

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Shemot)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

This is a well-known story received over the Internet long ago; if you gain nothing else from this week's Tastings of Torah but reading this story, it will have been worth it.

*One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I noticed a kid from my class walking home from school, who looked like he was carrying all of his books. His name was Kyle, and I wondered why would anyone bring all his books home on a Friday? I figured he must be a real nerd. I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game with my friends the next afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and continued on my way.*

*As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him. They ran at him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him. He looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes.*

*My heart went out to him, so I jogged over to help him look for his glasses. He was on his hands and knees crawling around looking for them, and I saw a tear in his eye. Spotting his glasses a few feet away, I handed them to him and said:*

*"Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives."*

*He looked at me and said, "Hey thanks!" There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude. I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived. As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said he had been in a private school until recently. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before. We talked all the way home, and I carried some of his books.*

*He turned out to be a pretty cool kid, so I asked him if he wanted to play a little football with my friends and me. We ended up hanging out together all weekend and the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him, as did my friends.*

*Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again. I stopped him and said, "Boy, you are gonna build some serious muscles with this pile of books everyday!"*

*He just laughed and handed me half the books. Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors, we began to think about college. Kyle decided on Georgetown, and I was going to Duke. Somehow, I knew we would always be friends, and that the miles would never be a problem. He was going to be a doctor, and I had decided to study business on a football scholarship.*

*Kyle ended up being the valedictorian of our class. I still teased him all the time about being a nerd, recalling those piles of books he had been carrying when we first met. He had to prepare a speech for graduation, and I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak.*

*Graduation day finally arrived, and Kyle looked great. He was one of those guys that really found himself during high school; he had filled out and actually looked good in glasses. In fact, he had more dates than I did and all the girls loved him.*

*I could see that he was nervous about his speech, so I smacked him on the back and said, "Hey, big guy, you'll be great!" He looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled. "Thanks," he said.*

*As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began:*

*"Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years: your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach...but mostly your friends. I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story.*

*And I just stared at my friend with disbelief as he told the real story of the first day we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend, and he had decided to clean out his locker so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later. This was why he was carrying all his stuff home. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile.*

*"Thankfully, I was saved. My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable." I heard the crowd gasp as this handsome, popular boy told us all about his weakest moment. I saw his mom and dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I realize its depth.*

Never underestimate the power of your actions. With one small gesture you can change a person's life, for better or for worse. G-d puts us all in each other's lives to impact one another in some way.

We all admire those instances when someone is really present for someone else. It is a trait that is easy to admire, but challenging to maintain. And this admirable goal may be at the root of one of the most puzzling stories in the entire Torah, found in this week's portion, Shemot.

This week we begin the second book of the Torah, Shemot, or Exodus, which will see the family of Yaakov transformed into the nation of Israel. The first portion focuses on the development of Moshe as a leader, detailing his birth as a slave, his rise as a Prince of Egypt and subsequent fall from grace and escape to the deserts of Midyan, his encounter with G-d at the Burning Bush and assumption of the mantle of leadership as he prepares to undertake the mission of bringing the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt.

While there is no shortage of stories and sub plots this week, the most challenging event in the emergence of Moshe as the savior of the Jewish People, occurs just as he is finally ready to return to Egypt and set his people free. Stopping at a small inn before the last leg of the journey home, G-d actually attempts to put Moses to death!

After no less than thirty nine verses (Exodus 3; 1-4: 19) in which G-d 'convinces' Moshe to leave Midyan and accept the mission of bringing the Jewish people out of Egypt, Moshe finally accepts, and, taking his wife and children with him, sets forth on the journey south back to Egypt.

Suddenly, just as he has nearly arrived at his destination:

*"And it was, on the way, in the inn, and G-d encountered him (Moshe) and desired to kill him. And Tsiporah took a rock and cut the foreskin of her son. and said: "For you are a groom of blood to me. And he (it?) abated (let go) from him (Moshe), and then she said: " A groom of blood of circumcision." (4:24-26)*

Essentially, just as Moshe is finally ready to fulfill G-d's request, G-d wants to kill him! What of Moshe's mission? What is going on? And how does Moshe's wife, Tsiporah, somehow save the day, by circumcising their son? What has Moshe done wrong, to warrant this wrathful decree from G-d? The Torah itself does not seem to offer any explanation. In fact, a close look at the context of these verses

makes it seem as though this incident is an interruption of the flow of the story, with almost no rhyme or reason.

Indeed, if a narrator were sharing the biblical narrative it would sound something like:

'And G-d told Moshe as he journeyed back to Egypt that He would perform mighty wonders through him, and they stopped at a motel, and G-d tried to kill Moshe, but Tsiporah quickly circumcised their son with a rock, and. back to our program! Huh??

What is going on here? The Talmud (Nedarim 31a) suggests that Moshe had not yet circumcised his newborn son (Eliezer), and was being held accountable now, because previously they had been journeying, and one does not perform a circumcision if one will be forced to travel, for fear of endangering the health of the baby. However, now that they had finally stopped at an inn, there was no reason not to perform the circumcision, and the decision not to do this immediately, was what nearly got Moshe killed.

Of course, this does not actually resolve the issue; if anything, it exacerbates it. Was Moshe nearly killed simply because he procrastinated?

Interestingly, there is also another difficulty within this story. Technically, one is not allowed to perform a circumcision if one is on a journey, because the infant must, for safety's sake, have three days with which to recover, and the journey is dangerous to the child's health. Therefore, suggests the Talmud, Moshe was not obligated to perform the circumcision for his son, as he had been commanded to journey to Egypt to get the Jewish people out of Egypt, and the commandment to go to Egypt excused him from the commandment to circumcise his son, which would have delayed his journey for three more days. However, suggests **Rabbi Yossi** in the Talmud, once he arrived at the inn, he could have performed the circumcision, and yet instead he busied himself with the details of their stay ("*Nita'sek Ba'Malon*"), hence G-d's severe reaction.

But again, the consequence hardly seems warranted by the infraction. And if, indeed, Moshe's error was that he was spending too much time at the front desk dealing with the hotel reservations, the very fact that they were only in an inn means they were still on their journey. And if they had not yet arrived in Egypt, then Moshe was still not able (and thus exempt) from performing the circumcision?

To which the **Ran (Rabbeinu' Nissim of Gerondi;** a medieval 13th century Spanish Commentator) suggests that perhaps this inn was so close to Egypt, it was as though Moshe was already there, and the short distance remaining to Egypt no longer constituted a danger to the baby, again allowing for the circumcision to be performed, which obligated Moshe immediately. And again, one wonders: is this the transgression that warrants Moshe's death (and the loss for the Jewish people of the savior they have been waiting for, for hundreds of years)?

One wonders (as does the Mizrachi) how the Ran could suggest the inn was a suburb of Egypt, when there is no such allusion in the text itself, but perhaps he assumes this from the fact that Moshe's wife Tsiporah, as well as the children are no longer mentioned after this interlude, supporting the possibility that Moshe brought them close to Egypt, but did not, for obvious reasons, wish to bring his family into the darkness of Egypt itself. Thus, he ensured they were safe in the 'inn outside of town', as it were.

The **Maharal of Prague**, however, is apparently not satisfied with this answer, and suggests, rather, that it is irrelevant where this inn was in relationship to Egypt; it was simply the first stop on the journey. And the reason Moshe now had the time to stop and fulfill his obligation to circumcise his son, was because the mitzvah he had been given by G-d was not to actually arrive in Egypt; the mitzvah was to leave Midyan.

Indeed, after G-d finishes telling Moshe to go to Egypt, Moshe nonetheless goes back to his father-in-law in Midyan. And again:

*"Va'Yomer Hashem El Moshe, Be'Midian: Lech, Shuv Mitzrayim.."  
"And G-d said to Moshe, in Midyan: 'Go, return to Egypt'.." (4:19)*

Despite the clear mission from G-d, Moshe was still in Midyan! The point, therefore, was for Moshe to get out of Egypt. Thus, the first safe place to stop activated the obligation for Moshe to circumcise his son.

Which leaves us with an additional question: Why, according to the Maharal, is the mission focused on departure (from Midyan) rather than on arrival (in Egypt)?

It is interesting, that while we live in a society that always focuses on results, Judaism concerns itself much more, with the process. The arrival is not, in the end, as important as the journey.

Indeed, in the first conversation G-d ever has with a Jew, He tells Abraham: "*Lech Lecha*" (Genesis 12:1) "Go" Towards the land I will show you, and this is a theme that permeates Judaism.

As an example, on Friday night, we begin our Kabbalat Shabbat service with the words: "*Lechu Neranena*", literally: "Go and Sing!" (Psalms 95:1) And most prayer books actually translate this as 'Come and sing', because the wording is so strange: why would we begin Shabbat by saying 'go sing'? Why not invite the congregation to come along? And this becomes the underlying theme on Friday night, culminating in the song of *Lecha Dodi*, which actually means, "Go my beloved!"

Strange words, to say the least; why would you tell your beloved to go? Invite her to come along! Judaism however, suggests that we are all on a journey, and if you think you have arrived, you will never get there.

It is interesting that even today, three thousand years later, we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, and not the entrance into the land of Israel, because it was the decision to leave, and more importantly, to let go of Egypt, that was ultimately the point at which the family of Yaakov became the nation of Israel.

The **Tzidkat HaTzaddik (Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin)** points out that despite verses to the contrary, we don't really eat Matzah on Passover to commemorate the fact that we didn't have enough time to bake bread before we left Egypt. After all, G-d planned the Exodus since the dawn of creation; He could certainly have allowed some time to bake Challah!

And a close look at the story of the actual Exodus clearly shows the Jews were given the command to celebrate a festival for seven days, and eat matzah, a week before they actually left Egypt (and indeed before they were even commanded to offer the Paschal lamb; see Exodus chapter 12, and specifically verse 15, where G-d commands the Jews to eat Matzah, before they have even taken the lambs for the sacrifice on the tenth day of Nissan, a week before the Exodus..)

Rather, suggests the Tzidkat HaTzaddik, the message of the Matzah is that every once in a while a window of opportunity presents itself, and you realize you have the chance to 'get out of Egypt'. We all, in the end, have our own personal Egypt we are trying to leave behind. When you have such a window, you have to grab it, because it doesn't last forever. And this was why G-d arranged for the Exodus to be in such a hurry ("Be'Chipazon": "in a hurry" see 12:11), because you have to grab the chance to leave Egypt behind; the door doesn't stay open forever.

It was very easy, suggests Jewish tradition, to get the Jews out of Egypt; it was very difficult to get Egypt out of the Jews. And this is true of every 'Egypt', and indeed every place we find ourselves in.

Sometimes, we are blessed to realize we are in our own Egypt, and maybe we are even lucky enough to get that urge, that desire to change, to move on and get out. But do we grab the opportunity?

Even Moshe, in Midyan, was getting perhaps, a little too 'Midyanized'. Hence, he was still in Midyan with his father in law, despite having been commanded by G-d himself to go down to Egypt. It was hard to leave Midyan behind, and that was the first thing Moshe had to accomplish. To be Moshe and accomplish all that he was meant to accomplish in this world, perhaps Moshe had to get out of Midyan.

Which leads us to our last question: even if Midyan was a land filled with pagan idolatry, necessitating Moshe's departure, it is difficult to comprehend the rush, when after all Moshe was headed for Egypt, which at the time represented the most evil place on earth! Why did Moshe need to leave Midyan, simply to exchange that environment with another which, it would seem, was even worse?

Perhaps this is the root of the issue, and the hidden message of this bizarre episode in Moshe's life.

Rabbi Yossi suggests that the issue for which Moshe was held accountable, was not that he delayed the circumcision, but rather the fact that he was "*Nita'sek Ba'Malon*": that he was occupying himself with the details of the hotel.

If Moshe has time to make sure there are towels in the room, while Jewish babies are being used to build pyramids, something is wrong. Something has happened to the Moshe who left Egypt forty years earlier.

It is important to note that the entire beginning of Moshe's life is all about women: His mother bears him and "sees that he is good" (2:2) and so she hides him as a baby in the house. Then, when that is no longer possible, she sets him afloat in a basket on the Nile River, where his sister sees and watches him from afar (2:4). Whereupon, the daughter of Pharaoh comes down to the Nile River and sees the baby from afar, stretching out her hand to bring the basket to shore. At which point Moshe's sister, Miriam succeeds in convincing the daughter of Pharaoh to use Moshe's own Mother as his wet nurse, such that he will grow up in the palace as a Prince of Egypt, but his mother will still be able to teach him what to see. The beginning of Moshe's life is all about women. It is the women who teach Moshe to see.

The second chapter of Moshe's life, however, is all about men: He sees an Egyptian beating a Jew, and ends up killing the Egyptian. And then he sees two Jewish men fighting each other, and gets involved as well. And finally Pharaoh himself (as opposed to the daughter of Pharaoh previously) hears all about it, and Moshe is forced to flee Egypt. (2:11-15)

And the verses here are very telling:

*"And in those days Moshe grew, and went out to his brethren, and saw their suffering. And he saw an Egyptian man beating a Jewish man, of his brethren. And he turned this way and that and saw there was no (other) man, and he hit (slew) the Egyptian and buried him in the sand." (Shemot 2:11-12)*

Growing up as a Prince in ancient Egypt might well have been akin to growing up in the home of Adolph Eichmann in Berlin in the 1930's. It is, therefore, nothing short of incredible, that Moshe would go out and actually see the suffering of his fellow Jews, much less that he would do something about it.

Moshe is ready to become a leader of the Jewish people, because he has learned to see, which means to really empathize with and feel the pain of the Jewish slaves around him, even while he himself is still ensconced in the palace.

And it is the women in his life who teach Moshe to see. Mystically speaking Judaism teaches that it is the woman who has the gift of sensitivity, gleaned from her ability to bring life into this world. The

woman, who reacts to the cries of the baby from the moment of birth, feels more the pain of those around her on our journey in this world.

And too, it will be a woman (Tziporah) who will see that which Moshe does not, and save him by circumcising his son.

But, having gained the ability to 'see' or feel others' pain, Moshe must leave Egypt and the palaces wherein he resides, and experience his own pain; his own exile. And this too, is part of the development of the leader who will ultimately lead the Jewish people.

And eventually, all alone in the desert, G-d will come to Moshe not as a pillar of fire, or a flaming mountain range, but as a burning bush; because in the noon-day desert sun, you have to be looking if you want to see a burning bush. And indeed Moshe says:

*"Asura Na' Ve'Ereh."* "I must go and see this sight." (3:3)

And only when he does see, does G-d "see that Moshe goes to see" (3:4), and subsequently Himself see the suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt. Only if we really learn to see each other's pain, will we finally merit for G-d to 'see' our pain.

Forty years later, the stage is set, and the redemption is at hand, when Moshe arrives with his family at a motel just outside of Egypt. And something is wrong, because while Jewish blood is spilled in the streets of Cairo, the leader of the Jewish people is worrying about sheets and towels. And while this would be an innocent moment for most people, if the same man who sensed the pain of his brothers even while he was living in the palace, is now able to deal with his hotel room, then something is wrong. If Moshe cannot be the leader who will take the Jewish people out of Egypt, then there is no purpose to his being in this world, and he must move over for the real Moshe to come along.

Maybe this is why Moshe has to get out of Midyan: life has become too comfortable. What, after all is Moshe's life? He is out in the wilderness with his sheep, without a care in the world. Totally isolated from humanity, for the moment, life is grand. But perhaps life is a little too grand, and maybe it is time to go back, and feel the pain of his people. In fact, one wonders whether this is part of the message-hidden in G-d's first words to Moshe:

*" Take the sandals off of your feet" (3:5)*

A strange opening line when one considers that this is the moment at which G-d introduces Himself to the man who will redeem the Jewish People and bring the Torah into the world.

Perhaps G-d was telling Moshe: 'don't be so comfortable'. The essence of Jewish ethics is the development of sensitivity for one's fellow human beings, and the ability to see every person as a vehicle for the image of G-d in which he or she was created. In fact, this is the 'reason' the Jewish people ended up in Egypt in the first place. Because if ten brothers could sit down and have lunch while their brother languished in a pit, then something was dreadfully wrong.

In fact, it is usually when I get too comfortable, that I know it is time to go.

I remember, years ago, in yeshiva, when I was told by my Rebbe, Rav Bik, that I was being moved up to a higher-level class. While this was certainly a compliment, I actually wasn't so thrilled. It had taken me over a year of breaking my teeth to finally begin to understand the flow of his classes, and feel like I was starting to 'get somewhere'. I could finally study the sources and begin to figure out what Rav Bik was trying to do, even predicting sometimes, the flow of his classes, which felt great. I really felt like I was

growing, and didn't yet want to start all over again in a different class, where I would once again have to try and figure out what the teacher was trying to do.

So I went to speak with Rav Bik, confident that when he knew I didn't want to move up just yet, there would be no problem. But when I told him I finally had begun to feel comfortable in the class, he interrupted me and said that was why I had to move up.

"You're not supposed to feel comfortable", he said. "If you're comfortable, you're in the wrong class; you're supposed to feel challenged."

Perhaps we are all a little too comfortable these days, sighing as we view the line at the bank, or the impending transit strike, while others suffer around the world.

The epitome of how we are really meant to be is Moshe, the leader of the people.

After all, why are we really here? What does it mean to be here? It is only because you are here, that I am really here, and the more I see you, the more I am really here as well. And to be a Moshe, to take the Jewish people out of Egypt, you have to be seeing on that kind of level. Because only a person who sees on that kind of level, can inspire all of us to really learn to see. Ultimately, Moshe would bring us out of Egypt to a barren mountain in the middle of the desert, the same mountain (Sinai, or Chorev) where Moshe rediscovered his own ability to see, and in that place, somehow, the Jewish people would actually see sound. Their ability to see would reach an entirely new level.

Which is the whole point. Egypt represented that place where people don't see; it was a land of darkness, where people did not see their fellow human beings. The Jewish people came into the world with a mission: to teach the world to see.

All of which leads us back to that strange story of the circumcision of Moshe's son, Eliezer.

What is a circumcision? Indeed, if there is a part of a man's body, which is imperfect, one wonders why G-d didn't just create us without foreskins? The idea behind circumcision is that we need a tikkun, a fixing. Circumcision, in the most physical sense, represents my challenge as a human being to improve and to change my surroundings and environment.

Circumcision is associated with the most physical part of a person, which is nonetheless also related to one of our greatest spiritual acts: the ability to procreate; to become partners with G-d in bringing life into the world. Circumcision teaches me that I am capable of recreating myself into something better. In fact, Avram's name is changed to Avraham only after he is circumcised, (Genesis 17:5) because he then becomes a partner in the recreation of himself into all that he can be.

Indeed, the **Klei Yakar** speaks of the foreskin as representing the physical obstruction to spiritual growth. And removing it represents my ability to remove the physical barriers that impede my spiritual growth, and prevent me from becoming a true partner in making this world the place it ought to be.

There is no greater barrier in this world, than the barrier that we allow to grow between us all; that prevent us from really seeing each other.

Sensitivity is all about recognizing that we are all one, and learning to feel someone else's pain as our own. Indeed, only when Moshe is saved from near death, does he understand what it means to be saved. Maybe, in order to be a savior, one first needs to experience the meaning of being saved. So that the experience isn't just something he brings to the people, but rather something he experiences with them.

Before Moshe comes to Egypt, to save Jewish children, he very nearly loses his own child, and before he brings life back to his own people, he nearly loses his own life.

May G-d grant that we all merit the extraordinary privilege of learning to be there; really be there, for one another wherever we are, so that one day soon we can all leave our Egypt behind and be together; really together, in the land we call home.

Shabbat Shalom,

R. Binny Freedman