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TORAH LIGHTS

SHEMOT: DEFINING A NATION

Maggid Books

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Shemot

*From Genesis to Exodus:
From Joseph the “Insider” to Moses the
“Outsider”*

*Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, and God of our
fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,
the God of Jacob...*

THE OPENING BLESSING OF THE “AMIDA”

The opening of the Amida prayer stops with Jacob’s name. But why should the patriarchal line be limited to three – why not four patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph? After all, Joseph’s role in the Genesis narrative is unquestionably central to the entire book of Genesis. A case could be made for showing that he shares a similar fate to those of all three patriarchs. Like Abraham, he lives among idolaters and must maintain his faith and traditions within a hostile environment. Like Isaac, he suffers a personal *akedah*, about to be slain not by his father but by his brothers, saved not by a ram but by Midianite traders. And like

Jacob, who set the foundation for the twelve tribes of Israel, Joseph provided Jacob's descendants with life and sustenance as the Grand Vizier of Egypt. Moreover, in resisting the seductive perfumes of his master Potiphar's wife, Joseph merits the unique accolade *haTzadik* (literally, 'the righteous one') appended to his name. As a result, he has come to represent for all of his descendants the mastery of the spiritual over the physical. If indeed Joseph is known to us forever as Joseph the *Tzadik*, and being that he is the son of Jacob, why is he not considered the fourth patriarch? After all, there are four parallel matriarchs!

To understand why, we must compare and contrast him not with the patriarchs who precede him, but with the personality who, from the moment of his appearance in the book of Exodus, stands at center stage for the rest of the Torah and all of subsequent Jewish religious history: Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our Teacher.

The idea of linking Moses and Joseph comes from the Midrash. Moses, the giant liberator of Israel, never enters the Land of Israel himself, and is even buried on Mount Nevo at the outskirts of the Promised Land – exactly where, nobody knows. Joseph, on the other hand, is buried in the heartland of Samaria – Shechem – which lives as a national shrine to this very day. Why does Joseph merit such preferred treatment?

The midrashic explanation is based on two verses that highlight contrasting aspects of their respective biographies. When Joseph was imprisoned and he spoke to the wine steward for the sake of interpreting his dream, he asked to be remembered to Pharaoh: "For indeed I was stolen away from out of the land of the Hebrews" (Gen. 40:15). Joseph does not hesitate to reveal his Jewish background.

Moses, on the other hand, after having rescued the Midianite shepherdesses, hears the women reporting to their father how "...an Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and drew water for us, and watered the flock" (Ex. 2:19). He does not correct them, saying "I am not an Egyptian but a Hebrew!" This silence, explains the Midrash, is why not even his bones may be brought back to the Land of Israel.*

In justifying the burial of Joseph's bones in Israel, testifying to

* See *Midrash Devarim Raba*, 2:8.

his unflinching recognition of his roots, the Midrash may be adding a notch of pride to Joseph's belt. But in truth, I believe that our sages are merely attempting to temper the indisputable fact that Moses is a far more "Jewish Jew" than Joseph in the most profound sense of the term.

In many ways, Joseph and Moses are contrasting personalities, mirror images of each other, with Moses rectifying the problematic steps taken by Joseph. Joseph was born in Israel, but became professionally successful in Egypt; Moses was born in Egypt, but established his place in history by taking the Jews on their way to Israel. Joseph was the insider who chose to move outside (he dreamt of Egyptian agriculture, as well as the cosmic universe). Moses was the outsider (Prince of Egypt), who insisted on coming inside (by slaying the Egyptian taskmaster). Joseph brought his family to Egypt, Moses took his people out of Egypt. Moses saw Egypt as a foreign country, and names his son Gershom "for he said I have been a stranger in a strange land" (Ex. 2:22). Joseph has at best ambiguous feelings about his early years in Canaan, naming his firstborn in Egypt Manasseh "since God has made me [allowed me to] forget completely my hardship and my parental home" (Gen. 41:51). Joseph, through his economic policies, enslaves the Egyptian farmers to Pharaoh; Moses frees the Jews from their enslavement to Pharaoh. And Joseph's dreams are realized, whereas Moses' dream – the vision of Israel's redemption in Israel – remained tragically unfulfilled at the end of his life.

The truth is that for the majority of Joseph's professional life he functions as an Egyptian, the Grand Vizier of Egypt. He may have grown up in the old home of the patriarch Jacob, heir to the traditions of Abraham and Isaac, but from the practical point of view, his time and energies are devoted to putting Exxon, Xerox and MGM on the map. Ultimately his professional activities enable him to preserve his people, the children of Israel; but day to day, hour to hour, he is involved in strengthening and aggrandizing Egypt.

A good case could easily be made in praise of Joseph. He never loses sight of God or morality, despite the blandishments of Egyptian society. And God would even testify that He had a special task for Joseph, personally chosen to save the descendants of Jacob and the world from a relentless famine. Nevertheless, he must pay a price for being Grand

Vizier of Egypt: The gold chain around his neck is Egyptian, his garments are Egyptian, his limousine is Egyptian, and even his language is Egyptian. Indeed, when his brothers come to ask for bread, an interpreter's presence is required for the interviews because his very language of discourse is Egyptian, with his countrymen totally unaware of his knowledge of Hebrew!

The difference between Moses and Joseph takes on its sharpest hue when seen against the shadow of Pharaoh. Joseph's life work consists of glorifying and exalting Pharaoh, in effect bestowing upon the Egyptian King-God the blessings of a prosperous and powerful kingdom, whose subjects are enslaved to him; Moses flees Pharaoh's court with a traitorous act against him, ultimately humiliating and degrading him by unleashing the ten plagues.

A shepherd and the son of shepherds, Joseph becomes the first Jewish prince in history, while Moses, a genuine prince of Egypt, begins his mature years as a shepherd on the run, risking his life for his commitment to free the Israelites. Jealousy and destiny force Joseph to live out his life away from his brothers, estranging himself from them. But Moses, despite his foreign, Egyptian background, nevertheless cares for his Hebrew brothers and identifies with them. As the Torah most poignantly records:

And it happened in those days [after the baby Moses was taken to the home of Pharaoh's daughter] that Moses grew up and he went out to his brothers and he saw [attempting to alleviate] their sufferings.

Exodus 2:11

Even though Joseph and Moses both change the world and preserve the Jewish people through the divine will that flows through them, their energies get channeled into different directions: Pharaoh and Egypt on the one hand, the Jewish people and Torah on the other.

This may be the significant factor in explaining why our sages stop short at calling Joseph a patriarch. He may be a *tzadik*, two of his sons may become the heads of tribes, and he may even deserve burial

in Israel; but ultimately a hero who spends so much of his energies on behalf of Egypt cannot be called a patriarch of the Jewish nation.

It is recorded that the first chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, was tended to in his final years by an internationally known physician. His last words to the doctor were: "I yearn for the day when Jews who are great will also be great Jews." It was Moses who was undoubtedly the greatest Jew who ever lived.

Women and the Exodus

*And these are the names of the children of Israel
who came to Egypt with Jacob; each individual
and his house came.*

EXODUS 1:1

The book of Exodus opens with a throwback to that which we already know from the last portions of the book of Genesis: the names of Jacob's children and the seventy Israelite souls – the Jewish households – who came to Egypt. Why the repetition? The great commentator Rashi attempts to explain that “even though Jacob's progeny were counted by name previously, the names are here repeated to show us how beloved they were...” (Rashi ad loc.). However, these first few verses of the book of Exodus are actually a prelude to the enslavement in Egypt, the tragedy of the first Jewish exile. I understand a loving recount when times are joyous but I find such mention superfluous when we are facing suffering and tragedy.

What is more, Pharaoh makes a striking distinction between males and females when he orders Jewish destruction:

And Pharaoh commanded his entire nation saying, every male baby born must be thrown into the Nile and every female baby shall be allowed to live.

Exodus 1:22

Pharaoh was apparently afraid to keep the Israelite men alive, lest they wage a rebellion against him; he seems to be fairly certain that the women will marry Egyptian men and assimilate into Egyptian society. However, logic dictates a totally opposite plan. Fathers often love and leave without having had any influence upon their progeny; indeed many individuals don't even know who their biological fathers are! Offspring are far more deeply attached to the mother in whose womb they developed and from whose milk they derive nourishment. Genocide might have been much easier for Pharaoh had he killed off the women and allowed the men to continue to live.

I would argue that although our Bible understands the critical importance of women – we have already seen how Abraham is the first Jew because he is the first individual who is introduced together with his wife who has her own name and identity – Pharaoh is totally oblivious to the pivotal role women play in the development of a nation. The Midrash on the first verse of Exodus – that we thought superfluous – provides an original meaning to the words “individual and his house”:

When Israel descended to Egypt, Jacob stood up and said, “These Egyptians are steeped in debauchery.” He rose up and immediately married all of his sons to women.

The Midrash is intensifying an oft-quoted statement in the Talmud, “I always call my wife ‘my house,’” since the real bulwark of the home is the woman of the house. As the Jewish nation emerged from a family and family units are the bedrock of every society, it is clearly the women who are of extreme importance.

Pharaoh was blind to this. Apparently he had no tradition of matriarchs like Sarah and Rebecca who directed the destiny of a national mission. For him, women were the weaker sex who were there to be used and taken advantage of. Hence Pharaoh attempts to utilize the Hebrew

midwives as his “kapos” to do his dirty work of actually murdering the male babies on the birthstools. To his surprise, the women rebelled: “And the midwives feared the Lord, so they did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do; they kept the male babies alive” (Ex. 1:17). It goes much further than that. The Midrash identifies the Hebrew midwives as Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses and Aaron. The Midrash goes on to teach us that their husband and father Amram was the head of the Israelite court, and when he heard Pharaoh’s decree to destroy all male babies, he ruled that Israelite couples refrain from bearing children. After all, why should men impregnate their wives only to have their baby sons killed!? Miriam chided her father:

Pharaoh was better than you are, my father. He only made a decree against male babies and you are making a decree against female babies as well.

Amram was convinced by his daughters’ words – and the result was the birth of Moses, savior of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Perhaps the importance of women protectors of the household and guardians of the future of Israel is hinted at in the “anonymous” verse, “And a man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi” (Ex. 2:1). Why are the two individuals – Amram and Yocheved – not named? You will remember from the book of Genesis that it was Levi together with his brother Shimon who saved the honor of the family of Jacob by killing off the residents of Shechem, a gentile people who stood silently by while their leader raped and held captive Dina, daughter of Jacob. When Jacob criticizes them on tactical grounds, they reply, “Can we allow them to make a harlot of our sister?” With these words Chapter 34 of the book of Genesis ends; Levi and Shimon have the last word.

Moreover, we know from Jacob and his family that it is the wife who gave names to the children. Even more than Amram and Yocheved, true credit must go to the mother of Amram and the mother of Yocheved. Each of these women gave birth to children in the midst of black bleak days of Jewish oppression. Despite the slavery and carnage all around one mother gives her son the name Amram, which means “exalted nation”; the other mother gives her daughter the name Yocheved,

which means “glory to God.” These two women were seemingly oblivious to the low estate to which Judaism had fallen in Egypt; their sights were held high, upon the stars of the heavens which God promised Abraham would symbolize his progeny and the Covenant of the Pieces which guaranteed the Hebrews a glorious future in the Land of Israel. These two proud grandmothers from the tribe of Levi merited grandchildren like Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Pharaoh begins to learn his lesson when Moses asks for a three-day journey in the desert; Pharaoh wants to know who will go. Moses insists:

Our youth and our old people will go, our sons and our daughters will go – our entire households will go, our women as well as our men.

Exodus 10:8

A wiser Pharaoh will only allow the men to leave; he now understands that he has most to fear from the women. And so Judaism establishes Passover, the festival of our freedom, as being celebrated by “a lamb for each house,” with the women included in the paschal sacrificial meal by name no less than the men. And so the women celebrate together with the men – the four cups, the matza and the haggada – the Passover *seder* of freedom.