

The Double Birth of Moshe

By Rav Elchanan Samet

2b. THE SISTER SUGGESTS THAT THE CHILD BE REMOVED FROM THE ARK AND GIVEN OVER TO A WET-NURSE (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.'"

A. THE TRANSITION FROM ONE MOTHER TO ANOTHER

At the beginning of chapter 2 of our parasha, the Torah introduces the story of the birth of Moshe ([Shemot 2:1-10](#)). The three stages of Moshe's salvation, described in the second half of the story, form an inverse parallel to the three stages of increasing danger described in the first half, and they nullify them completely. The structure of the story thus presents itself to us as follows:

1b. THE CHILD IS OPENLY RETURNED TO HIS MOTHER (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."

1a. THE CONCEALMENT (verse 2):

"... And she saw him, that he was good, and she concealed him for three months."

Does verse 10 fall outside the framework of the inverse parallel upon which the story is built? Not necessarily. Verse 10 corresponds to the introduction to the story, in verses 1-2:

2a. PLACING THE ARK IN THE RIVER, UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF HIS SISTER (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."

(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."

(10): "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 Moshe, and she said: 'For I drew him (meshitihu) from the water.'"

3a. PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER FINDS THE ARK (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..."

In an article in Megadim (#22, Tamuz 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 convey 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

3b. PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER HAS MERCY ON THE CHILD (6):

"...and behold – a child crying, and she had compassion for him and said: This is one of the Hebrew children."

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."

B. THE MEANING OF THE NAME "MOSHE"

The crux of the "exchange of mothers" is perceived correctly by R. Tee as being expressed in the naming of the child. 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. Moshe must certainly have had a name by which he was known to his biological parents during those two or three years that he spent in their home until he was weaned and handed back to Pharaoh's daughter. But the text does not reveal it to us; instead, it records only the name given to him by Pharaoh's daughter, thereby confirming and approving the legality of her status of motherhood.

Indeed, the right to choose the name is given to the mother, but not always to the biological mother. For example, Rachel and Leah choose the names of the children of their maidservants; they see themselves as the mothers of those sons because it was they who gave the maidservants to Yaakov 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 – the mother of the child, entitling her to give him his name? Pharaoh's daughter herself answers this question in the very name that she selects, as we shall see further on.

Is "Moshe" the original name that Pharaoh's daughter gives the child? This possibility encounters two problems: firstly, she did not speak Hebrew; why would she give her adopted son a Hebrew name that would be out of place in his royal Egyptian environment? Secondly, 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" ("drawn"), not "Moshe." This question remains pertinent even if we were to conjecture that that "Moshe" is the Hebrew translation of the original name in Egyptian that Pharaoh's daughter gave him.

Prof. U. Cassuto addresses these questions in his commentary on Sefer Shemot:

"The matter may be explained differently. First it is written (verse 10), 'And he became a SON unto her, and she called his name MOSHE' – in other words, the Egyptian word for 'son' is 'Moshe.' 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' = 'and she thought'), 'for I drew him out of the water.'"

"Moshe" is therefore an Egyptian name, meaning – in ancient Egyptian – "son." Pharaoh's daughter is thus declaring 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 further along, Cassuto's explanation becomes forced: how does the text attribute to Pharaoh's daughter a midrashic reason for the name in accordance with the Hebrew language and with a completely different meaning than her original intention – a meaning that could not possibly have occurred to her?

The Netziv (Ha'amek Davar, [Shemot 2:10](#)) was familiar with this explanation for the name "Moshe," based on the ancient Egyptian, and accepted it. His explanation of verse 10 solves the problem that we raised above concerning Cassuto's interpretation:

"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 Moshe.' And I have seen written in the name of R. Shemuel 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. This is truly called acquiring a person...

According to our words, the word 'meshithu' (I drew him out) is not related to the name Moshe, but rather is the explanation that she called him ['son,' i.e.] Moshe.

In any event, this is the way of the holy language – to present a play on words."

In other words, Pharaoh's daughter does in fact explain the name that she gives the child (Moshe, 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 "Moshe" and its reason – "for I drew him outwater," for the reason pertains not to the etymology of the name (which is actually Egyptian), but rather to its essentially legal nature.

C. BIBLICAL STORIES OF "REBIRTH"

The story of Moshe's birth belongs to the series of biblical narratives whose subject is the "rebirth" of the main character

(see my shiur on parashat Vayera in 5760, ***FILL IN URL***). 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 Torah relates to this miracle as a sort of rebirth of the child.

The first child whose "rebirth" is recounted in the Torah is Yishma'el. While he wanders about with his mother Hagar in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva, their supply of water runs out. Hagar casts the child under one of the bushes and distances herself, "for she said, Let me not witness the death of the child." An angel reveals himself to her, opening her eyes to see a well of water, and thus Yishma'el's life is saved.

Yitzchak, too, is "born again" after being bound to the alter on Mt. Moriah. At the last moment, after Avraham has stretched out his hand to seize the knife, the angel intervenes and prevents it.

Yosef, too – after being thrown into the pit with the intention that he will die there – is "brought back to life," as it were, when Midianite traders pull him out of the pit and sell him as a slave.

After the story of Moshe and his "rebirth," we find this motif reappearing in the Prophets, in the episode of the resuscitation of the Shumanite woman's son by Elisha ([II Melakhim 4](#)) and in the salvation of Yoash from the hands of Atalia by Yehosheva, his sister ([II Melakhim 11:1-3](#)).

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, are meant to create a change in the personality of the child, 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, in various spheres: the dangers that bring each of these children almost to the point of death are extremely varied, and the unexpected ways in which they are saved vary accordingly.

The children in these stories vary in their ages: they may be babies (Moshe, Yoash) or toddlers just weaned (Shemuel); young children (Yitzchak and the son of the Shunamite) or youths (Yishma'el, Yosef).

The new significance of the child's life also differs from story to story. The rebirth of the YOUTHS signifies their entry into a different ADULT LIFE than what awaited them within their families had they remained there: Yishma'el enters into a life of desert freedom as a "wild man;" Yosef enters a life of slavery,

aimed at 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 (Moshe, Shemuel, 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 (Yitzchak 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 Moshe, the metaphor of "rebirth" is closest to its original meaning: Moshe 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.

D. MOSHE'S "REBIRTH" – FOR HIS FUTURE ROLE

Why was it necessary for Moshe – 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? Why did this adoptive mother 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 3):

"The thoughts of God are deep; who can perceive His secret? To Him alone the plot is clear. Perhaps God caused it to come about that Moshe would grow up 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. For do we not see that he kills the Egyptian for performing an act of unjust violence? And he saves the Midianite daughters from the shepherds, for they perform unjust violence in watering their flocks from the water drawn by them (the daughters of Re'uel).

And moreover: had he grown up among his brethren, such that they had known him since his youth, they would not be in awe of him, for they would consider him as one of them."

Ibn Ezra hints at three answers:

a. Moshe 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 Bnei Yisrael and on each individual among them. In his long commentary on the story of the Egyptians' pursuit of Bnei Yisrael as they encamp by the sea (14:13), he addresses this issue again, referring at the end of his words there back to our story:

"We may ask: how could such a great camp of six hundred thousand men be afraid of those pursuing them? Why would they not fight for their lives and for their children?!"

The answer: because the Egyptians were masters to Israel; this generation now leaving Egypt had accustomed themselves since childhood to suffer the yoke of Egypt, and their souls were lowly. How could they now do battle with their masters? Bnei Yisrael were weak, and unlearned in warfare...

Only God, Who performs wonders and to Whom all is known, caused it to happen that the entire generation of males who had left Egypt died, for they lacked the strength to fight against the Canaanites. Then a new generation arose, the generation of the desert, who had not known exile – and they had a higher soul, AS I MENTIONED IN [my commentary on] MOSHE'S WORDS IN PARASHAT SHEMOT."

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. But 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. Moreover, during the last few decades psychologists have observed and studied an even more serious phenomenon: sometimes the victim develops an identification with his attacker, justifying the violent aggressor's evil deeds against him and even blaming himself and holding himself responsible for them.

Moshe encountered this slave mentality when one of the Israelites criticized him: "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" But Moshe had killed the Egyptian because he "struck a Hebrew man, of his brothers!" This same Hebrew, 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 Moshe, and Moshe fled."

In order to cultivate a free leader whose soul has not been perverted, 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.

b. Moshe's 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 Moshe's 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 Moshe later "went out to his brothers," we learn that he was aware of his ethnic origin. But the danger was that Moshe himself, who had grown up in the Egyptian palace, would seek to deny his origin.

Here we must pay attention to the identity of Moshe's "second mother," in whose home Moshe 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.

Since Pharaoh's daughter made no attempt to hide the fact that Moshe was an Israelite, we see that she did not act out of motives of personal gain. Moshe was aware that he was an Israelite, and presumably opposed the oppression of his nation. It is likely that Moshe's excursion to witness the suffering of his brothers was actually inspired and encouraged by his adoptive mother.

Although Moshe 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.

Thus, paradoxically, it was specifically Moshe's 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 Moshe's 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. Moshe had such a personality.

c. Finally, Ibn Ezra notes that it was not only the educational aspect that necessitated Moshe's upbringing as a free person in the royal palace, but also the future social and political requirements of Bnei Yisrael. In order to be accepted by his brethren as a respected leader, Moshe had to approach them "from the outside." Here, too, we must add that the royal Egyptian background with which Moshe presents himself to his people must have increased his importance in their eyes, and their identification with someone who had chosen to return to his oppressed people in order to redeem them from servitude.

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.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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E. EXCHANGE OF MOTHERS TO FOIL PHARAOH'S DECREE

Our story serves a dual purpose: it is not only the "story of Moshe's birth," the birth of the person destined to save Israel from Egyptian bondage, but also the continuation of the narrative in chapter 1: a story illustrating how Pharaoh's decrees against the growth of Bnei Yisrael were foiled.

The motif of Moshe's "rebirth" at the hands of Pharaoh's daughter is meant to serve this second purpose, too. Let us explain this further. 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 there lovingly in an ark, in an effort to do whatever she can to protect his young life, but 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 Bnei Yisrael themselves seem to be partially subjugating themselves to 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 the process of Moshe's "rebirth," when he enters Pharaoh's daughter's home and receives his new name from her, "Moshe," it becomes 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