

God Seeks to Kill Moshe – Parashat Bo

Rav Hanan Schlesinger

No uncircumcised male may participate in the annual ritual reenactment of the Exodus. Our Torah portion this week tells us that when Jews gather to celebrate the birth of the Jewish nation at Passover, only those who have been bought into the covenant of Jewish nationhood through circumcision may partake of the Pascal Lamb. And if it is the case that only males shorn of the foreskin may come to the festive table to celebrate each year, all the more so that only Israelites who had consented to circumcision were permitted to participate in the original Passover on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt over 3000 years ago. Few if any of the slaves in Egypt had remained loyal to the covenant of Abraham, to whom God had commanded circumcision for himself and his descendants, but we learn from the beginning of the Book of Joshua that Moshe - before the first Passover meal that preceded the Exodus - had led the soon-to-be-freed slaves in a mass circumcision ceremony. The Book of Exodus remains silent concerning that ceremony. However, it does reveal to us some of the details of the circumcision of one lone Israelite. It recounts the bloody initiation into Judaism of the son of Moshe.

Let us recall that after having being weaned from his mother's breast, the infant Moshe had been taken to the royal palace and raised there by the daughter of Pharaoh. As a youth his connection to his birth family was non-existent, or tenuous at the best. He grew up among the Egypt aristocracy – dressed like them, talked like them. He was educated like them and was one of them. Yes, he harbored some vague memory of his biological roots, which comes to the fore in a late adolescent identity crisis. He goes forth from the palace to “see his brethren”. Deeply touched by their desperate plight, his empathy is aroused and he strikes out at a cruel Egyptian taskmaster and kills him. The crime is witnessed by none besides the Hebrew slave that Moshe had rescued, but nonetheless the next time he approaches the slaves he is taunted for his crime. Word of his act reaches the Egyptian authorities and a warrant is put out for his arrest. Moshe is forced to flee to Midian.



Schultz Rosenberg Campus, 12324 Merit Drive, Dallas TX, 75251

Phone: 214-295-3525

Fax: 214-295-3526

Email: kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net

Web site: www.kollelofdallas.org

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He becomes a man without an identity. The Israelites with whom he might have thought to reconnect have stabbed him in the back. The Egyptians with whom he shares a culture have turned against him. He is forsaken and utterly alone. In Midian he is taken in by the local idolatrous priest and begins life anew. He marries Tzipora, his benefactor's daughter. Moshe gains a family and an identity – he becomes a Midianite shepherd. The memories of Egypt recede, as do those of the enslaved Hebrews. For over sixty years Moshe lives a quiet life in Midian.

And then his simple life is shaken to the foundation by the Voice that echoes out of the Burning Bush, the Voice that forces him to unearth the distant memories that he has all but forgotten. He hears about the bondage and suffering of his long lost brethren, about a covenant forged by Abraham with a mysterious and hidden God, who now commands him to return to Egypt, stand up to the despotic Pharaoh and lead the Hebrews to freedom in the Promised Land.

Moshe is reeling, sent into a psychological spiral by this frightening Voice and its utterly outlandish demands. How could he return to the land that made him a fugitive and to the People that rejected and betrayed him? What connection could he possibly forge with those distant, wretched slaves? Why would he want to leave his comfortable life and identity and become a crusader on a suicidal mission? So Moshe refuses to accede to the demands of the Voice. But it is unrelenting. Moshe stands his ground but the Voice does not back down. Yes, no. Yes, no. They go back and forth. Five times God comes at him. And at the end of the encounter, God had the last word, and Moshe is left speechless.

Will he go back to Egypt? We do not know and neither does he. He is completely confused, hurt, lost. He packs up the family for a journey in order “see if his brethren in Egypt are still alive”. Not a word about leading them out of slavery, for he does not know what he will do. And neither does he know any longer who he is at all.

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Tzipora took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and threw it at his legs, saying, You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me. He then released



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*His grip upon him, and she added, Bridegroom of blood –
to the circumcised! (Exodus 4:24-26)*

Moshe experienced God as trying to kill him. Perhaps waking up at night in a cold sweat, after thrashing about for hours in the darkness while wracked by nightmarish questions of personal identity and doubts concerning his own adequacy, Moshe can take it no longer. He cries out in anguish in the dead of night. Tzipora awakens, realizing that her husband is in the throes of a complete breakdown. She takes things into her own hands, in a flash circumcising the couple's young son, thereby making a powerful statement, showing her husband where his true loyalty must lie. We are of the circumcised she tells him, the blood covenant of circumcision will define who we are from this point forward. My husband – let there be no more equivocation, she says to him. And Moshe at that moment experiences catharsis. The tension is broken. He now knows with utter certainty who he is and what he must do. The doubts are gone, the tensions resolved. Everything becomes clear. It is as if God has released the death grip upon him and he has been granted a new identity, and new lease on life. Through the sacrificial act of Tzipora, Moshe is transformed from a Midianite shepherd into the leader of the Israelites. The bridegroom of the blood of circumcision will now make his way to the people whose identity will be cut in their flesh. And the Israelites will be redeemed!



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