



A Jew Without Sinai

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To be a Jew is, when we are lucky, to feel the memory of Sinai in our bones. We strive to feel as if we have experienced both the slavery and liberation of Egypt first hand, as if we ourselves saw God's miracles.

Sometimes we even succeed.

But there are moments when to be a Jew is to feel like we have arrived on the scene too late. There are days, when you are a Jew in the 21st century, when you feel as if you have only heard a rumor of revelation.

On those days, it can feel impossible to find ourselves in the stories of the Jewish people of Bemidbar, Jews who have all experienced God's revelation directly.

All, that is, except for two.

Gershom and Eliezer, Moshe's two sons, are glaringly absent in the beginning of Bemidbar:



במדבר ג:א-ד

¹וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֵי אַהֲרֹן וּמֹשֶׁה בְּיוֹם דִּבֶּר ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי: ²וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הַבְּכֹר נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא
אֶלְעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר: ³אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֲנִים הַמְּשֻׁחִים אֲשֶׁר מִלֵּא יָדָם לְכַהֵן: ⁴וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא לִפְנֵי
ה' בְּהִקְרָבָם אֲשֶׁר זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה' בַּמִּדְבָּר סִינַי וּבָנִים לֹא הָיוּ לָהֶם וַיִּכְהֵן אֶלְעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר עַל פְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן אֲבִיהֶם:

Bemidbar 3:1-4

¹This is the line of Aharon and Moshe at the time that God spoke with Moshe on Har Sinai.

²These were the names of Aharon's sons: Nadav, the firstborn, and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar; ³those were the names of Aharon's sons, the anointed priests who were ordained for priesthood. ⁴But Nadav and Avihu died by the will of God, when they offered alien fire before God in the wilderness of Sinai; and they left no sons. So it was Elazar and Itamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aharon.

These is the line of Aharon and Moshe, the text begins. As readers, we expect to see the names of both Moshe and Aharon's sons: Gershom and Eliezer, Moshe's sons, and Nadav, Avihu, Eleazar, and Itamar, Aharon's. Instead, the text names only Aharon's sons, leaving a gap where Moshe's sons should be.

In some ways, this absence is not surprising. While Moshe does technically have children, their most remarkable characteristic in the Torah is their absence from Moshe's life.

We first learn that Moshe has been separated from his children since his departure from Midian when Yitro comes to meet Moshe, bringing Moshe's wife and children with him:

שמות יח:

וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹקִים:

Shemot 18:5

Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought Moshe's sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God.

The Mekhilta de-R. Shimon ben Yohai describes the circumstances of Moshe's separation from his family:

מכילתא דר' שמעון בן יוחאי, שמות יח:ב

לקח את אשתו ואת בניו והרכיבם על החמור אמר לו המקום לאהרן צא לקראת אחיך המדברה יצא לקראתו חתחיל מגפפו ומנשקו אמר לו משה אחי היכן כל השנים הללו אמר לו במדין אמר מה טיב אלו בני אדם שעמך אמר לו אשתי ובני הן ואמר לו להיכן אתה מוליך אמר לו למצרים אמר לו על הראשונים אנו מצטערין עכשו אתה מביא את האחרונים מיד אמר לה חזרי לבית אביך

Mekhilta de-R. Shimon ben Yohai to Shemot 18:2

He took his wife and sons and rode them on the donkey. Hashem told Aharon, "Go and greet your brother in the desert." He went out to greet him and started to kiss him and said to him, "Moshe my brother, where were you all of these years?" He responded to him, "In Midian." He said to him, "Who are these people with you?" He responded to him, "My wife and sons." He said to him, "To where are you leading them?" He responded, "To Egypt." He said to him, "On the first ones (meaning the Jews who are already there) we are upset, and how you are bringing the later ones (meaning his sons, Jews coming into Egypt for the first time)!" Immediately he said to her, "Return to your father's house."

In his encounter with Aharon, Moshe learns that he must choose between his mission and his ability to stay with his family while ensuring their safety. Choosing not to subject his wife and children to the suffering of the Jewish people, Moshe sends them back to Midian. This choice makes complete sense as a father that he would choose not to endanger his children in Egypt. But this choice is also a moment of departure. Moshe, about to venture into Egypt, will



experience—and bring about—the liberation of the people from Egypt. Moshe's children—the children he, as a Jewish parent, will one day be commanded to tell about *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* (the Exodus)—will be the only Jews of their generation who will not. There are gaps between Moshe's experience and that of his children that can never be filled.

Perhaps even more surprising than Moshe's children missing *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is the fact that, according to some, they missed Sinai as well. While the Torah places Moshe's reunion with his wife and children immediately before *matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah), implying that they were present, according to one opinion, Moshe's family actually missed out on this pivotal Jewish experience, because they had not yet met up with Moshe:

תלמוד בבלי זבחים קטז.

בְּנֵי רַבִּי חִיָּיא וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ בֶּן לֵוִי; חֵד אָמַר: יִתְרוֹ קֹדֶם מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה הָיָה, וְחֵד אָמַר: יִתְרוֹ אַחֲרֵי מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה הָיָה.

Talmud Bavli Zevahim 116a

The sons of R. Hiyya and R. Yehoshua ben Levi—one says: [The story of] Yitro was before *matan torah*; but the other says: Yitro was after *matan torah*.

While some claim that all Jews, from all generations, were spiritually present at Sinai, the Gemara here offers a stunning claim: at least two Jews—Moshe's own children!—may have been absent.

What happens to Jews who miss out on the liberation from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai, to those who only learn of those foundational events second-hand? We see a hint towards an answer in the story of Yehonatan ben Gershom, the idolatrous priest:



שופטים יח:ל-לא

³⁰וַיִּקְיֵמוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי דָן אֶת הַפֶּסֶל וַיהוֹנָתָן בֶּן גֶּרְשֹׁם בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה הוּא וּבָנָיו הָיוּ כֹהֲנִים לְשִׁבְט הַדָּנִי עַד יוֹם גָּלוּת הָאָרֶץ. ³¹וַיִּשְׁיֵמוּ לָהֶם אֶת פֶּסֶל מִיכָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כָּל יְמֵי הָיִוֹת בֵּית הָאֱלֹקִים בְּשִׁלֹּה:

Shoftim 18:30-31

³⁰The Danites set up the sculptured image for themselves; and Yehonatan ben Gershom ben Me^{na}sheh—he and his children—were priests for the Danite tribe until the day of the exile of the land. ³¹They placed for them an image that Mikhah made, all the days that there was a House of God at Shiloh.

Noticing the familiar name “Gershom” and the suspended *nun* in the name Menashe, the Gemara suggests that the idolatrous priest was Gershom’s son and Moshe’s grandson:

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא קט:

יְכִי בֶן מְנַשֶּׁה הוּא?! וְהֵלֵא בֶן מֹשֶׁה הוּא, דְּכָתִיב: “בְּנֵי מֹשֶׁה גֶרְשֹׁם וְאֶלְיָעֶזֶר”! אֲלֵא מִתּוֹךְ שְׁעָשָׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מְנַשֶּׁה, תִּלְאֹה הַכְּתוּב בְּמִנְשֶׁה

Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 109b

But was he a son of Menasheh? Was he not the son of Moshe—as it is written: “Children of Moshe: Gershom and Eliezer”? Rather, because he did the deed of Menasheh, the verse linked him to Menasheh.

It is a devastating end to the story of Moshe’s children. Having missed both slavery and salvation, Gershom’s descendants never quite manage to rejoin the covenant. They are disaffected, so much so that Gershom’s son, Moshe’s grandson, eventually becomes an idolatrous priest. Moshe’s name is written with a suspended *nun*, the Gemara states, because Yehonatan behaves more like someone who would be associated with the idolatrous king Menashe than with Yehonatan’s actual grandfather, Moshe.

In this reading, it only takes three generations for the family that never experienced God's revelation firsthand to fall out of Jewish practice. For contemporary Jews who may feel that they too have missed out on revelation, this is terrifying. If we, like Gershom, missed Sinai, what chances do we have of maintaining our tradition?

But the Yerushalmi offers a different account of the suspended *nun*, and a different reading of what it's like to be the descendants of Moshe that missed out on the pivotal Jewish experiences:

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ט:ב, דף יג טור ד

רבי חונא ושמעון קמטריא בשם רבי שמואל בר נחמן ויהונתן בן גרשם בן מנשה בן תלפיה. אם זכה בן מנשה. ואם לאו בן מנשה.

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:2, 13d

R. Huna, Shimon Kamateira in the name of R. Shmuel bar Naḥman: “And Yehonatan ben Gershom ben Menasheh”—the *nun* is suspended: if he merits—son of Moshe; but if not—son of Menasheh.

While the Yerushalmi maintains that Yehonatan was indeed Moshe's grandson, it asserts that the suspended *nun* is supposed to indicate not his character, but his power of choice. There is nothing inevitable about Yehonatan's fate. His fate is indeterminate and hinges on how he chooses to live his life. He can step into his role as Moshe's grandson if he so chooses. The *nun* hangs suspended in air, his very identity awaiting his choice.

The Yerushalmi's emphasis on choice is not coincidental: by virtue of having missed Egypt and Sinai, of having heard of them only second-hand, Moshe's children actually have more choice than the rest of the Jewish people. They are Jews, but have not experienced the overwhelming reality of God's presence as the rest of the Jewish people have. They are in a



unique position with the ability to choose to accept or reject their place in the covenant, unawed by divine revelation.

What the Yerushalmi offers, on the days where we might feel that we have only heard rumors of revelation, is not simple reassurance. There is no magic that can enable us to hear Sinai on the days when it feels like God's word no longer reverberates through the world. There is nothing that can change the fact that we, like Moshe's children, were not there.

What the Yerushalmi offers instead is the possibility of the suspended *nun*. Even without experiencing the might of God directly, we can still choose our path, between Menasheh and Moshe. We can step into our place as Moshe's descendants, or to leave it behind for Menashe's path. We may feel like we missed the Exodus and Sinai, but we can choose to embrace it nonetheless.

What the Yerushalmi offers us is the possibility to choose our own names.

May we have the courage to choose wisely.

