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Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesah 5783 שבת חול המועד פסח תשפ"ג

Leaving Egypt with Compassion and Justice

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The Torah reading for Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesah (Exodus 33:12–34:26) describes the aftermath of the Golden Calf. How do we make sense of this choice? The 5th-century midrash, Pesikta de Rav Kahana, teaches that sin causes God's presence, the Shekhina, to distance herself from earth. Confronted by this distance Moshe not only argues for the continued existence of the Children of Israel (whom the deity had threatened to destroy, for they are *stiff-necked* and have "quickly turned aside" from the covenant established at Sinai), but he also yearns for God's nearness (Exod. 33:18) and to know God's "ways" (Exod. 33:13).

In response to Moshe's requests scripture reveals the Thirteen Attributes:

> *The Eternal passed before him and proclaimed, "The Eternal, the Eternal, God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending love to thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin—yet not remitting all punishment . . . "* (Exod. 34:6–7).

Most commentators opine that indeed God proclaims the name of the Eternal, calling out to Moshe and declaring the divine nature. However, Targum Yonatan (a 7th–8th-century Aramaic translation of the Torah that features midrashic expansions) introduces the radical idea that *Moshe* is the one who calls out to God and declares the divine name. In effect, Moshe reminds God of God's own divine traits of compassion and justice!

Where does Moshe find the courage (or the *hutzpah*?) to remind the Master of the Universe of the divine nature? From his adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter!

The Torah presents Pharaoh's daughter as a hero of the Exodus, a paragon of compassion and justice: "*She opened it* [the basket] *and saw the child and behold the* ***na'ar*** *was crying! She had compassion for him and said, 'This is one of the Hebrew boys'"* (Exod. 2:6). The term *na'ar* calls attention to itself as it usually refers to an adolescent, not a baby. As such, the 10th-century midrash, Exodus Rabbah 1:21 explicitly states that the baby's voice was that of an adolescent. Biblical scholar Aviva Zornberg proposed the narrative's use of the term *na'ar* means that Pharaoh's daughter hears the cry of a generation, the groan of the oppressed masses, enslaved and murdered by her father. Exodus Rabbah 1:23 explicitly addresses the courage and commitment of Pharaoh's daughter, creating a scene in which the princess' servants warn her that it is especially incumbent upon her as a member of the royal family to abide by her father's genocidal decrees. By taking the compassionate course she does, Pharaoh's daughter risks her own life.

Under the circumstances it would have been a simple matter, and perhaps a logical one, to ignore the cries of the *na'ar*, to look the other way, to walk or even swim on by. But instead, Pharoah's daughter chooses to see and hear and save the Hebrew baby. She hires a Hebrew wet-nurse. She adopts the child and names him Moshe (at once an Egyptian name meaning "son," and a Hebrew harbinger of his mission to draw the people through the waters of the Reed Sea to freedom).

As such, one may assert that Moshe learns compassion and justice and bravery from his adoptive mother, whom the rabbis regarded as not only a righteous convert, but a role model for all Jews. Illustrating this point, the 5th-century midrash, Leviticus Rabbah 1:3 imagines God requiting Pharoah's daughter "measure for measure" for her

righteousness: "Moshe was not your son, yet you called him your son, although you are not My daughter, I will call you My daughter." That is, just as Pharaoh's daughter adopts and names Moshe, so too does God adopt her as God's own and names her Batyah (literally, Daughter of God). Thus, the sages promoted a Jewish identity based not solely upon genealogy or geography but emphasizing righteous and compassionate behavior and the possibility of change.

Batyah's transition from Egyptian princess to honored Jewish convert demonstrates the possibility and power of *teshuvah*, to change. Her transformation contrasts with the *stiff-neckedness* charge that God levels against the Jewish people in consequence of the Golden Calf. The *stiff-neckedness* of the Children of Israel proves that you can take the people beyond Egypt but removing Egypt from the people's psyches is more complicated and will certainly require more time.

Assigning this Torah reading to Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesah points to this temporal issue. While the bible reports the Children of Israel physically leaving Egypt on the morning following the Paschal sacrifice, they commit the sin of the Golden Calf soon thereafter. True redemption is a process that takes time.

Our sages teach that sin causes distance between humanity and its Creator, while righteous behavior narrows that gap and increases God's influence in the world. Batyah's compassion and justice allow her to truly emerge from Egypt psychologically and to draw close to the Divine and play an important role in the moral history of the world. Her courage and righteousness bring her protégé, Moshe, to affect the Eternal's forgiveness of the people. Moshe's efforts lead to the reestablishment of the covenant following the sin of the Golden Calf.

The Bavli (Sotah 14a), building upon the Thirteen Attributes presented in this week's Torah reading, delineates a program of moral responsibilities. "Rabbi Hama ben R. Hanina asks: What is the meaning of, 'walking in God's ways and cleaving to God' (Deuteronomy 13:5)? He answers: 'Just as God clothes the naked, visits the sick, consoles the mourners, and buries the dead, so should you!'" In other words, we celebrate God's redemption of the Israelites from Egypt and exalt our Jewish identities as did Batyah and Moshe when we extend divine forgiveness, compassion, and justice through our own righteous behaviors.

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