

## EXODUS 1:1 - 6:1

### SHMOT

#### Drash

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After the successful story of Joseph in Egypt, set forth in Breishit, we are soon disappointed by the turn of events for the Jews there, as a new Pharaoh comes to power, who, the Torah tells us, "did not know Joseph". Whether he truly did not know him, or simply wanted to forget the debt of gratitude owed to the Jews, this new Pharaoh soon embarked on increasingly harsh measures against them. They were made to work harder and harder on building projects for the Pharaoh.

Despite the hardships the Jews endured and even proliferated, and this made the Pharaoh insecure. He ordered the midwives to kill newborn male children, but even this did not prevent the Jews from continuing to multiply, with the midwives fearing God more than they feared the Pharaoh, and letting the male babies survive.

Pharaoh told the entire population then, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

Just one more mistake of the Pharaoh -- underestimating the power of women. Because as we know, Moses was born, hidden by his mother for 3 months, and then perhaps strictly in accordance with the Pharaoh's mandate, she put him in the Nile, albeit safely tucked in a watertight ark, much like Noah's ark.

When Moses is pulled from the river by the Pharaoh's daughter, she recognizes that he is probably a Jewish child, but she not only spares him a death sentence but guarantees his upbringing by agreeing to pay to have him nursed by Moses' own mother, and then to bring him into the Pharaoh's household as her own child.

Moses had what one must assume was a privileged existence as a young adult, being a member of the ruling family, and yet he ventured out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Jew, one of his kinsmen, and he killed him.

When the Pharaoh learned of this, he issued a death sentence for Moses, so Moses fled to Midian, where he ended up marrying Zipporah, the daughter of a priest of Midian.

Flash forward 40 years. Moses is 80, minding his own business, tending his father-in-law's flock. All of a sudden there are wild special effects, rivaling Avatar, with a burning bush, which Moses is hard pressed to ignore. God speaks to Moses, and tells him to go back to Egypt to rescue his oppressed people.

Let's just say that Moses did not immediately jump to the task. He weaseled and squirmed. Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" God promises to be with Moses in this endeavor, but that does not assuage Moses. Moses is afraid the Jews will contest the authenticity of the message from God, so Moses asks God for proof that he is God, he asks his name. And even though God reveals his name to Moses, a unique privilege, even this was insufficient. There followed more wheedling by Moses, so God provided Moses with the ability to do miracles, to turn his rod into a snake and to turn the water from the Nile into blood.

Still this is not enough for Moses, who says, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." God tells him Not to

Worry, and Moses demurs one last time. "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent."

At this God utters one giant, OY, and says, all right already...I'll give you your brother Aaron, and the two of you can work on this together.

I can relate to Moses in all this. When Jan Taksa invited me to give this drash, I thought, OH NO! I couldn't possibly do this. For one thing, I am actually shy about getting up in front of people and speaking. Probably more importantly for this occasion, I wasn't born Jewish. I was raised in a fundamentalist, charismatic Christian environment. As a child I attended Foursquare Gospel services, founded by a faith healer who healed the lame in tent revivals across the south. We had the kind of services where, if you didn't cry, it wasn't church. Sermons weren't long on discerning the meaning of this or that word in the original Hebrew.

I've been to this minyan often enough to know it is a sophisticated bunch. Bringing you to tears by my shouting would not do the trick.

Nonetheless, despite my reservations, I accepted. In my nervousness I studied the scripture a great deal, read all that Plaut had to say on the subject, and all of the last 15 years of commentaries on the URJ website. I learned a lot, most of which I will spare you, but it was a useful thing for me, and I thank Jan for leading me down that path.

Oscar Wilde observed that "Every saint has a past. Every sinner has a future."

Moses was a murderer, a fugitive from justice, suffering from some speaking disability, an old man who had married a non-Jew and fallen away from his Jewish origins by the time God called him to liberate the Jews from Egypt. A question the scholars have continued to wrestle with is, Why was this imperfect person chosen for this monumental task?

Moses thought of many reasons why God should not choose him for this task, evoking Mike Meyers, "I am Not Worthy."

But what did make him worthy?

Was it that he had a deep sense of justice, as some commentators suggest?

Was it that he had a broad cross-cultural base, having been raised as Jewish and Egyptian and lived his adult life in Midian, married to the daughter of a Midian priest?

Was it that by virtue of his disability that he felt humble?

I would offer that we are all merely human, fallible and imperfect. Our fallibilities and imperfections should not stand in the way of trying to do good. "The perfect is the enemy of the good" as is said. And some times, when we are called, or in my case emailed, we must answer the call, despite our misgivings, particularly when it is in service of the community.