

“Thinking Torah”

by Rabbi Alex Israel - aletal@netvision.net.il

Parashat Shemot

"The Lord met him and sought to kill him" (4:24)

MEKOROT FOR CHAVRUTA STUDY:

1. The episode that we shall study this week is the strange events at Moses' desert stop-over on his way from Midyan to Egypt. It can be found in SHEMOT 4:23-26. Really you need to study the entire section, so see 4:14-26 and in our shiur we shall relate to the parsha as a whole unit.

2. Analyse the story. Certain things need definition:

- Who is the victim of God's wrath? - Moshe or his son? Which son?
- How is this connected to Brit Mila?
- What is the emphasis on the notion of the "first-born" in this parsha. It comes up at least twice (passuk 22 and 23 and is Moshe's son his firstborn? that would be a third!)
- Also in the context of the wider story, see verses 18-20. How do we view these repeated messages of departure? When does God tell him that the death sentence has been removed from him? Why is this relevant here? - Has he not already accepted the mission? And is it wise for Moses to take his entire family with him?

3. See Rashi - 4:25-26; also Ibn Ezra 4:24-26

- How does the Rashbam Shemot 4:14 and v.24 AND Bereshit 32:29 explain the sin differently?

4. Even at first glance there are certain motifs within this parsha which seem to be classic "Exodus" themes: the stress of the firstborn and blood as a protection to ward off Godly harm. What is the significance of all this?

- See also Rashi on 12:6 who suggests that Am Yisrael merited to leave Egypt by virtue of the blood of Circumcision!

5. Was it sensible for Moshe to take his family with him?

- See Rashi on Shemot 18:3 and the Rashbam 4:24. There are those who see it as a positive phenomenon: See Shemot Rabba 4:4 (quoted by the Ramban) and see also the complex position of the Meshech Chochma.

6. See the comments here of the SHADAL - Rav Shmuel David Luzzato. Very important! He really draws together many strands and complements the Rashbam beautifully. Look it up.

THE SHIUR SECTION:

"Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt ... At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his legs with it, saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!' And when He let

him alone, she added, 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.'" (4:20-26)

As far as we are concerned, we have just learned of Moses' appointment as saviour to the Jewish people and messenger of God. We watch Moses load up his simple donkey with his wife and two boys to set out upon the journey to Egypt "to return to his brothers" in order to undertake God's mission to His nation. On the way to his God given mission, God seeks to kill him - or is it his son that he seeks to kill? Whichever way, this is a peculiar and startling occurrence! Has Moses in some way angered God? Has he become undesirable this soon? What has he done since the episode of the burning bush to arouse God's wrath? Why would God persuade Moses to be the leader of Israel and then kill him on the way to his mission?

Then there are questions that relate to the circumcision. How did Zippora know that this was the appropriate antidote to the attack? And why does this circumcision need to be performed just now?

CIRCUMCISION

One of the keys to deciphering this parsha would seem to be the identification of the victim of the attack. "At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him." Who is the "him"? This vague passuk leaves us with no pointers. Instead, its obscure wording allows a wide range of opinions amongst even the earliest of sources.

The second question clearly relates to the identity of Moses' sin. What sin precipitated the attack?

Now, from the parsha, the sin is unclear. However, by the fact that Moses is saved by Tziphora taking the initiative and circumcising their son, we get some feeling that circumcision is the major issue here. This line of explanation is taken by the Gemara in Nedarim (31b-32a):

" It was taught: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korkha said - Great is circumcision for despite all the meritorious deeds performed by Moses our teacher, when he displayed apathy towards Mila, none of his merits protected him, as it is written, 'And the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him.'

R' Yossi said - God forbid that Moses should have been apathetic towards circumcision. Rather Moses thought, 'If I circumcise my son and immediately go forth (on my mission) there will be a risk to the child's health as it states (Genesis 34:25) 'and it was on the third day when they were sore.' How can I circumcise him and delay three days? Did God not issue me with a directive, 'Go! Return to Egypt!' In that case, why was Moshe punished? - Because he occupied himself with issues of lodgings as first priority, as it states, 'He met him at the lodging place.'

Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel said - It wasn't Moshe Rabbeinu who the angel (in other texts - Satan) sought to kill. It sought to kill the baby. It states "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" This is said about the Baby."

Let us summarise the opinions here. As to the identity of the victim of attack, one teacher sees the angel as coming to attack Moshe, another teacher sees the baby as the potential victim. And as for the suggested sin, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha suggests that Moses ignored his obligation to circumcise his son out of apathy. Rabbi Yossi rejects the argument of Moses' apathy. He suggests that Moses was allowed to delay the circumcision of his son. Only that once he "occupied himself with issues of lodgings", he was then found guilty in some way. (More about these "lodgings" later.)

Why would Moses have been apathetic to the circumcision of his son? It is apparent that Moses and Tziporah have a newborn baby. While Moses was arguing with God at the burning bush, Tziporah was in the delivery room at the hospital. Before the burning bush episode, we had already heard about the birth of their first son :

"She bore him a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, I have been a stranger in a foreign land." (2:22)

But in our parsha we see Moshe travelling with Tziporah and his "sons" - more than one child. In Parshat Yitro, we are told about the identity of the second son:

"The other was named Eliezer, meaning, 'The God of my father helped me and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.'" (18:4)

It would seem that this son has just been born and the question is when to give him a Brit. According to Rabbi Yossi, Moses was reluctant to delay his Godly mission. He wished to set out for Egypt immediately. What of the Brit Mila? Moses had two Divine commands: to circumcise his son, and to go back to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. He chose the second over the first. However, at the desert encampment - by which time, apparently, they were near enough to Egypt so as not to endanger the health of the child - at this stage Moses had no excuse not to perform the already delayed circumcision. According to this reading, circumcision is both the sin and the cure. We can now also explain the Torah's stress of the encampment - the "malon" - for it is the place itself which lead to a critique of Moshe.

But, this is a far cry from Rabbi Yehoshua's opinion, that Moses was "apathetic" as regards circumcision? Why would Moses have ignored a mitzva of this importance?

It might be that Rabbi Yehoshua sees even a momentary delay in the fulfilment of the mitzva as apathy. In the words of Rabbi Hirsch: "Was he not embarked on a mission to accomplish the salvation of a people whose whole meaning and importance .. rests upon the idea of Mila! And should he, just he, bring in the midst of this people an uncircumcised child? Rather let him die than let him introduce his mission with such an example." But still, it all seems somewhat excessive and out of proportion.

1. YITRO AND MOSHE

The Midrash (Mechilta Yitro 6) suggests a very different idea:

"When Moshe asked for Tzippora's hand in marriage, Yitro made a condition. He said, 'Your first son must go to Avoda Zara and the children henceforth can be raised in the name of Heaven.' Moshe accepted and Yitro made him swear that he would fulfil his promise.... this is why the angel came to kill Moshe."

There is a tradition that Yitro was a free thinker who had tested every Pagan deity. The Torah records (Ch.18) Yitro's statement of the greatness of Hashem: "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the gods."(18:11) This statement is interesting in particular when we recall Yitro's original title as the Priest of Midyan (2:16, 18:1) indicating that he was a religious functionary of some sort and it would be likely that this religion was Pagan. If Yitro eventually says : NOW I know that Hashem is greatest amongst ALL GODS" it would seem that he is talking with the voice of experience. The Midrash paints Yitro as a relentless religious searcher who, by virtue of his openness and ongoing spiritual quest, opens himself up to the possibility of belief in Hashem.

According to this view, Yitro apparently wishes to raise Moses' firstborn in his way of free thought and openness. Moshe resists. Yitro strikes a demand to let Moses and Tzippora raise the rest of their children in their own way, however Gershom was to be raised with no traditional upbringing. He was to be given a pluralistic education, to study comparative religion at university, to tour India, and to go to Yeshiva, and to find his own way in the world! Somehow, Moshe agrees to the deal. If this Midrash is correct, then Gershom, Moshe's firstborn, indeed would not have been circumcised [1]. This is a serious accusation. Interestingly, according to this suggestion, the child in question is NOT the new baby, Eliezer, but rather the eldest, Gershom.

Textually, this creates a certain unity within the parsha as a whole - a firstborn theme. The Parsha has just spoken of Israel as God's firstborn(4:22), and then God has issued a threat to kill Pharaoh's firstborn (4:23). Now comes our story where God wants to kill Moses' firstborn.

Why does God attack Moshe? It would seem that at the moment at which Moshe takes up the leadership of the nation, God's anger is aroused at Moshe's pagan child. Clearly, this agreement was unacceptable for the Jewish figurehead himself! God is telling Moses that he cannot continue with a situation whereby one of Moses' children is raised in a foreign tradition. The Jewish way is one of education (cf. Bereshit 18:19).

2. MILA AND MITZRAYIM

It is possible that we are missing something here. There is no doubt that Brit Mila occupies a fundamental role in the drama of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Later we see that the only person's who are excluded from the eating of the Paschal Lamb in Egypt are the uncircumcised:

"If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be a citizen of the country. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it." (Ex. 12:48-9)

Rashi (12:6) quoting the Midrash, suggests that God said:

"... 'The time has arrived for the fulfilment of the promise of redemption that I made to Abraham'. But the Israelites had no mitzvot through which to merit redemption. ...he gave them two mitzvot: The blood of the Paschal Lamb, and the blood of Mila. They all circumcised themselves that very night..."

The Ramban (12:40) comments:

"It is well known that the People of Israel in Egypt were sinful. They had even abandoned the practice of Brit Mila ..."

There would seem to be a strong connection between Yetziat Mitzrayim as a whole and the practice of Brit Mila. Could it be that the connection is the notion of "brit" or covenant? For the Israelites, circumcision was more than a simple operation to remove the foreskin. This routine act was a living expression of a timeless covenant that tied the nation to its God. Two covenants were made with Avraham Avinu. The first was a promise of slavery and salvation - the Brit Bein Habetarim (Bereshit Ch.15 - see our shiur of this year from Parshat Lech Lecha.) The second Brit was Brit Mila. In this Brit, Avraham was not passive, just waiting for history to take its course. In this covenant, Avraham and all future generations had to be active, They had to actively express their belonging to God and to the promises of nationhood and land that he had made.

But, as the Ramban comments, the Jewish people had lapsed their reminder of the Brit. They had, with the bewildering pressures of slavery and the corrosion of time and cultural pressures, forgotten their assertion of the covenant. They had lost their understanding of their active role within the man God relationship. The act of Mila - the primary expression whereby a Jew could express his attachment to the God-Israel covenant - was (and still is - to today) a most profound and elementary act of identification and belonging.

Maybe the importance of Mila is exactly that. In an era of slavery in Egypt, in which the status of Israel is at a low point and the future looks worryingly bleak, the process of Mila is an act of hope, faith and identification with the Jewish future. These are the values of the Brit. Moses had to communicate this timeless covenant and the hope that went along with all that to the people in Egypt. Mila is a primary expression of belonging. With Moshe's new appointment, his personal track record in these matters had to be impeccable.

3. MOSES AND JACOB

When studying this parsha, it is difficult not to be struck by the remarkable parallel between this strange episode and the mysterious story of Jacob and the angel. Both stories are vague and seemingly esoteric. They are united by the following parallels:

1. **Background:** In both stories the protagonist is travelling from a father-in-law to meet a brother. Jacob leaves Lavan to meet Esav. Moshe leaves Yitro to meet Aaron (v.27). The meeting takes place after many years of separation and is eagerly anticipated.
2. In both cases the main protagonist carries his **family** - his wife and children - with him on his journey.
3. **The attack:** In both stories a mysterious divine being attacks

him threatening his life. The attack is totally surprising and unexpected in both cases.

4. **Injury:** The end of the attack in both cases is a form of bodily injury. Both injuries represent a certain resolution to the situation of danger. With Moshe we talk of circumcision (albeit upon one of his sons it would seem - although the text obscures the identity of the victim here and the of the attack). In Yaakov's story, there is the dislocation of the hip. Both injuries strike the same part of the body[2].

5. **Language:** It might be interesting to note the verb "P_G_SH" which indicates a meeting - a "pegisha". The word has only four occurrences in the entire Torah and they are found exclusively within the context of these two stories; the word appears twice in this story about Moshe and twice in the story of Yaakov's meeting with Esav! (Shemot 4:24, 27 / Bereshit 32:18, 33:8 [3])

Is there a common factor which links these two stories over and above these textual and narrative parallels [4]? Are the two stories thematically related?

ISKEI LINA - OCCUPATION WITH LODGINGS

"In that case, why was Moshe punished? - Because he occupied himself with issues of lodgings as first priority, as it states, 'He met him at the lodging place.'" (Talmud Nedarim 31b)

"God met him: an angel. He was wasting time, delaying in his journey by taking his wife and sons." (Rashbam 4:24)

In our parsha we see Moshe return from the burning bush. Before he leaves we see a series of actions that he engages in.

- v.18 : he asks permission to leave from his father in law.
- v.19 : God tells him that he shouldn't worry about going down to Egypt because those people who seek to kill him are dead.
- v.20 : He takes his family.
- v.20b : He takes the staff of God with him.

What is this long string of actions? We would imagine that he would return from the burning bush and leave straight away. Even if he had to say his goodbyes etc. The Torah did not need to tell us these things. It could have skipped to verse 27 with ease without us missing anything in the storyline. No; the Torah wants to communicate something to the reader by reporting these activities, one by one.

Let us add something further. Buber developed a method of Biblical analysis. He called it the "*Leitwort*". In Hebrew we refer to this method as the "*mila mancha*" or leading -word. What this method states is that the Biblical narrative is characterised by a literary technique whereby a word or phrase might appear repeatedly within a section. By following these repetitions, one is able to decipher or at least grasp a meaning of the text. The repeated word reveals the tone of the passage. Thus, if we can identify a repeated phrase which is particularly evident within a parsha, we might have a clue as to the stress of that parsha.

Look in a chumash. In our parsha the words "lech" (go) and "shuv" (return) recur five times each. They are the dominant words (*leitwort*) of the parsha. The theme of going to Egypt and the return to Egypt are repeated in every other line. What is this repetition trying to convey? Is it trying to suggest that

Moses should be already on his way but he is finding things to do? The text is repeating: "lech-shuv" - as if to say to Moses - "Go already - return to Egypt!" but Moses is taking his time.

The Rashbam claims that Moses was attacked for taking his family. The commentators debate the advisability of this act. On one hand, the fact that Moses was willing to bring his family into the borders of Egypt is a bold act that suggests his complete confidence in his mission. After all he would not bring his own family into the thick of things were he not totally certain that his mission would end in success and freedom for the entire nation. But on the other hand, his family could not have been anything but a hindrance in his political-Godly mission. Moshe had to be a public figure. He had no time for his family.

Why did he take his family? Was this just another stage in his procrastination? Indeed, why did God need to prompt him that the people had died who sought to kill him? Why did Moses ask his father-in-law for his approval? (and he couches his request in words which hide his true motive!) What is Moses up to? Why does he not just get going?

It is here that we come to the story of Jacob, for Jacob was a classic figure who also delayed his journey home. At Lavan's house, after 14 years of work, he should have returned to his parents, but he didn't. He stayed another 6 years [5]. Later he stays in Sukkot and Shechem for a while until the Dina episode makes him move on. He is dawdling home, taking his time, almost reluctant to get there [6]. According to Rashbam, the angel who fought Yaakov came to hold Yaakov down so that Yaakov would actually meet Esav. Yaakov was attempting to flee during the night, to avoid his meeting with Esav. The angel forced him to confront his destiny.

In the words of the Rashbam in Bereshit (32:29)

"Yaakov was hurt and emerged limping because God promised him (personal protection) and now he was running away. We find a similar thing any time someone travels on a journey against God's wishes, or if they refuse to undertake a journey, the person in question is punished. This is the case of Moshe who said "make someone else your agent" (4:13) and God became furious with him.... according to p'shat, because he was delaying his journey, 'and it came to pass on the way, at the motel, and the Lord met him and desired to kill him.' (4:24) The same is with Yona and with Bilaam"

(See the Rashbam in full, and to understand the notion of "Roshem", look at Rashi in 4:14, and Rashbam there.)

Here the Rashbam spells out the Yaakov-Moshe connection. Chapter 3 and 4 - the story of the burning bush - contain an entire series of excuses by Moshe as to why he is unsuitable for the leadership role. Moses uses every argument possible to refuse this calling, but God responds by making it painfully clear that he wants Moses to lead the people. Now it should be Moses' turn to demonstrate a certain enthusiasm. He should accept his task and now embrace his God-given role. But, it would appear that Moses is still trying to avoid things. To my mind, it is not the Brit Mila that he is avoiding as much as his leadership role. He seems concerned about the threats to his life in Egypt, his father-in-law, his wife and kids; and what about God?

The Gemara says that it was his occupation with the lodging

arrangements which found him guilty. But is this not precisely the point? Moshe has taken his family. Now he has lodging arrangements to make and he is busy organising his family. But he is supposed to be acting on behalf of God! Why is he avoiding entering into his role with full commitment and application? The time for protest and deliberation is over. "Lech! Shuv!" proclaims the Torah, and the angel comes to attack Moshe - to make him confront his destiny. Ironically Brit Mila is also a Mitzva which cannot wait. Brit Mila should not be delayed after the eighth day. And Moses is delaying.

It is Tzipora who understands that the solution is nothing but immediate action. It is interesting that in the next scene we see Moses meet Aaron in the desert - without his family!

Shabbat Shalom

Footnotes

{1} How much this explanation can be historically substantiated is unclear. Sarna (Understanding Genesis pgs 131-133) claims that whereas in Babylonia circumcision was not practised, it was well known and widely performed in Egyptian society. From the story in Shechem (Genesis ch.34) it is clear that Canaanites were uncircumcised, although the idea was not foreign to them. Before we can come to a full conclusion as to the Bible's view of the relationship between circumcision and Egypt, some explanation must be made for the phrase - Joshua 5:9 - that relates to the removal of the "disgrace of Egypt" in the context of circumcision. To what exactly does it refer?

{2} In fact the thigh (yerech) - which was injured in Yaakov's fight with the angel - is frequently seen as a symbol of procreation. cf. Shemot 1:5 - "all the souls that descended from Jacob's loins (yerech) - seventy in number." and see for example Rashi on Bereshit 24:2 "Put your hand under my thigh (yerech)" where he sees "yerech" as a synonym for "milah"!

{3} However note, that if this linguistic connection is true, the parsha as a literary unit continues through to the next passuk which describes Moshe's meeting with Aharon (4:26 - which uses the verb "vayifgesheyhu"). This may well be correct from a literary perspective (despite the fact that it flies in the face of the division of parshiot). As we shall see in our next section, the verbs "shuv" and "lech" are the *leitwort*, or "millim manchot" of this parsha. These continue into the next passuk (4:26) too!

{4} See Da'at Mikra pg 85-7 who also dwells upon this parallel but does not explain its meaning.

{5} Bereshit 31:41

{6} Rashi makes this point. See Bereshit 35:1

©5762/2002 Rav Alex Israel.

ThinkingTorah is written by Rav Alex Israel and is a non-profit venture, purely for the purpose of Limmud Torah.

Rav Alex's blogs are at:
<http://thinkingtorah.blogspot.com/>
<http://bekiutnach.blogspot.com/>

To subscribe/unsubscribe:

Please send an email to:

thinkingtorah@gmail.com with title line SUBSCRIBE
to unsubscribe send message with title line UNSUBSCRIBE