

**Parshat Vayikra:
Naming Moses, Naming Our Experience**
Darshanit Dr. Miriam Udel

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2019

With its first verse appearing as a neutral setup for the next one, the Book of Leviticus seems to begin quite tamely:

And He called to Moses, and the Lord spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying... (Leviticus 1:1)

א וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד
לֵאמֹר: (ויקרא א:א)

But in that rhetorical whimper, the Sages discern a bang. Read the verse again, they urge, putting the emphasis on the word “Moses.” In an extended homily recorded in Leviticus Rabba 1:3, the Rabbis attempt to merge the pointedly anonymous presentation of Moses’s family of origin in Exodus 2 with the surfeit of names in an obscure genealogical verse in Chronicles, 4:18. There is a veritable laundry list (Yered, Avigdor, Hever, Avi Sokho, Yekutiel, Avi Zanoah), and as the midrash informs us, each name on that list would have been a plausible appellation for the eventual lawgiver. Through clever word play, each name is linked homiletically to the traits and deeds of Moses. Finally, the furious thrum of *derashot* culminates in the proclamation:

Said the Holy One, blessed be He to Moses: ‘As you live, out of all the names applied to you, I shall call you by just that name which Bithiah, the daughter of Pharaoh, has called you: even as She called his name Moses (Ex. 2:10), even so the Lord called unto Moses.’¹

אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה חַיִּךְ מִכְשָׁמוֹת
שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ לְךָ אֵינִי קוֹרֵא אוֹתְךָ אֶלָּא בְּשֵׁם
שֶׁקְרָאתְךָ בְּתִיָּה בַת פַּרְעֹה (שְׁמוֹת ב.י): וַתִּקְרָא
שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה

Ultimately, God issues the call at the beginning of Leviticus—and indeed throughout the Torah—to “Moshe” in recognition of the specific name conferred by Pharaoh’s daughter. God’s adoption of “her” name for the child is a mark of the esteem in which the Egyptian princess is held. Fittingly, her own name comes in for rabbinic scrutiny and celebration in the same midrash, for the verse in Chronicles that is being interpreted is also the biblical source for her name being Batya, or “daughter of God.” In an interpretive tradition that sees Pharaoh’s daughter as a righteous convert to Judaism, her adoption of the vulnerable Hebrew baby runs parallel to God’s adoption of *her*.

R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Bithia, the daughter of Pharaoh: ‘Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son; you, too, though you are not My daughter, yet I will call you My daughter, even as it is said, “These are the sons of Bithia,” i.e. Bath Jah, (the daughter of God).

רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ דְּסַקְנִין בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי לֵוִי אָמַר לָהּ
הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְבַתִּיָּה בַת פַּרְעֹה, מֹשֶׁה לֹא
הָיָה בְּנִךְ וַיִּקְרָאתוֹ בְּנִךְ, אַף אֶת לֹא אֶת בְּתִי וְאַנִּי
קוֹרֵא אוֹתְךָ בְּתִי, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: אֵלֶּה בְנֵי בְּתִיָּה, בַּת
יְהוָה

If Moshe’s name was conferred by his adoptive mother—who glosses his name with the phrase *כי מן-המים* or “I drew him from the water”—then it only makes sense to wonder how she was able to render this Hebrew etymology on the spot. The 13th-century commentator Hizkuni proffers two explanations, each shimmering with interpretive possibility:

¹ Trans. J. Israelstam

This accords with the rabbinic interpretation that she converted and was learning Hebrew; on account of the miracle that he was pulled from the water, as a remembrance that he was of the Hebrews, and therefore he is only mentioned by this name throughout the entire Torah. Another idea: Pharaoh's daughter didn't know Hebrew, but here is the plain sense of the verse: Yoheved called him by the name "Moshe," and Pharaoh's daughter asked her, 'What does Moshe mean?' so she told her that it was the language of pulling or drawing forth. Then Pharaoh's daughter replied, 'It is fitting (*yafeh*) that you called him thus because I pulled him from the water.' The passive participle "*mashuy*" or "pulled" is not written, but rather the active "*moshe*," to indicate that just as I pulled him forth, so too he will pull others, i.e. he will pull Israel forth from Egypt².

ותקרא שמו משה
 כדברי רבותינו שנתגיירה והיתה לומדת לשון הקודש על שם הנס שנמשה מן המים להזכיר כי מן העברים הוא ולכך אינו נזכר בכל התורה א בת פרעה לא היתהאלא על שם זה. ד" יודעת לשון הקודש, אלא כך פשוטו של מקרא, **ותקרא** יוכבד את שמו משה **ותאמר** לה בת פרעה מהו לשון משה והגידה היא לה שהוא לשון המשכה ואז אמרה בת פרעה יפה קראתו כן כי מן המים משיתוהו. **משה**. משוי אין כתיב כאן אלא משה, לומר כשם יהיה שמשיתיהו כן יהיה הוא מושה אחרים פי' מושה ישראל ממצרים

Hizkuni's Batya seeks not to obscure Moshe's origins, but to commemorate them, which is why the God of Israel in turn chooses to celebrate the arc of her journey from Pharaoh's palace to the very midst of the Israelite camp. Her growing linguistic mastery of Hebrew symbolizes her progress in this journey. Or: she worked collaboratively with Moshe's birth mother to match language to lived experience, both past and future. In naming a baby, she also named a set of experiences and imbued them with meaning.

The excursus into Mosaic nomenclature occasioned by the beginning of Leviticus Rabba, a book putatively devoted to explicating *Leviticus*, seems at first like a feint, a deft change-of-subject on the part of rabbis not quite ready to enter into the technical ritual intricacies of the Torah's third book. Abraham ibn Ezra professes surprise at the thrust of a midrash that builds such an elaborate structure on the name Moshe, which is "*mikreh*," mere chance. But these names memorialize contingent events and fit them into narrative arcs: Moshe's vulnerability, his rescue, his eventual leadership, Batya's embrace of the Jewish people. In fact, this midrashic inquiry into names, traits, and experience can serve to remind us of how religion helps to make sense of our lives: by fitting seemingly incidental and even arbitrary details into larger frameworks of significance. Leviticus is replete with such details and therefore, with opportunities for making meaning.



Darshanit Dr. Miriam Udel is associate professor of German Studies and Jewish Studies at Emory University, focusing on modern Jewish literatures and cultures, especially Yiddish. She holds a BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and a PhD in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. She's studied at Midreshet Lindenbaum and MaTaN and directed Drisha's Dr. Beth Samuels Summer High School Program. Her first book, *Never Better!: The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), won a National Jewish Book Award. Her anthology of Yiddish children's literature, *Honey on the Page*, will appear with New York University Press in October 2020.

² My translation