



Taking a Stand

Moses is the hero of the Exodus. What do we know about his background. Why was he chosen to be the savior?

The Background of Moses

Should America police the world? Why should we mix into domestic squabbles in countries so many thousands of miles away? Should America sacrifice soldiers and billions of dollars for all sorts of internal wars in all sorts of places around the world, especially at a time when the economy is in such a difficult situation? These questions have been the source of debate in the United States for many years.

We're now approaching the holiday of Pesach. Even though I'm still busy with eating Hamantashen, everyone else I meet already knows exactly who they'll be having over for the first Seder and where they will be for the second Seder.

The story of Pesach, of course, is the story of Moshe Rabbeinu—the story of how one humble Jew with a unique upbringing was chosen by G-d to be the one who takes the Jewish Nation out of Egypt.

When we read about Moshe Rabbeinu in the Book of Shmos, we discover that we know very little about his life. We read about his birth and how his mother, Yocheved, put him in a basket on the Nile River. We read about how Basya, the Princess of Egypt, daughter of the Pharaoh, rescues the little baby in the basket—and before you know it, you're reading about the famous Burning Bush, when Moshe was already 80 years old.

There are only 15 verses between the birth of Moshe and the story of the Burning Bush, in which the Torah essentially explains why G-d chose Moshe as the leader of the Jewish Nation. That's his entire resume.

In those 15 verses, the first story we read about Moshe is, "And Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers and saw their suffering" (Shmos 2:11). The Rebbe explains: Moshe was a prince who grew up in the household of the most powerful man in the world of his day. He was the son of the Pharaoh's daughter, a young man for whom his adopted mother would do everything. Despite that all, he "went out to his brothers." But he didn't go out to take a stroll but rather, "to inquire as to his brothers' welfare," because he cared about his fellow Jews (Sichos Kodesh 5740, Vol. I, pg. 784).

And what did he see? An Egyptian wanting to kill a Jew. So right away, the verse tells us that "he turned this way and that and he saw that there was no person." He wanted to see if there might be anybody around who might rescue this poor Jew. But, "he saw that there was no person"—he saw that no one cared. So he killed the Egyptian and rescued the Jew.

The next day he stepped out of the palace again and this time, he saw two of his fellow Jews fighting. They weren't killing each other but they were fighting. So Moshe immediately got involved and asked, "Why are you hitting your fellow?"

But this time, Moshe hears from his "brothers" what they really think about him: "And he said, 'Who appointed you as a man, minister and judge over us?'" In other words, "Who made you a policeman here? Who asked you to get involved?" And then came the zinger: "Are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian?" So the Torah next tells us, "And Moshe saw, and he said, 'Indeed, the matter is known.'"

And indeed, Moshe's greatest fear materialized. Now, the Pharaoh

wanted to execute Moshe. And so Moshe was forced to flee the country. So he ran to Midyan.

But guess what? When he gets to Midyan, what does he see again? Two parties fighting. This time, it was a squabble between two groups of shepherds. He sees a group of shepherds kicking out a group of young women who were herding their fathers' flocks, not letting them draw water from a well. So here, too, Moshe mixed in and saved the women, and not only that, but also gave their sheep water to drink.

We see here why Moshe was chosen to be the leader of the Jewish Nation. The Torah wants us to know that he was chosen because he always took the side of the persecuted. He always stood by the side of justice, helping rescue the oppressed from oppression (Sichos Kodesh 5729, Vol. II, pg. 377).

What Each Story Adds

But we can ask a question here: Why does the Torah need to bring all three cases? The Torah generally is quite stingy with words. True, the Torah wants to give us an understanding of who Moshe Rabbeinu was. But seemingly, one story should have been good enough: Moshe put his life in danger and even killed an Egyptian so as to save the life of a Jew, and indeed, the Pharaoh wanted to kill him for it—real self-sacrifice right there. What more do you need than that? What do the two next stories add? We get the lesson from the first story!

The Torah isn't there to tell us what Moshe Rabbeinu did with his entire life, because he certainly did more things than those three things in those eighty years. So what do we need those two stories for?

The explanation is that if the Torah had only given us the first story, we would have known from it that Moshe was prepared to give up his life to save the life of a Jew from the hands of a Gentile. When he saw

a Jew in mortal danger, he ran to save him. But in Jewish history, there were many more Jews who did that.

So the second story reveals to us another side of Moshe Rabbeinu. In that story, we're not talking about danger to life. It's just two Jews fighting — something that unfortunately occurs every day. So what's the big deal here already? One guy is ready to hit the other guy. Why does Moshe suddenly get involved? We've already been taught that Moshe Rabbeinu is a man who gets involved.

But this story teaches us more about Moshe Rabbeinu. We learn here that he's not a man who gets involved only when he has no choice —when “he had to fulfill his mission” and save another Jew. Rather, we learn here that Moshe cared about every fight among two Jews, even if it was a petty, small squabble.

But we could still explain that the pressure Moshe felt to get involved was nothing more than “national pride,” that he didn't truly care about the fight itself but rather, was embarrassed that his “brothers,” the very people he considered himself as belonging to, could act like that.

It's like a father telling his kids that when we go out on the street and you fight in public, I'm embarrassed by you—inside the house, you guys can do to each other whatever you want. On the street, behave like gentlemen— don't embarrass me!

And so the Torah comes along to give us the third story—that even when Moshe got to Midyan and saw a fight between absolute strangers, fighting over the right to use a well, there too he got involved and stood by the side of the oppressed.

Don't Learn from Experience

Not only that, but this third story has a wonderful lesson.

It often happens that people stand by the side of the oppressed out of

the goodness of their own hearts, or because they are optimistic and sure that they will be honored for their acts of heroism.

But after they get involved in the fight, they ultimately emerge with a missing tooth or two and a black eye—because, as we all know, when you try to separate two people fighting, you tend to get a few good blows from both of them. Or, if they're lucky, they only get away with the parties they helped hating them even more, which also happens. Not only that, but they sometimes get charges pressed against them, too.

What happens to such a person is that he learns a lesson for the next time he sees a fight—then, he flees it like fire. He's already learned his lesson that it's not worth getting involved. He already paid dearly.

So here we have Moshe Rabbeinu getting involved in the first story and saving one Jewish life. The very next day, he tries to break up a fight—and what's his "reward"? His own Jewish brothers turned on him, the Pharaoh wanted to execute him, and he had to flee the country for Midyan.

Not only that, but when he got to Midyan, like a refugee just getting off the ship, he didn't have anything to his name and didn't know a soul in this strange country. And then, he suddenly witnesses a fight among strangers about whom he doesn't know the first thing—and he's already learned physically what the "reward" can be for such a mitzvah.

Still, Moshe doesn't hesitate for a minute and immediately gets involved. "And Moshe rose up and saved them," the Torah tells us—that's Moshe Rabbeinu for you.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden, the great medieval commentator and leader, writes that this teaches us "that it is incumbent upon a distinguished person to save the oppressed from his oppression in any possible way,

whoever the oppressed may be, as the Torah tells us with regards to Moshe Rabbeinu, 'And Moshe rose up and saved them,' even though they were the daughters of idolators."

So what's the lesson for us? The lesson, my friends, is that in every Jew there is a spark of Moshe.

When we see a Jew struggling with his or her Jewish identity, a Jew who doesn't want to make a Seder because he had a hard year and doesn't feel connected to our tradition, you can't tell yourself, "It's not my problem, it's between him and his Creator." It explicitly *is* your problem! You have to get involved and make peace between him G-d, helping him find a place to have a Seder, and helping him feel more comfortable with Judaism.