

Parashat Shemot

Third Portion

David Ison ~ Thu 7 Jan 2010

How remarkable it is that so many significant events are assembled and compacted into these 15 verses. To begin, Moshe, the Torah states,

וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו

he went forth to his brethren.

Noting this curious verbiage in the Hebrew, the commentator from the Orthodox Union renders the phrase as,

“Moshe goes out to see what is happening with the Jewish People.” This wording seems out of place unless it is interpreted as a pattern which Moshe pursued and doesn't refer to a single one-time event. Yonatan ben Uzziel affirms this idea, saying that Moshe “beheld the anguish of their souls, and the greatness of their toil.” This could not realistically be accomplished in a single-day event.

On this point Rashi comments,

נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מיצר עליהם

He directed his eyes and his heart to be distressed over them.

(If I were translating the Hebrew of Rashi I would say it as, “He inducted his eyes and his heart to be concerned about them.”) [From Exodus Rabbah 1:27]

Again this speaks more of a pattern than of an event that occurred only on one day. The fact that Moshe was doing as Rashi indicates, namely focusing his eyes and heart on the plight of his brethren is also evident in the grammar of the sentence. In the English we read it as,

“ went out to his brothers and **looked at** their burdens, and he **saw** an Egyptian man” The curious thing is that these words that mean “to look at” and “to see” are in the Hebrew the same verb, the same conjugation and identical vowelings:

וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלֵתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי

It implies Moshe was looking around and observing things. His perception must have been considerable, because ben Uzziel writes,

“And he saw a Mitzri strike a Jewish man of his brethren; and Moshe turned, and considered in the wisdom of his mind, and understood that in no generation would there arise a convert from that Mitzri, and that none of his children's children would ever be converted;”

So he confronts and kills this Egyptian who was striking or beating a Jew. According to the Midrash this Egyptian had committed mischief with this man's wife and proceeded to abuse his taskmaster position to afflict him. Rashi comments,

“[The Hebrew man] was the husband of Shelomith the daughter of Dibri , and the taskmaster laid his eyes on her. So he woke the Hebrew man at night and expelled him from his house, and he returned and was intimate with the man's wife. The man returned home and became aware of the misdeed. Once that Egyptian saw this, he smote him and afflicted him all day.”

[From Exodus Rabbah 1:28]

Next, Moshe proceeds to break up a fight between two Hebrews and they confront him saying, will you also kill me as you did the Egyptian? In the Torah these two are unnamed but Yonatan ben Uzziel identifies them as Datan and Aviram. There is a Midrash that says these two had witnessed him kill the Mitzri (Egyptian) and reported him to Pharaoh.

When Moshe realises his action of killing the Mitzri has been discovered, he says a curious thing,

אָכֵן נוֹדַע הַדָּבָר

literally, “thus the fact is known” (by ou.org, or my translation Uh-uh this thing is discovered!)

In any event, the Sfat Emet says that in these words there is a powerful Mussar (or teaching) lesson for us. When two Jews would fight each other, when Jews would inform on another to Par'o, then the fact is obvious - why do the Jewish People suffer exile more bitterly than other nations.

Next, Moshe flees to Midyan where he saves the daughters of Yitro from certain nuisance shepherds who were menacing their activities. He takes then Tzipora as a wife. She bears a son, whom Moshe names Gershom, commenting as his reason:

גֵר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נְכַרִּיהָ

I was a ger in a strange or foreign land

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the oppression of Mitzrayim against the Hebrews is greatly intensified. The people react by calling out to Hashem. And the Torah says that Hashem knew it and saw it,

וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים

and Elohim was aware, or he knew.

Rashi comments,

נָתַן עֲלֵיהֶם לֵב וְלֹא הִעֲלִים עֵינָיו

[lit., He set His heart] upon them: and did not conceal His eyes from them.