the person chosen to be the leader of the Exodus?

- **Ibn Ezra:** Moshe had to be brought up as royalty to not share the slave mentality of his brethren, and also this way he would be separate from the population and looked up to
 - **Abarbanel:** Moshe's royal upbringing gave him the boldness to fight injustices

- **(Rashi), Akeidas Yitzchak:** God had Moshe grew up in Pharaoh's house as a sign that even though he planned to wipe out Yisrael, their savior was raised in his own house
- **Rambam (MN 2:45):** the first level of Moshe's prophecy was that he stood up to save the oppressed, even when in a foreign land (Midyan)
 - **Abarbanel, Tzeror haMor, Seforno:** Moshe stood up for those being oppressed
 - **Nechama Leibowitz:** we see three successive stories, where Moshe stands up for an oppressed Israelite against an Egyptian, then between two Israelites, and finally between a group of strangers, showing his strong commitment to justice
- **Rabbeinu Bahayei:** the burning bush represented Moshe's philosophical understanding of God
- **Chasam Sofer:** Moshe was chosen because he sought to share his brothers' hardship

Why did God/an angel seek to kill Moshe on his way to Egypt, and how did Zipporah save him?

- **Chazal:** Moshe was being punished for not circumcising his son due to the journey
 - **R. Shimon b. Gamliel (Nedarim 31):** the baby was the one in danger, not Moshe
 - **R. Chananel (in R. Bayhei):** Moshe was not even present with his wife and sons; the angel sought to kill the baby until Zipporah circumcised him
- **Mekhilta (dR' Yishmael):** Moshe made a deal with Yisro that one of his sons should be given over to idolatry; by circumcising this son, Zipporah was reversing that deal
 - **Ibn Ezra:** it is impossible that Moshe could have made or agreed to such a deal
- **Rashbam, haEmunah haRamah:** Moshe was punished for delaying his trip to Egypt
 - **Rashbam:** circumcision was like a sacrifice that could atone for this sin
 - **haEmunah haRamah (3):** bloodletting can save people in danger
- **Ibn Ezra:** Moshe was wrong to bring his family to Egypt, which would indicate he planned to live there for an extended period instead of having the nation redeemed
 - By having Zipporah circumcise her son, God forced her to stay with the boys instead of joining Moshe, and indicated to them all that it was better to split up
- **Abarbanel, R. DZ Hoffman:** being with his family, Moshe was not prepared for prophetic instructions, and when God came to Moshe he was in danger

Important "Chazal"s and "Rashi"s

- God constantly counts and names the children of Israel to show His love for them (Rashi)
- Pharaoh's astrologers say that the savior of Israel would be afflicted by water, so they decreed that all boys born should be thrown to the river. Once Moshe was thrown in, they saw that their decree was successful and annulled it (Sotah 12b)
- Amram had separated from his wife when he heard of Pharaoh's decree to kill all baby boys, and the elders of Israel did the same. Amram's daughter Miriam said to him, "your act is worse than Pharaoh's, because you are also preventing the births of baby girls, and preventing them from entering the next world, etc." Amram remarried his wife and the elders did the same (Sotah 12b)
- When Moshe was born, the house filled with light (Rashi, Gemara)
- One who raises his hand to strike his fellow, even before striking him, is called wicked, as Moshe "said to the wicked one" [who raised his hand] (Sanhedrin 58b)
- [God appeared in a thornbush] and not another tree, because God is with [Israel] in suffering (Rashi)
- "E-yeh asher E-yeh," I will be with them in future exiles as I am with them in this exile (Brachos 9b)

A Short Vort

Even though Moshe is being tasked with speaking to and convincing the world's most powerful ruler, Hashem makes it clear that He is not interested in His messenger being a persuasive speaker, but rather someone of great moral character, who is interested in sharing his people's burden and seeks to give honor to others.