

TORAH MIETZION

New Readings in Tanach

SHEMOT

EDITORS

Rav Ezra Bick &
Rav Yaakov Beasley

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Parashat Shemot

The Double Birth of Moses

by Rav Elchanan Samet

I. FROM ONE MOTHER TO ANOTHER

The Torah introduces the story of the birth of Moses at the beginning of chapter two of Exodus. Three stages of Moses' salvation in the story's second half form an inverse parallel to the three stages of increasing danger in the first half, nullifying them completely, as follows:

1. The concealment (v. 2):
... And she saw him, that he was good, and she concealed him for three months.
2. Placing the ark in the river, under his sister's supervision (v. 3-4):
She took for him an ark of gopher wood... and she placed the child inside it, and placed [it] in the reeds at the river bank. His sister stationed herself at a distance, to know what would become of him.
3. Pharaoh's daughter finds the ark (v. 5-6):
And Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe upon the river... and she saw the ark ... and she opened, and saw him – the child ...

- 3A. Pharaoh's daughter has mercy on the child (v. 6):
... and behold – a child crying, and she had compassion for him and said: This is one of the Hebrew children.
- 2A. The sister suggests that the child be given over to a wet-nurse (v. 7–8):
And his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "should I go and call on your behalf for a wet-nurse from the Hebrews..." and she said... "Go."
- 1A. The child is openly returned to his mother (v. 8–9):
And the young girl went and called the mother of the child, and Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Take this child and nurse him for me..." And the woman took the child and nursed him.

Does verse ten fall outside the framework of the inverse parallel upon which the story is built? Not necessarily. Verse ten corresponds to the story's introduction in verses 1–2:

And a man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi; and the woman conceived and *bore a son*. (v. 1–2)

And the child grew up and she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh *and he became a son unto her*, and she called his name Moses, and she said: "For I drew him (*meshitihu*) from the water." (v. 10)

In an article in *Megadim* (#22, Tammuz 5754), Rav David Tee explains:

The story opens with the birth of this son, and concludes with the adoption of the son. In a certain sense, these framing verses of the story conveys the essence of what happens, while the plot that develops within the framing verses is simply an expansion of it.... The framing verses therefore express the story's essence: the exchange of mothers. It would seem appropriate for the pattern of "and she conceived...and she bore...and she called him..."

to occur in succession, such as we find in the case of many other mothers who give birth, but this is not what happens here.... The child is transferred from the guardianship of one mother to that of a different one.... The calling of the name... is done by Pharaoh's daughter, rather than by the natural mother. The plot describes the transition from the house of the mother to the house of Pharaoh's daughter, but the framing verses illuminate the way in which Pharaoh's daughter truly steps into the shoes of the mother, becoming the one who leaves her stamp upon him.

II. THE MEANING OF THE NAME "MOSES"

R. Tee correctly perceives that the crux of the "exchange of mothers" is expressed in the child's naming. The right to choose the child's name is often reserved for the mother in biblical stories describing a birth, while in our case this right is reserved for Pharaoh's daughter. Certainly, Moses had a name from Amram and Yokheved before he was weaned and returned to Pharaoh's daughter. But the text only records the name given to him by Pharaoh's daughter, thereby confirming and approving the legality of her status of motherhood.

The right to choose the name is not always given to the biological mother. For example, Rachel and Leah choose the names of the children of their maidservants; for they see themselves as the mothers of those sons. They gave the maidservants to Jacob in order that the children who would be born would be considered theirs.

What is it that makes Pharaoh's daughter – both in her own eyes and in the eyes of the narrative – Moses' mother? As we shall see, Pharaoh's daughter herself answers this question in the very name that she selects.

Is "Moses" the original name that Pharaoh's daughter gives him? This creates two problems: first, she did not speak Hebrew; why give her adopted son a Hebrew name that would be out of place in his royal Egyptian environment? Second, if she gave him a Hebrew name that was meant to hint at the circumstances of the beginning of their relationship – "For I drew him out of the water" – then his name in Hebrew should be "*Mashui*" (literally, "drawn"), not "Moses." Even if we were to

conjecture that that “Moses” is the Hebrew translation of the original name in Egyptian, this question remains pertinent.

Professor U. Cassuto addresses these questions in his commentary on Exodus:

The matter may be explained differently. First it is written (v. 10), “And he became a son unto her, and she called his name *Moses*” – in other words, the Egyptian word for “son” is “Moses.” Thereafter, following the Torah’s way of explaining names – since the sound of the name in Egyptian is reminiscent of the sound of the Hebrew verb *m-sh-h* – it was *as if she thought* (“and she said,” i.e. – and she thought), “*for I drew him out of the water.*”

“Moses” is therefore an Egyptian name, meaning “son.” Pharaoh’s daughter declares that the child she is adopting is her legal son, and accordingly she is giving him his name: “And he became a son to her – and she called his name ‘a son.’”

But how does the text attribute to Pharaoh’s daughter a midrashic reason for the name based on the Hebrew, one completely different meaning from her original intention; a meaning that could not possibly have occurred to her?

The Netziv was familiar with this explanation for the name “Moses,” based on the ancient Egyptian, and accepted it. His explanation of verse ten solves the problem above:

“And he became a son unto her” – Since she saved him from death and also raised him, it was considered as though she had given birth to him, as she says: “And she called his name Moses.” And I have seen written in the name of R. Shmuel of Bohemia, that in the Egyptian language, this word in this form means “son”... and this interpretation is correct.

Thus she explains the reason why the child is hers: “for I drew him out of the water” – for it is as if he drowned in the river, and so his father and mother have no portion in him, and I am the mother of the child...

Accordingly, the word “*meshitihu*” (I drew him out) is not

related to the name Moses, but rather explains why she called him [“son,” i.e.] Moses. (Ha’amek Davar, Exodus 2:10)

Pharaoh’s daughter does explain the name that she gives the child (Moses, meaning in Egyptian “my son,” or “my child”) by the fact that she saved him from drowning in the river, thereby acquiring him for herself. When the Torah comes to translate her thought or her statement – which was formulated in Egyptian – into Hebrew, it does so through a play on words. Therefore there is no discrepancy between the name “Moses” and its reason – “for I drew him out of water,” for the reason pertains not to the etymology of the name (which is actually Egyptian), but rather to the legal basis for her being the one to give him his name.

III. BIBLICAL STORIES OF “REBIRTH”

The story of Moses’ birth belongs to the series of biblical narratives whose subject is the “rebirth” of the main character. In a story of rebirth we find a baby, young child or youth, whose life is endangered to the point where he nearly dies. He is miraculously saved from that danger, and his life is returned to him as a gift. The Tanach relates to this miracle as a sort of rebirth of the child. Among the ‘children’ who experience rebirths are Ishmael in the wilderness of Be’er Sheva, Isaac after the *Akeda*, Joseph after being thrown into the pit, the episode of the resuscitation of the Shunamite woman’s son by Elisha (II Kings 4) and in the salvation of Yoash from the hands of Atalia by Yehosheva, his sister (II Kings 11:1–3).¹

In each of these stories, the rebirth signifies the beginning of the child’s existence on a different level – his existence is imbued with a new destiny. The nature and purpose of this destiny are always connected to the nature of the danger in which he found himself and the way in which he was saved, which themselves always hint at this difference in his future existence. In order to achieve this new level of existence or this new destiny, he had to be at death’s door, and then merit the miracle of salvation. The miracle itself, and the special circumstances through which it comes about, create a change in the personality of the child,

1. See R. Samet’s shiur online at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parasha.60/04vayera.htm> for an expansion of this idea.

making it clear to him and to all those around him that from now on a new chapter is starting in his life, in which his destiny will be realized.

A comparison of the above stories reveals several differences between them. They may be babies (Moses, Yoash), toddlers just weaned (Samuel), young children (Isaac and the son of the Shunamite), or youths (Ishmael, Joseph). The rebirth of the youths signifies their entry into a different adulthood than what awaited them had they remained within their families: Ishmael enters into a life of desert freedom as a “wild man”; while Joseph enters a life of slavery, preparing him for the rise to greatness in Egypt and for the role that he is destined to play in saving his family. The rebirth of the babies and the just-weaned toddler (Moses, Samuel, and Yoash) is meant to mold their childhood in a world very different from the one into which they were born naturally, in order that each of them will develop from childhood onwards to be suitable for a great and new national leadership role. The rebirth of the children (Isaac and the son of the Shunamite) is meant to mold the attitude of their parents towards them, such that they will relate to them on a different level than was the case before.

In the case of Moses, the metaphor of rebirth is closest to its original meaning: Moses emerges anew into the world from the sealed ark that was floating upon the water, and upon reemerging – with his life given back to him again, as it were – he acquires a new mother. Later on she will adopt him as her son, give him his name and mold his education and his environment from early childhood until maturity.

IV. MOSES’ “REBIRTH” – HIS FUTURE ROLE

Why was it necessary for Moses – future savior of Israel – to be “reborn” in the unique circumstances described in our *parasha*? Why was it necessary for him to pass from his biological, Jewish mother to an adoptive Egyptian mother – and why did she have to be the daughter of Pharaoh?

Ibn Ezra provides an in-depth and detailed response to these questions in his long commentary (on verse three), and hints at three answers:

First, Moses had to grow up specifically in the royal palace, “that his soul might be habituated to be on the highest level ... not lowly and accustomed to being in a house of slaves.” Ibn Ezra is acutely conscious

of the profound psychological significance of exile and enslavement on the collective psyche of *Benei Yisrael* and on each individual among them.²

Leading the nation of Israel in this generation, in which the battle for freedom will occur, there must be a leader who is himself free. Such a leader cannot arise from among the ranks of the oppressed, degraded masses of slaves. Prolonged oppression creates a lowly soul, and the nation accustoms itself to injustice and mistreatment as though it were a normal social arrangement. Moses encountered this slave mentality when one of the Israelites criticized him: “Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” But Moses had killed the Egyptian because he “struck a Hebrew man, of his brothers!” This same Israelite, it appears – or one of his friends – was the one who brought the killing of the Egyptian to Pharaoh’s attention. Immediately, “Pharaoh heard this thing and sought to kill Moses, and Moses fled.”

In order to cultivate a free leader whose soul has not been warped by chains, there was a need for him to be completely severed from the company of his fellow Jews from earliest childhood. He had to grow up in a social environment of free people – preferably, in the royal palace. This would give him the self-awareness of a prince, a member of the Egyptian royalty, allowing him later to stand before Pharaoh without fear, and to conduct the negotiations with him in the accepted way and using the mannerisms he had learned in childhood, in Pharaoh’s own court.

Second, Moses’ education in the Egyptian royal palace presented a danger from the opposite direction: the danger of identification with the oppressor and the social norms prevalent in Egypt, out of a sense of belonging to the royal family. This danger appears even more severe, and no less likely, than its predecessor.

It appears from the story that Pharaoh’s daughter never tried to blur Moses’ origins, the fact that he was “one of the Hebrew children,” and therefore she agreed to give him to “a wet-nurse from among the Hebrews.” From the fact that Moses later “went out to his brothers,” we learn that he was aware of his ethnic origin. But the danger was that

2. See his long commentary on Exodus 14:13, discussing why the Jewish people did not attack the Egyptians by the Red Sea even though they enjoyed far superior numbers.

Moses himself, who had grown up in the Egyptian palace, would seek to deny his origin.

Here we must pay attention to the identity of Moses’ “second mother,” in whose home Moses was educated. She was the daughter of Pharaoh who, in the crucial moral test that she faced at the river, made her decision and acted against her father’s decree, showing compassion on the Hebrew baby. According to her father’s decree, he should have been cast into the river to die. By saving the Hebrew baby’s life, and by adopting him as her son, Pharaoh’s daughter gave wordless expression to her opposition to her father’s policy of enslavement and murder.

Although Moses grows up in the Egyptian palace, his name and the circumstances that brought about his upbringing there – which had never been hidden from him by his adoptive mother – constantly reminded him of his origins and identity, and this sharpened the fundamental difference between himself – a refugee born of an oppressed nation – and his noble Egyptian surroundings.

Paradoxically, it was specifically Moses’ upbringing in the very heart of evil – in Pharaoh’s palace – that gave him the ability to negate completely the enslavement of his nation and to regard it as an injustice requiring correction.

Ibn Ezra perceives the continuation of our chapter as proof of Moses’ moral character, formed in the home of Pharaoh’s daughter: “Do we not find that he killed the Egyptian *because he had committed unjust violence*, and that he saved the daughters of Midian from the shepherds *because the latter performed unjust violence*?” Although the condition for engaging in such acts is that “his soul not be lowly and accustomed to being in a house of slaves,” this condition is not sufficient. Even someone who grows up free does not necessarily object to every act of moral injustice, unless he has a moral personality. Moses had such a personality.

Finally, Ibn Ezra notes that it was not only the educational aspect that necessitated Moses’ upbringing as a free person in the royal palace, but also the future social and political requirements of *Benei Yisrael*. In order to be accepted by his brethren as a respected leader, Moses had to approach them “from the outside.” Here, too, we must add that the royal Egyptian background with which Moses presents himself to his people must have increased his importance in their eyes, and their identifica-

tion with someone who had chosen to return to his oppressed people in order to redeem them from servitude.

V. EXCHANGE OF MOTHERS TO FOIL PHARAOH'S DECREE

Our story serves a dual purpose; it is not only the “story of Moses’ birth,” the birth of the person destined to save Israel from Egyptian bondage, but also the continuation of the narrative in chapter one, a story illustrating how Pharaoh’s decrees against the growth of *Benei Yisrael* were foiled.

The motif of Moses’ “rebirth” at the hands of Pharaoh’s daughter is meant to serve this second purpose, too. Attention should be paid to the wondrous turnabout that takes place in our story. Pharaoh decrees, “Every son that is born shall be cast into the river,” and in this instance it is the child’s own mother who places him in the river. She certainly does not “cast” him there, heaven forbid, but rather places him lovingly in an ark, in an effort to do whatever she can to protect his young life. Nevertheless, in this act the mother is somehow fulfilling – against her will – the decree of Pharaoh. The child’s life is indeed in grave danger.

Who saves the life of this child, drawing him from the river and thereby nullifying Pharaoh’s decree? None other than Pharaoh’s own daughter! This illustrates a wonderful victory over that decree. Even at the moment when his decree seemed to be attaining its objective – to the point where *Benei Yisrael* themselves seem to be partially collaborating with it – we find the divine agent coming to cancel the decree from within Pharaoh’s own royal palace.

From this point of view, Pharaoh’s daughter continues the work of the midwives (who, according to a literal reading of the text, were themselves Egyptian women), who not only refused to cooperate with Pharaoh’s secret instruction, but actively “gave life to the children.” Likewise, Pharaoh’s daughter not only fails to cast one of the Israelite children into the river, but actually draws him out from there and gives him life. But in light of the circumstances of Pharaoh’s new decree “to all his nation,” it is not enough to draw him out of the water; she must be ready to bring him up under her guardianship and in her home in order that the child will live.

With the completion of Moses’ “rebirth,” when he enters Pharaoh’s daughter’s home and receives his new name, “Moses,” it becomes

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clear to him and his parents, as well as to readers of the narrative, that a great change has taken place in his life. A great new destiny has been added to his existence – a destiny for which he must grow up in this new and surprising environment, Pharaoh's palace. The child drawn from the water by divine grace and through the good heart of a God-fearing Egyptian woman is destined to devote his life to drawing his brethren from the waters of Egypt – the troubled waters in which they are trapped, and the waters of the Red Sea through which they will pass as a redeemed people.

From Egyptian Prince to Israelite Redeemer

by Rav Ezra Bick

It is a commonplace of rabbinic commentary that Genesis is the story of individuals – the forefathers, and Exodus is the story of a people. For instance, this is one explanation given for the repetition of the verse “And these are the names of the Israelites who came to Egypt” (Gen. 46:8 and Ex. 1:1). Our *parasha* repeats this census in order to introduce “And the Israelites reproduced and swarmed and multiplied and were strengthened greatly, and the land was filled with them” (Ex. 1:7) – in other words, the individuals became a people.

Obviously, there is one outstanding individual personality in Exodus; however, it would not be correct to say that the central theme of Exodus is the life-story of Moses. Nonetheless, there can be no question that his personality is an important focus of the story of the exodus, at least to the extent that it is an important factor in the development of the people of Israel. As Moses plays a crucial role in the formation of the people, the Torah tells his personal story and highlights his character traits in order to help us understand how a motley gang of slaves becomes the chosen people. This is most clearly true in Moses’ personal history before God’s revelation to him at the burning bush. I therefore wish to examine four linked incidents: the Egyptian striking the Hebrew, the

two fighting Hebrews, Pharaoh's attempt on Moses' life, and the rescue of the daughters of the priest of Midian. These incidents are recounted in nearly telegraphic brevity, with only about two verses each. Therefore, we will have to read them very closely to pick up the hints and meanings in each episode.

I. FIRST DAY OUT

And it came about in those days, and Moses grew and went out to his brethren and saw their suffering; and he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew of his brethren. (Ex. 2:11)

The opening is very puzzling. "In those days" – what days? Surely not the days described in the previous verse: "And the child grew and she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and he became her child; and she called his name Moses, for I drew him from the water" (v. 10). This describes the age when he was weaned, and was big enough to be separated from his nurse-mother. In fact, using a stylistic form, which will be repeated several times in this *parasha*, the Torah distinguishes between Moses' age in these two verses by using the same phrase twice. Twice, in two consecutive verses, the Torah states that "Moses grew." Clearly the verb must mean different things, or else it would not have been repeated. Rashi suggests "the first (growing) is size, and the second is position, as Pharaoh appointed him over his house." This interpretation grants different meanings to the two instances of the verb "grew." The Ramban comments simply, "He grew and became a man ... in the previous instance it says the 'child grew' until he no longer needed to be weaned ... and afterwards he grew and became a man of intelligence." The verb's meaning is the same, but refers to two different and distinct stages, one in infancy and one much later. Since it is clear that Moses has grown a great deal, this makes the phrase "in those days" difficult to understand.

Continuing the verse, we note that twice the Torah refers to the Jews as "his brethren." Moses goes out "to his brethren," and he sees an Egyptian striking a Hebrew "of his brethren." The Torah reveals what lies behind Moses' actions – not curiosity, not only a protest against

injustice, not merely a desire to help the persecuted and the weak, but a deep identification with his brethren, with his brothers. Moses, in this story, is not being held up as a paradigm of universal justice, but as a champion of his own people. This is made clear by the second instance of a polysemic twin, the double-but-different verb case. Moses “*sees* their suffering” and he “*sees* an Egyptian striking a Hebrew.” Rashi, on the first “*seeing*,” comments: “He prepared his eyes and heart to feel sorry for them.” The two instances of “*seeing*” in the verse do not have the same meaning. The second means to see in the normal sense. The first however does not refer to mere perception. This is clear by the grammatical form of the Hebrew – “*vayar besivlotam*.” The suffering is not the direct object of his seeing (“*vayar et sivlotam*”). He “*saw*” *into* their suffering. Rashi explains that “*vayar be-*” means to understand, to delve into, including identification, to open not only one’s eyes but one’s heart as well, as opposed to “*vayar et*” which is mere sense-perception.

This takes place because Moses is not facing slaves or foreigners, but, from the onset, “his brethren.” Even before he saw them, he had gone out “to his brethren.” He is searching for his brothers, and therefore he “*commiserates with their suffering*” upon seeing it. Therefore, when he sees, in the normal sense, an Egyptian (not a brother) striking a Hebrew “*of his brethren*,” he reacts not by writing a letter to the editor of the Nile Times, but by striking the Egyptian dead. Moses is not a judge or superior, but one with the suffering slave. He is a protagonist in this conflict, not a referee.

This explains the opening of the verse. We have learnt that Moses is being brought up in Pharaoh’s house as a son of Pharaoh’s daughter. In that house, the Egyptians are his brethren. And then, “in those days,” i.e., from within that social framework; Moses “went out” to his real brethren, to those in whom he discovered his brotherhood and identity. The Torah emphasizes, in the words “in those days,” that Moses’ heart beats with a Jewish identity – not as a natural result of a good Jewish upbringing – but rather in spite of his upbringing, because he had chosen to identify in such, because, in Rashi’s words, “he has prepared his eyes and his heart.” The Torah is emphasizing the opposition of “those days” with “his brethren,” with the passage from one to the other indicated by the verb “went out.”

The protagonists in this story have no names – there is “the Egyptian” and there is “the Hebrew.” Even Moses loses his name after the initial “going out.” He simply joins his brethren and becomes one of them. The stirring in Moses’s soul is national identification, not personal ethics and not justice.

II. THE SECOND DAY

He went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew persons were fighting; and he said to the evil one, “why do you strike your fellow?” (v. 13)

We already know that “to go out” for Moses means leaving the Egyptian household where he still lives in order to join his Israelite brethren. Imagine then the chagrin and disappointment the idealistic Moses, just beginning to be swept up in his new-found identification with his suffering brothers, so soon after he put his life on the line for the national ideal, must feel when the sight that meets his eyes on the second day is two Hebrews, two of his brothers, fighting between themselves. Notice that here the verb is missing, the Torah does not say “and he *saw* two Hebrew persons.” This verb has been set aside for the eyes of Moses that have been “prepared to feel sorry for them.” The sight of the second day cannot be grasped by the eyes and heart of Moses who is “going out” to his brethren. How does Moses, the Jewish patriot, react?

Moses remonstrates, “why do you strike your *fellow* (*re’akha*)?” He does not call one the “*brother*” of the other, and the Torah does not remind us here that they are his brothers. Moses does not see them now as brothers of his, and surely not as brothers of each other. The word “*ehav*,” brethren, in the previous story, does not designate a familial relationship, nor an ethical one (as in “all men are brothers”), but the heartfelt bond of identification and shared destiny that Moses has discovered the previous day. On this, the second day, it is not present between them, and Moses does not react on the basis of his feelings from yesterday. Rather, here is Moses as the ethical personality. Perhaps, Moses’ willingness to assume the role of the ethical teacher derives from his feelings of responsibility as a “brother,” but the reaction itself is very different from

the leap of commitment from the day before. Moses' rebuke assumes a measure of objectivity, of distancing, which is quite the opposite of the spontaneous identification of yesterday.

The "evil" one immediately senses this:

And he said: "Who has made you *a ruler and judge* over us; are you planning to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" (v. 14)

He accuses Moses of being, not his brother, but a judge. All of a sudden Moses has, in a manner not explicated in the text, identified the guilty party (two Hebrews are fighting, but Moses speaks to "the evil one"). He is discriminating (in the sense of distinguishing), rather than embracing any Jew simply because he is a Jew. That is exactly what the "evil" one, this early Jewish patriot, is angry about. Are you going to treat me, your brother, as you treated the Egyptian, a stranger to you?

This, I think, is what Moses fears. "And Moses feared and said: Indeed, the matter is known." The deliberately enigmatic phrase, "the matter (*hadavar*) is known," elicits many midrashic interpretations. I would suggest that it includes not merely the fact of the killing of the Egyptian, but the attitude that lay behind it – that Moses no longer identified as an Egyptian himself but had joined, in heart and soul, the Jews. This made him a rebel, an Israelite who had risen and killed an Egyptian, and not merely a royal delinquent, who presumably would not have been punished too severely by his foster-grandfather in despotic Egypt.

We have seen two sides of Moses, Moses the Jewish patriot, and Moses the ethical judge. In both cases, Moses had to "go out;" that is, leave his Egyptian background, in order to come to grips with these two new and dialectical sides of his personality. This "going out," transcending of one's childhood training and natural personality, now becomes even more extreme, as Moses has to flee Egypt.

III. EXODUS

The third incident is the most concise of all, completely described in one packed verse:

Pharaoh heard about this matter, and sought to kill Moses, and

Moses fled from Pharaoh; and he *sat* in the land of Midian, and he sat by the well. (v. 15)

Most English translations state that Moses did not *sit* in the land of Midian, he *settled* there. That is quite correct. This highlights the third example of our polysemic twins – in both cases and in very close proximity the Torah uses the verb “*yashav*.” But of course “*yashav*” in a country means to dwell or to settle, whereas when Moses came to the well, he sat down by its side. This merely highlights the real question – the order of the verse is clearly backwards! Moses is fleeing Pharaoh, arrives in Midian, and comes to the well. First he sits down, and only later could he be said to settle. In fact, any mention of settling should be postponed until after the story of Reuel’s daughters, since Moses presumably has no home at all in Midian until he is brought to their house. Why does the Torah say immediately after “Moses fled” that he settled in Midian, and only afterwards begin the story of the well and the seven daughters?

This story, as opposed to the first two (and the fourth), does not describe an act of might or bravery. Moses flees from the danger into which he has been placed. I would suggest, though, that this is not merely a bridge to the next story, Moses’s confrontation with the shepherds of Midian. The verse is so detailed that it seems impossible to view it only as an explanation how Moses happened to be in Midian. The Netziv points out that the expression “Moses fled from Pharaoh” is unnecessary and the verse would have read just as well had it said, “Pharaoh sought to kill Moses and Moses fled to Midian.” I think the answer is that the Torah wishes to stress not just the geographical movement, but the completion of the cultural break. Moses is fleeing *from Pharaoh*, is completely breaking his connection to the Egyptian royal house. Possibly, even though Moses identifies with his brethren and feels their suffering, he might still seek to help them from a position of power within the Egyptian system. Pharaoh forces him to flee for his life, and it is not important only that Moses flee *to* Midian, but even more that he is fleeing *from* Pharaoh.

As such, Moses is in a difficult and strange position now. Cut off from his Egyptian roots, he has not found himself welcomed by the Jews either. His one encounter has in fact led to his banishment. Moses,

forced to flee from Pharaoh, is (perhaps subconsciously) heading to *settle* in Midian. This is the meaning of the juxtaposition of “Moses fled from Pharaoh” and “he settled in the land of Midian.” He has not actually done any action that could be construed as settling – on the contrary, he has no place of his own and therefore sits, a homeless stranger, by the well, outside the city – but the movement from Egypt to Midian is equally described as “fleeing from Pharaoh” and as “settling in Midian.” This part of the verse does not describe what happens *after* he travels – that is the content of “he sat by the well” – but is an alternative description of the movement itself. Moses is replacing his childhood milieu, going to settle in a strange place.

We now understand the importance of this verse and the incident it tells. Moses is overcoming his natural cultural identity. He is leaving Egypt and searching for his brethren. But divine providence decrees that he can only come home to the Jewish people by first being completely divorced from the hope of any natural belonging. Moses will not join the Jews simply because he has discovered that he is more comfortable with their cultural ways. The path from Egyptian to Hebrew is not a simple one. First he will find himself with no home at all, a stranger settling in a strange land to which he has no natural connections, as he expresses it in naming his first son – “I am a stranger in a strange land” (v. 22). Only afterwards, after hearing the voice of God who sends him back, will he make the voyage to join the Jews.

IV. RESCUING THE MAIDENS

This brings us to the last incident of Moses’ pre-prophetic life. The part that concerns us, that which deals with Moses’ character and its development (rather than with his marriage), is, like the previous three incidents, told in a terse and concise manner. One verse describes the characters (v. 16), and one verse describes the situation before Moses and his reaction:

The shepherds came and chased them away, and Moses rose and saved them, and watered their sheep. (v. 17)

Moses’ reaction here is fundamentally different than in the first two cases. In the first, Moses acted patriotically out of identification

with “his brethren.” The root of his action was group identity. In the second he acted ethically as a judge, in rebuking the evil perpetrator of an evil act. The root of his action was justice. In this case, Moses has no identification with the daughters of the priest of Midian, and he is not interested in justice. The verb the Torah uses is “*vayoshiyan*” – he saved them. Moses is acting heroically, and the root of his action is nobility and bravery. He sees the strong oppressing the weak, and “rises up” to rescue the weak. The Torah stresses that he subsequently waters the sheep for them, an action not necessary from the perspective of the conflict which precede it. Moses is helping those who need help, rather than helping his brethren or admonishing the wicked. He neither punishes the shepherds nor admonishes them – he simply rescues the girls.

This personality trait, while admirable, seems very distant from what we expect as necessary from the future deliverer of Israel. Obviously, to be the leader of the Jews, Moses needs to be their champion and feel their sorrow and oppression. He needs to have a fine sense of justice and ethics, for the leader of Israel in exodus is also the one who will bring down the Torah and teach them the ways of God. But why is a necessary condition of Moses’ education that he be a wandering hero-knight, a sort of Hercules who without any personal interest rises up to help the helpless? The answer, of course, is that Moses’ leadership of Israel, if in part based on his love of his brethren, also requires an innate sense of help for anyone who needs assistance, without the element of patriotic identification. For this to come out, Moses, unlike any other Jew of his time, had to be divorced from the Jews totally, to be a stranger in a strange land, in order to face seven strange maidens struggling with the local bullies and to instinctively rise and rescue them. With that personality, he will be sent back to rejoin the people he never knew and be both one of them and their leader.

V. EPILOGUE – MARRIAGE

Moses marries Tzipora, one of the seven daughters he has rescued. It surely is ironic, in light of how I interpreted the meaning of Moses’ fleeing Egypt, that the daughters describe him as “an Egyptian man.” The Torah says, “Moses agreed to dwell (*lashevet*) with the man, and he gave his daughter Tzipora to Moses.” There is an air of passivity in this state-

ment. Moses did not settle down in Midian after all; he *agreed* to dwell with the man. We have the impression of his being persuaded and agreeing with no great enthusiasm. (This is the third “*lashevet*” in this section, and the meaning is neither to settle, as in “*vayeshv be-eretz Midian*,” nor to sit, as in “*vayeshv al habe’er*,” but means to join a family – “*lashevet et ha’ish*,” to move in with the man). If we did not know better, we might think that the Moses saga is over, the promise of his great deeds of youth buried in domesticity and shepherding, a stranger, dependent on a local dignitary. Moses, who went out to “see” his people’s suffering, and saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew of his brethren – what does he see now? The next “seeing” will be God’s: “And God saw the Israelites, and God knew” (v. 25). Soon afterwards, Moses will “see and behold the bush is burning in fire and the bush is not consumed” (3:2). But that is already a different chapter.