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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAERA

The Two Consecrations of Moshe

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At the beginning of our parasha (Shemot 6:2-12), we read of Moshe's appointment as God's agent to secure the release of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. All the elements that we would expect to find in such a consecration are present: the problem of slavery, Moshe's task, and the ultimate goal - redemption. However, this entire section seems superfluous - Moshe was already appointed as God's messenger at the burning bush (Shemot 3:7ff.)! What need is there for a second consecration?

To properly identify the need for both prophecies, we must turn back a few pages and carefully examine the cryptic yet critical depiction of the bondage, presented by the Torah immediately preceding the vision of the burning bush. The Torah describes God's "thoughts and emotions," so to speak, prior to choosing Moshe as the savior of His people:

"A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.

God HEARD their moaning,
And God REMEMBERED His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.
God LOOKED upon the Israelites
And God TOOK NOTICE of them." (2:23-5)

I divide the verse this way in order to associate more clearly each verb with its subject. The verse focuses on FOUR actions undertaken by God: He hears, remembers, sees and takes notice. The following verses, where God appears to Moshe at the burning bush and informs him of the impending redemption, parallel the previous ones - but only THREE of these verbs are mentioned:

"God said,
'I have surely SEEN the plight of My people in Egypt
And have HEARD their outcry because of their taskmasters;
Yes, I have TAKEN NOTICE of their sufferings.'" (3:7-8)

Strikingly, in the latter description, God's "remembering" has been omitted! When the Torah informs us, the readers, of God's reaction to the enslavement of the Jews, it mentions that "God remembered His covenant;" but at the burning bush, God does not mention this to Moshe. The divine promise to our Patriarchs remains concealed from the father of all prophets.

In order to understand God's omission of the covenant as He speaks to Moshe, we will analyze God's choice of Moshe to lead His people out of slavery. While the Torah gives us no clue as to why God chose Avraham to father God's nation, the Torah does tell us much about Moshe's background before he is chosen as God's messenger. Over the course of Parashat Shemot, we read about several of Moshe's experiences, which can be seen as preparation for God's revelation at the burning bush. We may reasonably assume that the Torah presents to us those stories which are relevant to our understanding of Moshe, and thus critical for understanding the rest of the story.

We encounter three episodes involving Moshe (besides the account of his birth and adoption):

1. "...When Moshe had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen."
2. "When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting..."
3. "Now the priest of Midyan had seven daughters. They CAME to draw water, and filled the troughs to WATER their father's flock. But shepherds CAME and drove them off. Moshe ROSE to their defense and he WATERED their flock. When they CAME to their father, Reuel ... 'He even drew water for us and WATERED the flock.'"

The motif of these three stories is Moshe's aggressive commitment to helping the oppressed. Apparently, the Torah, in its treatment of Moshe's character, emphasizes his resolute moral conviction. Many commentators have already dealt with the evident progression throughout these episodes (see Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in the Book of Shemot): in the first incident, a conflict exists between an Israelite and an Egyptian; Moshe instinctively intervenes on behalf of the suffering Jew. In the following incident, the element of the suffering at the hands of the oppressor is less obvious; here, the two combatants are both from Moshe's nation - "two Hebrews." Finally, in the third encounter, the oppressed bear no relationship to Moshe whatsoever; they come from a foreign nation (Midyan). Yet, Moshe rescues them as well, true to the ethical essence of his character, as one who naturally seeks to assist those in need, regardless of their heritage or ancestry. Indeed, Moshe's identification with those who suffer evolves from their suffering per se, not from their belonging to one nation or another.

This is the Torah's presentation of Moshe: a man of robust moral fabric.

After this preparation, Moshe chances upon the burning bush, where God informs him of the imminent release of Benei Yisrael from bondage. As noted, God employs only three of the four aforementioned expressions. Conspicuously, He omits the fourth element, that of remembering His covenant to the Patriarchs.

In analyzing the various actions attributed to the Almighty in this context (hearing, remembering, seeing, and taking notice), our first step involves an obvious division into two distinct categories. The "seeing," "hearing" and "taking notice" relate to God's reaction to the suffering of the slaves, the pain and misery which He now plans to bring to an end. These three verbs must be understood in this light: "I have surely seen the plight of My people in Egypt and have heard their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I have taken notice of their sufferings." God sees the oppression that has overcome His nation, He hears their cries resulting from the bitter bondage and He knows and recognizes their pain. Thus, these three actions involve the actual enslavement of Benei Yisrael and their consequent suffering.

In contrast to these three verbs, the "remembering" clearly relates to an entirely different dimension. Regardless of the suffering experienced by the nation, God recalls the covenant with the Patriarchs (referring, most likely, to the "Berit Bein Ha-betarim" with Avraham, in Bereishit 15).

In other words, the Torah presents two reasons for which God has decided to redeem His nation:

- a) The moral reason - God wishes to end the unjust oppression to which Benei Yisrael have been subjected. Regardless of any previous promises to, or future destiny of, the people in question, the suffering itself (i.e., the torture, the cries and the pain, as specified in the verse) demand divine intervention.
- b) The historical/national reason - God, Who keeps His word, must fulfill His promise to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov that their progeny would inherit and settle in the Land of Canaan.

Upon revealing Himself to Moshe at the burning bush, God informs Moshe of only three of the four divine "reactions" to the slavery, namely, the three relating to the moral necessity of redemption. Nowhere throughout the entire dialogue with Moshe at the bush does God make even a subtle reference to His promise to the national forefathers.

This omission of such a critical and relevant ingredient of redemption becomes all the more glaring in light of God's introduction to Moshe at the burning bush: "I am the God of your father, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Yaakov." In other words, God introduces Himself as, primarily, the God of the three national Patriarchs. We should have expected, after such an introduction, some reference - if only an allusion - to the covenant. However, despite the fact that the Torah had presented this element of God's reaction just a moment earlier, God omits the covenant from His opening prophecy to Moshe.

Strange as it may seem, as Moshe leaves the bush and heads towards Egypt to carry out the divine plan of redemption, he is unaware of the second reason behind this redemption - the national, historical element. He was never told of God's "remembering" the covenant, which led Him to save His people from bondage.

This feature of redemption, which had disappeared at the burning bush, resurfaces at the beginning of our parasha, during the second consecration of Moshe: "I have now HEARD the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have REMEMBERED My covenant" (6:5). In addition to the action of "hearing," of which Moshe was told at the bush, God introduces a new factor: "and I have remembered My covenant."

Thus, Moshe undergoes a second formal inauguration, which informs him of an additional motivation behind God's intervention in Egypt: the divine covenant with the Patriarchs. This prophecy is laden with expressions regarding the destiny of the Nation of Israel and its national calling ("I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God"). These expressions are adopted mostly from the two covenants which God had struck with Avraham - "Berit Bein Ha-betarim" (Bereishit 15) and "Berit Mila" (Bereishit 17).

Upon his initial consecration, Moshe is charged with the responsibility of saving Benei Yisrael from their foreign oppressor. He is chosen as God's moral agent, if you will, ordered to perform the work of the Almighty as the moral ruler of the world. In this context, then, we understand the significance of the three prior incidents - they underscore Moshe's firm stand on behalf of the weak and oppressed. This commitment to justice renders him worthy of assuming the role of the Almighty's moral agent, saving the oppressed (Benei Yisrael) from their oppressor (Egypt).

Although in our parasha Moshe undergoes the process of consecration for a second time, this process differs drastically from his initial inauguration at the burning bush. Now God orders him to redeem the progeny of the Patriarchs, the three national forefathers with whom God had made a treaty and given a historical promise whose fulfillment has now become imminent.

Obviously, one difficulty remains unresolved: why does God distinguish so sharply between the two motivations behind His saving Benei Yisrael? Why does he reveal them to Moshe over the course of two distinct prophecies?

To resolve this issue, we must carefully examine an earlier narrative, the story of Moshe's escape to Midyan. Moshe is born to a Hebrew woman but raised by an adoptive Egyptian mother. This mother is none other than the Egyptian princess herself. Presumably, questions of national identity occupied Moshe's consciousness for some time. Nevertheless, upon leaving the confines of the palace and observing the oppression of the Hebrew slaves, Moshe relates to them as "his brethren," as emphasized by the text. After Moshe witnesses the disturbing confrontation between two slaves and

censures the perpetrator, the latter responds angrily, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" The delinquent is not content with merely criticizing Moshe's efforts, but, apparently, he quickly reports Moshe to the Egyptian authorities. As a result of this informer, Moshe must flee his homeland and abandon his nation.

We can reasonably speculate what Moshe felt during his encounters outside the palace. Essentially, he endangers his stature in the Pharaoh's government for the sake of assisting his suffering brethren. In turn, these beneficiaries of his sacrifice resent his involvement and betray Moshe, turning him over to the officials who have now issued his death warrant.

Moshe, left with no alternative, abandons his ungrateful brethren and heads towards Midyan. Whereas earlier we read of "A HEBREW MAN from his [Moshe's] KINSMEN," now Yitro's daughters refer to him as "AN EGYPTIAN MAN saved us." It would seem that even in his own mind, Moshe undergoes a deep-rooted, emotional crisis of sorts. Back in Egypt, he may have seen himself as a "Hebrew," even though he was raised as an Egyptian. Confusion and doubt regarding his self-definition are now implanted within the innermost recesses of his being. It stands to reason that on account of his people's betrayal, Moshe has stripped himself of his Hebrew identity. This may help clarify his baffling decision not to circumcise his son. Even after his assumption of responsibility as the redeemer of Israel, he neglects his son's circumcision, perhaps reflecting his ongoing ambivalence surrounding his identity. Only when his life is threatened does his wife (a Midyanite!) perform the ritual.

Indeed, Moshe's task as redeemer of Israel does not automatically translate into the renewal of his identification with the Hebrew slaves. Moshe could easily identify with the moral underpinnings of the redemption with no connection whatsoever to his personal identity. Morality itself requires his involvement, and his work on behalf of the suffering stems from his firm opposition to injustice. National identity is of no relevance or consequence. Moshe is chosen on the basis of his moral determination; therefore, God informs him only of the moral background behind the imminent redemption.

Moshe then embarks on his mission and meets with demoralizing failure. The nation itself closes its ears, and the Egyptian king remains obstinate and resolute. However, Moshe's approach and mindset undergo a drastic change in the final verses of Parashat Shemot, after his humiliating confrontation with Pharaoh. After having endangered his life by petitioning the king on behalf of the slaves, he leaves the palace empty-handed, only to be assaulted by the nation's embittered leaders. Again, Moshe encounters betrayal and degradation from the very nation for whom he has sacrificed everything. Unquestionably, this verbal abuse which showered upon him reminded Moshe of the condemnation he received from the Hebrew combatant whom he had tried to assist. The text alludes to this association which undoubtedly fell into Moshe's mind at this moment.

The Hebrew Combatant:

The Officers of Benei Yisrael:

HE SAID
Who made you ruler and
JUDGE UPON US?
Do you mean to KILL ME

THEY SAID to them
May God look
UPON YOU AND JUDGE...
Giving them a sword TO KILL US

For the second time in parashat Shemot, Moshe must deal with the lifelong dilemma with which leadership is often fraught. He had committed himself to helping the people, but they respond with resentment. However, as opposed to his reaction earlier, which was marked by the relinquishing of his association with the people on whose behalf he labored, now he turns to God as a card-carrying member of the enslaved nation: "Why did You bring harm upon this people?" The first encounter resulted in "Moshe escaped;" now, "Moshe returned to God."

Moshe now reaffirms his identification as part of the people and, as such, he experiences their pain together with them. Their critique does not undermine his sense of leadership; to the contrary, it evokes his impassioned plea to the Almighty and his request for the promised deliverance of his own nation.

Immediately following his petition to God, Moshe undergoes a second inauguration, a process that opens Parashat Vaera. Only now can God disclose to His chosen messenger the second factor of the redemption, the national-historical element. After Moshe senses and identifies totally with the plight of Benei Yisrael, he is prepared to learn about the national redemption, the redemption that sets this nation apart from the rest of the world.

From this point on, Moshe leads the nation as God's agent, with two concurrent responsibilities facing him - moral and national. The new leader now faces both the moral responsibility of saving a downtrodden people from the unjust oppression and cruelty of a foreign ruler, and the national duty of bringing about the fulfillment of the promise to the forefathers. He will lead his people to the land where they can both live in freedom and independence and where they can realize their potential as God's chosen people.

[Those interested in further research are encouraged to compare the two accounts of Moshe's consecration in full. You will discover discrepancies with regard to the location of the vision, the description of the promised land, Aharon's role in the unfolding redemption, etc. These can be explained, in my opinion, according to the basic distinction between the two causes of the redemption - the moral factor and the national, historical element.]

(Translated by Rav David Silverberg)