



THE ORIGINS OF MOSES' NAME Parshat Shemos-17 January 2025 Shabbat times start 4:07 finishes 5:21

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Rabbi Wolfe of Zbarazh was a Chasidic master known for his eagerness to defend the poor and the victimized.

One day, he heard unpleasant sounds coming from the kitchen. Putting aside the book he was studying, he went to find out what was happening there. His wife was having a disagreement with the maid. "She broke an expensive dish," the annoyed Rebbetzin explained to him. "It was an accident," cried the maid.

"No, she did it on purpose, to annoy me, and I'm going to deduct it from her wages," countered the Rebbetzin. "Then I shall go to the rabbinic court," said the maid.

"Go ahead, and I'll come too!" said the Rebbetzin. "And me too," said her husband.

"You? Why are you coming? I don't need you there."

"She does," said Rabbi Wolfe, "you are the wife of a Rebbe; she is only a poor maid. She needs me to defend her."

A Name-Check

One of the greatest enigmas in the Bible concerns the name of its most oft-mentioned character, Moses.

The name Moses is mentioned more than 600 times in Scripture. Yet "Moses" was not his given name... Among all of the heavyweights mentioned in the Bible, Moses' name stands out due to its unusual origins.

"Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe by the river... She saw a basket among the reeds... She opened it and saw a boy crying...and he was a son to her. She called his name Moses, as she said, 'For I drew him from the water.'"

It turns out that the name the Torah elected to call its key player was the one given him by Pharaoh's daughter!

Why?

It's not as if his parents neglected to name him. The Midrash records four names he was given at birth, one by each of his family members. One of these names was Tuvyah, which means good, for "She [his mother] saw that he was good." So what possessed the Torah to ignore the name given him by his pious parents at birth, using instead the name given him by a stranger?

This question intensifies according to the mystical teaching that one's name is not just utilitarian and random, but is inherently intertwined with the make-up of the name-bearer's soul and destiny.

If that's the case, doesn't the name Tuvyah - which means goodness - encapsulate Moses' essence and lifetime more than the name Moses, which commemorates but a single (albeit lifesaving) episode in his life? Sacrificial Choices

Moses had it made. He was being groomed for nobility and honour. His every whim was tended to, and he was pampered with all sorts of luxuries. He was adored by all of Egypt, having been recognized as a brilliant young man who possessed vision and courage. He was the people's prince and was headed towards a bright political future.

But he never quite got there, or at least he took a different route.

Incident #1:

"It happened in those days that Moses grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens..."

According to our Sages, the day of Moses' fateful stroll was the day he was made responsible over Pharaoh's entire household. After being doted upon and sheltered his entire life, on that day, for the first time, he ventured outside the cushioned palace environment he was accustomed to into the real world, where injustice flourished and suffering was rampant.

"And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man."

For the first time in his young life he came face-to-face with an oppressor and a victim, and he had to choose between them.

To side with a member of the lowest caste against a "fellow" member of the all-highest would not be seen positively back at the palace, nor by the commoners on the street. More than just committing career-suicide, or even more, forfeiting a life of opulence, by acting against an Egyptian overseer on behalf of a Hebrew slave, Moses was endangering his life!

Yet he didn't think twice, but "struck the Egyptian down and hid him in the sand."

This was how his first day outside the palace ended.

Incident #2:

"He went out the next day, and behold! Two Hebrew men were fighting." Moses could have left them to their fighting. After all, the murder of an innocent man was not at stake this time; it was merely some Israelite in-fighting. And yet, he didn't think twice but "said to the wicked one, 'Why would you strike your fellow?'"

This deed would cost him dearly.

"Who made you a man, a ruler, and a judge over us?" replied the Hebrew he had rebuked. "Are you saying that you are going to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and he thought, "Indeed, the matter has become known."

His fears would prove to be well founded. "Pharaoh heard about this matter and sought to kill Moses; so Moses fled from before Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian. He sat at the well."

This was how his second day outside the palace ended.

A few days later would be much the same.

Incident #3:

"The minister of Midian had seven daughters; they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's sheep. The shepherds came out and drove them away [for their family had been excommunicated by the Midianites]." Now, the voice of logic, coupled with instincts of self-preservation, might well have argued against getting involved in this bout of local politics, especially if that involvement would align him with a family of social outcasts, yet that didn't stop Moses from standing up for those being wronged.

"Moses got up and saved them, and watered their sheep."

A pattern emerges.

So much must have happened in young Moses' life until this point, and yet the Torah, being a work of instruction rather than history, saw fit to record only these pitifully few incidents.

Mind you, it can be argued that all three incidents are irrelevant to the story. For the story to be cohesive, all we need to know is that Pharaoh sought to kill Moses and that Moses got away. The question of why Pharaoh sought to kill Moses is nothing but gossip.

In truth, however, it can be said that precisely these events capture the spirit of Moses. For each of three episodes outlined are in reality just different expressions of the same characteristic.

Moses identified with the victim, the disadvantaged, the oppressed. At the risk of his own comfort and even his life, he never stood idly by as someone was being hurt.

In each of the documented incidents, the faces of the persecutor and the persecuted may have changed, but Moses did not. He always took the side of the sufferer.

This pattern is illustrated even more clearly by the next occurrence in Moses' life which the Torah chose to record:

"Moses was grazing the sheep of his father-in-law... He saw a burning bush that wasn't being consumed... G-d said, 'I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt...and now, go, and I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall take my people out of Egypt!'"

To go back to the land where he was wanted for murder?

To confront and rebel against his step-grandfather, Pharaoh, the man who treated him like a son, and brought him up with love?

To embrace and redeem the people who turned him in to the authorities, facilitating his stint on death row?

Besides, hadn't his life finally settled? He'd recently married, had a kid, gotten a job; life was good, so why spoil it?

Because a people was being oppressed in the land of Egypt.

The name Moses now seems to fit him like a glove, for it points to the very beginning of this pattern.

"Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe by the river... She saw a basket among the reeds... She opened it and saw a boy crying. She took pity on him and said, 'This is one of the Hebrew boys,'...and he was a son to her."

When the princess of Egypt first laid on eyes on little Moses, he was quite literally a basket-case. But he was also a Hebrew slave-child, whom her father had decreed should be drowned.

Taking the child in would thus be very risky. Keeping his identity secret would be nearly impossible, especially with all of the palace chitchat.

Yet she didn't hesitate to extend herself towards the victim-child of a victim-people, and "drew him out of the water." How fitting a name for Moses, who would grow to do the same for others. 1

Inspiration for the nation

In each one of us glows a spark of Moses. He is our teacher, a teacher from within. Moses is a shepherd of faith, nourishing each of us with our own inherent knowledge, guiding it to pour down into our conscious mind. Showing us the way out of our slavery to mortar and bricks. How do you awaken Moses? By awakening yourself. How do you awaken yourself? That only you can do. Yet even that will be with the guidance of a teacher, of someone in whom Moses is awake. Only the awakened can guide others to be awake.

Joke

Berel and Shmerel are sitting on a bench in the middle of Chelm, chatting. Berel asks Shmerel, "Has your son Chaim Yankel decided what he wants to be when he grows up?"
"Yes, he wants to be a garbage collector," replied Shmerel.
Berel thought for a moment and responded, "That's a rather strange ambition to have for a career."
"Not really," said Shmerel, "It should be an easy job."
"How so?" asked Berel.
"Because garbage collection is only done on Tuesdays."

Story time

A prominent Jewish merchant, Reb Yaakov from Vilna, known to be an accomplished Torah scholar, once passed through Mezritch. Having heard of the greatness of the Mezritcher Maggid, Rabbi Dov Ber, Reb Yaakov decided to visit him, although he was not an adherent of the Chasidic movement. Reb Yaakov was eager to engage the Maggid in a learned discussion, and he was not disappointed. But, as Reb Yaakov had no interest in Chasidic philosophy, the subject was not broached.

As Reb Yaakov was about to leave, the Maggid suddenly said: "Remember Yaakov, what our Sages of blessed memory said, that G-d sends His cure to a patient through a particular doctor and a particular medicine. Sometimes the One Above sends His cure not through the medication which the doctor prescribes, but through the doctor himself. As you know, a doctor receives his healing powers by authority of the Divine Torah, as it is written, 'And he shall surely cure him.' Therefore, the doctor has a healing angel at his side, and a very great doctor is accompanied by the chief healing angel, Rafael, himself."

As he traveled back to Vilna, Reb Yaakov thought about this strange parting remark, which seemed to come out of the blue. Reb Yaakov was, thank G-d, in very good health. He had never needed a doctor before, and he hoped he would not have to consult one in the future. He hadn't asked the Maggid for medical advice, so why had the Maggid mentioned doctors? Unable to solve this puzzle, he soon dismissed the entire episode from his mind.

Several weeks later Reb Yaakov returned home and soon fell into his normal routine. After a few days, he awoke feeling quite ill. His condition worsened rapidly and although all the best doctors were called in, each offering a different medication, nothing helped.

Word of his condition spread quickly. His friends and acquaintances were devastated, for Reb Yaakov was a kind and charitable man. Then a ray of hope appeared. The Jews of Vilna heard that the king would be arriving in town, and his personal physician, who was a wayward Jew, would be accompanying him. If only they could persuade the king's doctor to pay a call on their beloved friend, maybe this great doctor could save his life.

The community leaders dispatched a delegation to the king and petitioned him to allow his royal physician to visit Reb Yaakov. The king received them graciously and agreed to their request. The hopes of his family and friends soared when the famous doctor entered the sickroom, but were soon dashed. When the doctor looked at Reb Yaakov he said disdainfully, "Am I G-d that you have brought me here to revive a dead man?"

To everyone's horror, the doctor turned to leave. The distraught family begged him to prescribe some medication. "Nothing can help this man," he replied brusquely, casting a parting glance at the dying patient. But something caught his eye and he turned to look again. A slight bit of color could be seen on the patient's pale face. The doctor quickly took his notepad and scribbled a prescription. "Run to the pharmacy and bring this medication at once!"

Hope sprang again into the hearts of the man's family and friends. The royal physician remained at the man's bedside, his eyes fixed on the sick man. He was amazed to see further signs of improvement. He pulled out his pad and prescribed another medication. But no sooner had he written it out than the patient's eyes began to flicker.

The doctor had never seen such a thing in all his experience. Suddenly, the erstwhile dying man sat up in bed and addressed the physician, "I beg you, dear doctor, don't go yet. Stay a while longer, and I'll feel much better. The Angel Rafael must be at your side."

The physician was completely overwhelmed. He stared at the patient in utter disbelief, and although he didn't believe in angels, he could almost believe the patient's words. As if reading the doctor's thoughts, Reb Yaakov began to relate his visit to the Maggid of Mezritch and especially the Maggid's puzzling remark at the end of the visit.

"I can see now, that his remark was completely prophetic and true," Reb Yaakov remarked.

The king's doctor, who had listened intently to the whole episode, sat engrossed in thought. It occurred to him that, great healer though he was, he needed a lot of healing himself - healing of a spiritual nature.

"I would like to meet this saintly man," he finally said. "When you are fully recovered, I would like you to take me to meet him."

Not very long after, the two of them, Reb Yaakov and the king's physician, traveled to Mezritch - Reb Yaakov to become a Chasid and the physician to return to his faith.

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Parsha Summary

The Parshah "Shemot" (Exodus 1:1-6:1) begins with the Israelites multiplying in Egypt. Threatened by their growth, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the killing of Hebrew male infants. A baby boy, Moses, is saved by his mother Yocheved, found by Pharaoh's daughter, and raised in the palace.

As an adult, Moses kills an Egyptian oppressor and flees to Midian, where he marries Tziporah and becomes a shepherd. G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush, commanding him to demand Israel's freedom from Pharaoh. With his brother Aaron as spokesman, Moses confronts Pharaoh, who refuses and worsens the Israelites' suffering. G-d assures Moses that redemption is near.