

An Awakening for Moses

Now it was some years later, Moshe grew up; he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens. He saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, one of his brothers. (Exodus 2:11, Fox)

When we first encounter Moses in Chapter 2 of Exodus, he is a helpless child hidden among the reeds on the bank of the river. Within 16 verses, he has been saved, raised as an Egyptian prince and has fled to Midian. Having just intervened to kill an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, he now flees in order to save his own life.

Ever wonder why Moses turned his back on his place of privilege to stand in solidarity with the enslaved Hebrews? The text simply reads, *“One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor”* (2:11, NRSV. Compare with Everett Fox’s translation above). Surely it was a familiar sight to Moses. What made this time different? From the sages of old, to Torah scholars and students of our own day, many have pondered this passage.

According to Rashi,¹ Moses “focused his eyes and heart to share their distress.” Rashi’s interpretation, says one commentator,² takes into account the use of the Hebrew words *ra’ah* (‘to see’) and *be* (‘in’). Thus, the text can read, *“he looked into their burdens.”*

Says an Australian student of Torah,³ “What strikes me about Rashi’s interpretation is that Moses saw their suffering not only with his eyes, but also with his heart.” Did Moses act so strongly because he saw with ‘eyes of the heart’? Ponder this passage and join in the Torah discussion.

Moses refuses to stand by in the face of injustice, but he is not the only one to do this. The courageous disobedience of women is also a key theme in these first chapters of Exodus. We find a

Levite woman who hides her son amongst the reeds, thus dangerously contradicting Pharaoh’s edict. The infant’s sister (Miriam) colludes in this challenge to Pharaoh’s authority. Then Pharaoh’s

daughter finds and saves the baby, willingly contravening the authority of her father.

Each of these brave and proactive women creates a ripple of defiance that will swell into the movement of the exodus. The emerging message might be understood as this: it requires only one person to take a stand against injustice for the river of liberation to start flowing. In the Talmud we find this saying:

“Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua says: The earth rests on one pillar, and a righteous person is its name, as it is stated: ‘But a righteous person is the foundation of the world’ (Proverbs 10:25).” (Chagigah, 12b).

Reflection

- Describe a time when you saw something or someone with ‘eyes of the heart,’ or when you ‘looked into the burden’ of another.
- Who is a ‘Moses figure’ in our own times?
- How can we teach our children to be obedient to God and ‘disobedient’ to the pressures of malevolent influences?
- Creatively entering into the narrative of this week’s Torah portion, and drawing upon your life experience, express your view as to what might have been going on within the mind/heart of Moses as he made the transition from ‘prince of Egypt’ to ‘liberator of slaves.’

Notes:

1. Rashi: esteemed Torah scholar; 11th century
2. Nehama Leibowitz, 1996.
3. Mark David Walsh, 2007.

Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah*, Vol.2 (New York: Mesorah, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996); parashah commentaries of Bat Kol Institute www.batkol.info; Sefaria website: www.sefaria.org

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