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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

MOSHEH RABBEINU ON CAMPUS

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When Mosheh first leaves the Egyptian royal palace, he uses deadly force to stop a privileged oppressor from striking a member of an oppressed ethnic group. He next intervenes verbally in an attempt to stop a physical altercation between two members of that group. Moving to Midyan, he rescues the daughters of Midian from discrimination and sexual harassment. Finally, he returns to Egypt as G-d's representative to free the entire oppressed ethnic group.

Seforno and Rabbi S.R. Hirsch offer explanations for Mosheh's varied responses. But the essential outline remains the same. In this narrative, we can describe Mosheh as a happy social justice warrior. Religious leaders at the outset of their careers can often identify easily with this portrait of Mosheh.

What drives, or generates, Mosheh's passion against injustice (which may or may not be the same thing as a passion for justice)?

Ibn Ezra to Shemot 2:3 suggests that Mosheh's passionate opposition to injustice arose from his noble Egyptian upbringing rather than from his Jewishness.

אולי סבב השם זה
שיגדל משה בבית המלכות
להיות נפשו על מדרגה העליונה
בדרך הלימוד והרגילות,
ולא תהיה שפלה ורגילה להיות בבית עבדים.
הלא תראה,
שהרג המצרי בעבור שהוא עשה חמס.
והושיע בנות מדין מהרועים,

בעבור שהיו עושים חמס להשקות צאנן מהמים שדלו.
*Perhaps Hashem arranged for this to occur,
that Mosheh would be raised in the royal house,
so that his soul would be on the highest level
via education and habit
and not be lowly and accustomed to being in the house of slaves.*

*You can see this
from (Mosheh's) killing of the Egyptian
because (the Egyptian) did violent injustice.
and from his rescuing the daughters of Midian from the shepherds,
because (the shepherds) were doing violent injustice
by watering their flocks from the water drawn by the (daughters).*

On this reading, we can see Mosheh as pursuing a constant, stable path of noblesse oblige.

Ibn Ezra's comments to Shemot 2:11 convey a very different impression.

וְהָיוּ בְיָמַי הַהֵם
וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה
וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו
וַיֵּרָא בְּסֹבְלָתָם
וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי
מַכֵּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי
מֵאֶחָיו.

It happened in those days
Mosheh grew up and he went out to his brothers;
he saw their oppression;
he saw an Egyptian man
striking a Hebrew man
from among his brothers.

“וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו”
המצרים,

כי בארמון המלך היה.
וטעם “מֵאֶחָיו” –

אחר הזכיר עברי ממשפחתו,
כמו “אֲנָשִׁים אֶחָיו”

He went out to his brothers
the Egyptians,
as he was in the palace of the king.

*The meaning of from among his brothers -
afterward it mentions a Hebrew from among his family,
as in men who are brothers (Bereishis 13:8)*

It's difficult to parse Ibn Ezra's syntax, and there are manuscript variations, but his key point seems clear. The verse uses the word "brothers" twice, but the referent changes. When Mosheh first leaves the palace, his brothers are the Egyptians. Something about seeing the Egyptian strike the Hebrew changes his self-understanding, so that now the Hebrew becomes his brother. Mosheh's identity changes.

Why does it change? Very likely because Mosheh understands, for the first time, that he is vulnerable, that everything he thought was his can be taken away with no cause, in a moment. So Mosheh's passion against injustice is a direct consequence of his identification as a Jew.

In that moment, Mosheh assumes that the oppressed are always virtuous. He thinks that their oppression is wrong not because oppression is per se wrong, but rather because they do not deserve to be oppressed. So he is shocked when he finds two Hebrews fighting, to the point that one might strike the other just as the Egyptian did. He intervenes, verbally, and discovers a miasma of cynicism and even collaboration. This Jew is no better than the dead Egyptian. Maybe Jews overall are no better than Egyptians.

So Mosheh flees. He shows up in Midian as to all appearances an **אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם**, the same phrase the Torah used to describe the man he killed. He has not lost his passion against injustice – hence he intervenes on behalf of Yitro's daughters – but he no longer sees it as connected to Jewish identity. He intermarries and lives happily as a Midianite for many years. It literally takes a miracle – the Unconsumed Bush – to bring him back to the Jewish people, and he never becomes fully comfortable among them.

The miracle was probably not enough by itself. It attracted Mosheh's attention – he is a spiritual seeker – but it makes no inherent case for Jewish identity. Ultimately, Mosheh returns because he is convinced that the Jewish people are the **most** oppressed, and so his intervention on their behalf can be justified on universalist rather than particularist grounds. Had he seen the Jews as a privileged elite, as white oppressors, or even just as full citizens, he would never have agreed to lead them.

In other words, Mosheh became an American Jewish college student.

The Sages tell us that we cannot rely on miracles. Even in the midst of a terrible run of anti-Semitic incidents, we cannot plausibly claim to be the most oppressed minority in the world. We absolutely do not want that to change.

So what can we do to keep our Mosheh's from fleeing to Midian?

We could prevent Jews from fighting with each other. We could resolve our interdenominational logjams, and conduct our intradenominational disagreements with civility. But that is precisely the sort of thing that requires leadership to accomplish, so it seems circular to make that a prerequisite for attracting leaders.

We could give our Moshehs a broader base for Jewish identity than passion against injustice. This is certainly worth a try, but there are risks. We might do too good a job, and produce Jewish leaders for whom opposing injustice isn't a top priority, even when our own community is relatively secure. We might even create a community that is instinctively suspicious of social justice as a cause, and sees passion against injustice as competing with rather than as an essential component of Jewish identity. Or two communities, one of which has an identity rooted exclusively in that passion, and the other of which lacks that passion entirely.

Finally, we might try focusing not on Mosheh, and not on the squabbling Jews, but on the interaction among them. If we can't stop fighting with each other, can we change how we react when someone calls us out for the way we are conducting the fight? If we can't agree on which causes to support, can we appreciate those who do? Especially when they are young, can we appreciate them even when they choose the wrong side?

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