

## SIGNIFICANT ANONYMITY IN EXODUS 2

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Exodus 2 is a prologue of sorts, introducing Moses and describing his early life prior to his summons by God to liberate the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. The several vignettes comprising Exodus 2 feature a rich array of characters that can be itemized and ranked like the *dramatis personae* of a Shakespearean history:

EGYPTIANS – the Pharaoh, King of Egypt (2:1); his daughter, her personal servant and her other attendants (2:5); an abusive Egyptian (taskmaster?) (2:11).

ISRAELITES – the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (2:24); their descendants, the Israelites (2:23); one victimized, beaten Israelite slave (2:11); two squabbling Israelite men (2:13); a Levite man (2:1); his wife, a Levite woman (2:1); their daughter (2:4); and their son (2:2), later identified as Moses (2:10).

MIDIANITES – Re'uel, a priest of Midian (2:18); his daughter, Zipporah (2:21); her son Gershom (2:22); and a group of shepherds (2:17).

That is a bustling population for such a short chapter. There is only one verse out of the 25 (2:14) that does not make specific mention of any of these 18 characters, whereas the remaining 24 verses invoke the various players 55 times – an average of well over two mentions per verse. Indeed, in the Hebrew text of the chapter, nearly one word in four (79 words out of a total of 335, a proportion of 23.6%) refers to some actor in the drama.

It is that very emphasis on the players which draws the reader's attention to the startling fact that effectively none of them is identified by name – a particular irony, considering that their story falls at the beginning of a book and weekly portion entitled *Shemot* [Names]. The bland anonymity of the narrative is a metaphor for the objectification of the Israelites under Egyptian servitude. The fact that no Egyptian character in this chapter has a name either (Pharaoh is only a title) implies that the people of Egypt have become diminished, as well, by their endorsement of a racist policy of subjugation for the Hebrews in their land.

It is worthy of note that in this narrative only those born and living in Midian have names. Perched on the sidelines, far from the central drama in Egypt, these characters remain unimpaired by the depersonalization that obtains in that country. Moreover, there are in fact a distinct few Israelites in the chapter who are also identified by name: specifically, the three Patriarchs and Moses.<sup>1</sup> However, since those characters represent respectively the Israelites' past glory and their future redemption, the very namelessness of everyone in between serves as a bleak index of a present degradation that impacts the Hebrew slaves and their Egyptian oppressors alike.

The tone of the chapter is set in its opening verse. The pointedly generic description of Moses' parentage as *a man from the House of Levi who married a daughter of Levi* (2:1) introduces a spirit of namelessness expressive of the Israelites' dehumanization. That significant anonymity in 2:1 represents a deficiency of detail that will in fact be supplied in a later chapter – *Amram took to wife his aunt Jochebed, and she bore him . . . Moses* (Ex. 6:20) – but such re-personalization is going to be possible only in the fullness of time, with the augury of the coming redemption.

The opening verse sets the tone of the chapter in a different – and ultimately far more encouraging – way, by suggesting that we are defined by our relationships as much as by our names. Through the seeming anonymity of calling Moses' parents *a man of the house of Levi* and *a daughter of Levi*, the Torah is in fact establishing their identity far more meaningfully than any name alone could ever do. Such a relationship-based identification plants them squarely in the context of a larger social reality of which they are a recognized part.

The same principle holds true throughout the chapter. There are very few personal names, and also some general descriptive references: *ha-ishah* [the woman], *ha-yeled* [the boy], *ha-almah* [the lass]. Most of the 55 references to the various characters in this chapter identify those people more explicitly in terms of their interaction with others. The relationship in question might take the form of a professional description of that person's function in society: *meineketh* [wet-nurse], *ro'im* [shepherds]. Or, a person may be identified by a title expressing either their authority over or duty of service to others: *melekh Mitzrayim* [king of Egypt], *kohen Midyan* [Priest of Midian], *ish sar ve-*

*shofet* [chief man and judge], *na'aroteha* [her attendants], *amatah* [her maid-servant].

The overwhelming majority of referents, however, have to do with those characters' kinship to others, speaking of them in terms of their being *bat* [a daughter of], *ben* [a son of], *ahoto* [his sister], *ehav* [his brothers], or *mi-yaldei ha-ivrim*

[one of the Hebrews' children]. In the narrative of Exodus 2, as in the Egyptian society it describes, those deprived of their names are defined – for the reader, as well as for each other – by their relationships with those around them. Even when we are not told who they are, we know with whom and to whom they belong. As such, they not only endure when crushed by the cruel policies of a despot but also emerge with their fundamental dignity intact. The very namelessness of the characters in this narrative serves only to place even greater emphasis on that interconnectedness which defines them best of all. When robbed of our freedom and our identities and our very names, our relationship with others is all we have left to say who we are.

The corollary of this is that our connection with others may very well be all we need to say about who we are. An exegetical commentary from antiquity, preserved in Judah Eisenstein's 1915 compendium *Otzar ha-Midrashim*, teaches the compelling lesson that each of us recovers a sense of self from our interactions with those around us:

(Pharaoh's daughter) *called his name Moshe, saying: 'Because out of the water did I draw him'* (Ex. 2:10), but his father called him *Chaver* ("friend"), because on this child's account he was brought closer with his wife,<sup>2</sup> and his mother called him *Yekuti-El* ("God will nourish me"), because she suckled him from her breast; his sister called him *Yered* ("he will descend"), because she had gone down to him at the bank of the river to see what his end would be, while (his brother) Aaron called him *Avi-Zano'ah* ("my father had deserted"), because my father left my mother and then returned to her on this child's account. (His grandfather) Kehat called him *Avigdor* ("source of protection"), because on his account God's protecting hedge grew up around Israel, so that the Egyptians could no longer cast their sons into the Nile; his wet-nurse called him *Avi-Soko* ("source of

shelter"), because God would cover him with a canopy to conceal him from the Egyptians; and the Israelites called him *Shemayah ben-Netanel* ("the Eternal One has heard; God has given"), because in his times God hearkened to their outcry (*Otzar ha-Midrashim, Moshe* 4).<sup>3</sup>

The Midrash imagines that everyone associated with the infant Moses assigned him a different name, based on their own respective understandings of what he means to each of them. To the contrary of confusing the issue of who he

is, their diverse articulations serve in fact to anchor him in the community by declaring him kin to them all. The spirit of mutuality and interdependence of which the Midrash speaks is the core value which emerges between the lines in Exodus 2.

Strictly speaking in terms of Jewish history, that spirit of unity serves to create a continuum from the proud self-identification of Jacob's disparate brood of sons when they first come into Egypt ('*we are brothers, all the sons of the same man*' - Gen. 42:13) to the comprehensive description of their descendants' departure from that country centuries later: '*We will leave with our young and our old; we will leave with our sons and daughters and flocks and herds*' (Ex. 10:9). In a broader sense, however, Exodus 2 asserts the enduring principle that human companionship validates our most essential being. That was the intent of the Creator, Who decreed at the beginning of all things that '*it is not good for humanity to be alone*' (Gen. 2:18), and it is a core reality asserted anew from Hillel ("If I am for myself only, what am I?" – Mishnah *Pirkei Avot* 1:14) to Mark Zborowski, who entitled his mid-twentieth century study on *shtetl* society *Life Is With People*. At the best of times, mutual interdependence is the mechanism underlying civilization (a word which at its source means "living together with others in cities"). At the very worst of times, when the nation-state goes mad and turns cannibal so that repression and genocide become the order of the day, it is our connection to those around us that preserves not just our lives, but our identity and our personhood as well.

#### NOTES

1. Even Moses may not have had a real name. Contemporary inscriptions indicate that the suffix *mose* or *meses* – denoting "son" or "child," and a component of such Egyptian royal names as

Kamose ("born to Ka (the spirit)"), and Rameses ("born to (the sun-god) Re") – was on occasion used by itself as a personal name in ancient Egypt. When put together with a defined patronymic, Moses as a personal name would, like the modern nickname "junior," resonate of familial continuity. Absent clear paternity, however, as in the case of this Hebrew foundling left in the reeds by the edge of the Nile, the name Moses becomes a generic nominator meaning basically "the kid." Whether such a moniker is to be viewed as affectionate, or as marginalizing and dismissive, is frankly a matter of opinion.

2. Jewish tradition teaches that the men of Israel were so demoralized by Pharaoh's genocidal edict that they withdrew from physical intimacy with their wives, in order to avoid creating a pregnancy the fruit of which would only be destined for death. The righteous Israelite women solaced and reassured their husbands – by which affirmative act of faith, the Talmud declares (Sotah 11b), they merited the redemption of their people.

3. Compare to the similar midrash in Yalkut Shimoni, Exodus 166. See also Va-yikra Rabbah 1:3.