



Remembering Who We Are

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After Pharaoh's first refusal, after the Jewish people's burden increases because of his words, Moshe can't imagine redemption:

שמות ו:יב

וַיִּדְבֹר מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי ה' לֵאמֹר הֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעֵנִי כִּרְעָה וְאֲנִי עֹרֵל שִׁפְתַּיִם:

Shemot 6:12

But Moses appealed to God, saying, “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, me—who gets tongue-tied!”

We are used to this. Moshe is terrified of his mission. He is scared of doing more harm than good. He cannot yet fully believe in the God who speaks to him or His promises.

We're so used to his refusals that, skimming through another one, we might miss that instead of giving him an answer, God simply commands Moshe to go. And because we are primed to skip these moments, we might miss that where we might look for God's answer, the Torah instead tells us Moshe's family story in the form of a genealogy:



שמות ו:יג-יד, כה-כו

¹³וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּצִיֵם אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

¹⁴אֵלֶּה רָאשֵׁי בֵּית אֲבֹתָם בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲנוֹךְ וּפְלוּא חֲצֹרֶן וְכַרְמִי אֵלֶּה מְשֻׁפְּחוֹת רְאוּבֵן...
²⁵וְאֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן לָקַח לוֹ מִבְּנוֹת פּוּטִיֵּאל לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת פִּינְחָס אֵלֶּה רָאשֵׁי אֲבוֹת הַלְוִיִּם
²⁶לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם: ²⁶הוּא אַהֲרֹן וּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' לָהֶם הוֹצִיאוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַל צְבָאָתָם:

Shemot 6:13-14, 25-26

¹³So God spoke to both Moshe and Aharon in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

¹⁴The following are the heads of their respective clans. The sons of Reuven, Israel's firstborn: Hanokh and Pallu, Hetzron and Karmi; those are the families of Reuven...

²⁵And Aharon's son Elazar took into his [household] as wife one of Putiel's daughters, and she bore him Phinhas. Those are the heads of the ancestral houses of the Levites by their families. ²⁶It is the same Aharon and Moshe to whom God said, "Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop."

Why does the Torah omit God's answer to Moshe and place a genealogy here instead?

Perhaps this genealogy is actually the answer Moshe needs at this moment. Moshe, rejected by the Israelites, needs reassurance: despite the fact that he might feel like an outsider, he is in fact one of them. He is a part of their story, and they are a part of his. Even if they reject him, his ancestral ties to the people demand that he return and try again.

But maybe in addition to representing an obligation, the genealogy also represents reassurance. Moshe, at this moment, feels unable to face the task before him. In recounting Moshe's ancestry, the Torah offers a reminder that Moshe is not alone. He has a history to draw on in this moment of paralysis. He has ancestors who lived and endured before him. He comes from people who faced dark nights and impossible situations, and still persevered. The genealogy is not a digression where we would expect God's reply; instead, it is a form of

reply in itself. Remember who you are. Remember the people you come from, and when you feel that you have no strength of your own, draw on knowledge that you have inherited theirs.

Moshe's experience of drawing strength from his history parallels a practice that allowed the Jewish people to endure their enslavement: a sort of proto-Torah study the people engaged in weekly.

A midrashic tradition notices a dramatic phrase at the beginning of this week's *parashah* when God first sends Moshe to reassure the Jewish people that, despite Moshe's disastrous meeting with Pharaoh, they will still be redeemed. The Jewish people, however, do not listen:

שמות ו:ט

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה:

Shemot 6:9

But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.

Why are the Jews now unable to listen when previously they could? What does it mean that their spirits were “crushed?”

This *midrash* answers:

שמות רבה ה:יח

תִּכְבֵּד הָעֶבֶדָה עַל הָאֲנָשִׁים, מִלְמֵד שֶׁהָיוּ בְיָדָם מַגְלוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ מִשְׁתַּעֲשָׁעִין בָּהֶם מִשְׁבֶּת לְשִׁבֶּת, לוֹמַר שֶׁהִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גּוֹאֵל, לְפִי שֶׁהָיוּ נֹחִין בְּשִׁבֶּת, אָמַר לָהֶן פֶּרַעַה, תִּכְבֵּד הָעֶבֶדָה עַל הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בָּהּ וְאֵל יִשְׁעוּ וְגו', אֵל יְהוּ מִשְׁתַּעֲשָׁעִין וְאֵל יְהוּ נִפְיִשִׁין בְּיוֹם הַשְׁבֶּת.

Shemot Rabbah 5:18

“Let heavier work be imposed upon the men” (Shemot 5:9)—this teaches that they had scrolls in their possession in which they would delight every Shabbat, that said that the Holy One blessed be He will deliver them. Because they rested on Shabbat, Pharaoh said to them: “Let heavier work be imposed upon the men, and they will labor in it; and let them not regard [yish’u]...”—[meaning:] let them not delight [mishta’ashin], and let them not rest on the Shabbat day.

Noticing the unusual word “יִשְׁעוּ” - pay attention,” the *midrash* links it to a similar sounding word, “מִשְׁתַּעֲשְׂעִין” - delight,” and explains that Pharaoh, in addition to increasing the Jewish people’s labor, is removing a source of delight by denying them rest on Shabbat, the day on which they would find delight in scrolls they would read.

The brief *midrash* paints a picture in which the Jewish people are sustained by words. Once a week, the Jewish people gather to hear words of hope, words which promised a redemption. In this telling, resilience is built one shabbat at a time. Hundreds of years in Egypt are survived week by week, scroll by scroll.

While the *midrash* does not tell us what exactly the scrolls contain, the Maharzu¹ imagines that they might contain stories of the ancestors of the Jews in Egypt, a sort of proto-Bereishit:

מהרז"ו שם

והמגילות הם כל דברי ספר בראשית מגילות של סיפורי אדם ונח והמבול והפלגה וסיפורי האבות וכל הנבואות וההבטחות שהתנבאו.

¹ R. Zev Wolf Einhorn, a 19th century commentary on Midrash Rabbah.



Maharzu's commentary

The scrolls contained all the words of the book of Genesis: the stories of Adam and Noah and the Flood and the dispersion [at the Tower of Babel], and the stories of the patriarchs and all of the prophecies and promises made to them.

One imagines the people poring over the texts, remembering their national journey. Perhaps they grieve when they read the story of the world destroyed in the Flood. Perhaps they hold their breath as they come to the end of the book, and exhale as they hear the final words, “God will surely redeem you.”

The stories the Jewish people read week after week are not simply a distraction from their troubles. They are a source of strength and hope. Reading the stories, the Jewish people are reminded of their history. They remember what their ancestors have endured, and they understand themselves as part of a greater story. Like Moshe at the beginning of our *parashah*, they draw strength from their family history. The fact that their ancestors endured difficulty and survived to build a people means that they too have that strength. The story of that chain of survival and the belief that sustained it gives them the ability to endure.

Sometimes the world around us is too dark for us to imagine a better future. Some days it is impossible to imagine the day after, or to hope that it can possibly bring anything good. In those moments, what we need isn't always assurance about the future. Sometimes what we need, instead, is the story of who we are and how we've gotten this far. In those moments, the most important thing we can do is recite to ourselves the names of those who came before us, and to remember that they saw darker nights than these.

And on those nights, those whispered names, that incantation, can create the spark that allows us to dream of the day that will follow.

