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Parshat Shemot A Tale of Two Lives Myriam Ackermann-Sommer

How does one grow to become an inspired and inspirational guide? While our weekly Parsha does explore this question by staging the early years of Moshe's life – a paragon of spiritual leadership if there ever was one – it also frustrates most of our expectations. Indeed, how unsettling to learn so little about Moshe Rabbenu's childhood and youth (Exodus 2:10) after he is rescued by the Egyptian princess Bithiah as a baby (Exodus 2:5-9) – a lingering disappointment that only Dreamwork's *Prince of Egypt* and a smattering of *midrashim* would compensate for!

Instead, the process through which the future leader of the people of Israel awakens to his vocation is traced back to a foundational experience, a moment of spiritual growth. This moment is no other than the encounter with the vulnerable other, as this incredibly dense verse suggests (2:11):

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.

וְיָהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו
וַיֵּרָא בְּסוּבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה
אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו:

Quite strikingly, we may also observe that Moshe is said to “grow up” twice (in v. 10 and 11 of Exodus 2), a repetition that Rashi did not fail to highlight. As the great medieval commentator would stress, quoting Rabbi Judah son of Elai (*Yalkut Shimon*), the Torah is alluding to two different types of growth: the first one is that of Moshe's physical stature and the second refers his improvement in social standing as he was appointed by Pharaoh to the charge of his palace. I would like to suggest another reading of the two references to growing up. The first one may be about Moshe's position within Egyptian society, whereas the second one could have to do with his spiritual greatness and awakening to the call of his people. Indeed, this second stage of spiritual as well as moral progress implied that the princess's adoptive son grew out of his privileged status to face the agony of his brothers. The consequence of this action, as we learn from what follows in our parsha, is exile, an experience of complete uprootedness that will pave the way for divine revelation and, eventually, homecoming and the fulfilment of Hashem's project for the people of Israel.

Thus, Moshe's first meaningful action, as is recorded in the Torah, is to set off on a quest for otherness and leave the comfort and safety of the palace behind as he “goes out”, which can be symbolically construed as a way of renouncing stable answers and signs so as to try and negotiate a new identity in flux, that of a Hebrew. Indeed, according to Ramban, it is because Yocheved's son had been told about his origins that he went in search of his brothers and sisters and thereby witnesses their duress. This spiritual rebirth is characteristic of many a Biblical figure (Ishmael after his near-death in the desert; Itzhak after the Akeda; Yosef when he is thrown into a pit): it is synonymous with a new existence and the challenges that it implies.

But what does it mean to become a fully fledged Israelite? In the Parsha under scrutiny, it is particularly noteworthy that Moshe's new identity as a grown man and future leader is grounded in ethical responsibility for the other, which is also the source of the future leader's newly acquired moral greatness (the second growth, or rebirth). More specifically, the awakening of the spiritual guide's vocation relies on his ability to feel concerned by the fate of his people, whom he now recognizes as “his brothers”, as our verse suggests twice, as though Moshe had to go through the stage of acknowledging his kinsfolk as a group so as to be able to identify one of its members, the Hebrew who is getting beaten, as his brother. Thus, while the first reference to “brothers” seems to connote a reference to ethnicity, the second one is intrinsically linked with emotional commitment and Moshe's moral undertaking. Not only that: the former prince's active attempt to assist his brother will imply that he must

sacrifice his high lifestyle and prosperity for the sake of his people, as his exile reminds us (2:15). Moshe's willingness to open himself to the suffering of his people is of particular resonance to us today: as Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued throughout his insightful works on ethical commitment, it is only by acknowledging the other that I can become who I am, a subject both in the sense of a consistent self and of someone willing to subject myself to the figure of the vulnerable other by stepping in and getting involved for his or her sake, possibly to the point of sacrificing my own tranquility of mind.

We cannot fail to record that Moshe kills the Egyptian man who beat his brother while attempting to save him from the blows of the oppressor, an action that a member of his own kinsfolk will mention snappingly in v. 14 of the same chapter. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interprets this murder as an act of civil disobedience, indicating our leader's opposition to an unjust government whose tyranny the brutal Egyptian represents. Rabbi Sacks goes on to draw a parallel between this action and that of Shifra and Poua, i.e. Myriam and Yocheved according to our midrashic tradition, who refused to put Hebrew babies to death and decided to save them at the risk of losing their own lives. Moshe, not unlike his mother and sister, reacts quite strongly to scenes of violence, as he does later on in our parsha when he steps in to defend the daughters of the priest of Midian against shepherds.

However, in this case (the killing of the Egyptian oppressor), the response of Moshe Rabbenu may not seem entirely appropriate as it only leads to more violence and does not immediately gain him the respect of his people. This is vividly stressed in Exodus 2:14, which hints at the fear of the Hebrews: will Moshe assert his leadership through violent means, thereby mimicking the despotism and violence of the Egyptians that oppress them? Nonetheless, most of the midrashim stress that this fear was not at all justified and partly or entirely exonerate the murderer. Indeed, according to Rabbi Levi (Midrash Devarim Rabba, 2:29), Moshe did not intend to kill his opponent but merely to prevent him from hurting the Hebrew – hence his departure for Midian, which is highly reminiscent of the exile to the cities of refuge that shelters the perpetrators of accidental manslaughter under Torah Law (Bamidbar, 35:11. See also Devarim, 4:41 and Rashi's commentary). However, it remains unclear whether Moshe was fully cleared from the stain of this murder since a midrash mentions it as one of the sins that will eventually cause the death of this unsurpassed leader, thereby preventing him from entering the land of Israel, as Hashem eventually rebukes him for killing the Egyptian (Otsar Midrashim, Midrash Petirat Moshe Rabbenu, p. 363 in the Eisenstein edition). Thus, even when it is used for the sake of saving one's own brother or one's people, violence is never unambiguously condoned in the Torah, as it is recorded that Hashem also cried over dead Egyptians after drowning them in the Red Sea (Megila 10b, Sanhedrin 39b). The necessary ethical commitment to otherness that characterizes a spiritual leader implies a constant revision of one's means and ends, and the knowledge that no collateral damage can be entirely unobjectionable. Beyond the necessary concern for one's own people lies a reminder that one will have to account for the loss of the lives of the oppressors as well as for that of the oppressed. Moshe, as he sets off on his spiritual journey, learns this from his encounter with otherness both in the figure of the Hebrew and in that of the Egyptian. May we also learn from Moshe's spiritual growth and from Hashem's infinite compassion for all his creatures.



Myriam Ackermann-Sommer, was born and raised in France. She earned a B.A. in English, along with a minor in Hebrew at the Sorbonne while completing a degree in Humanities at the École Normale Supérieure, a selective French college. In her master's degree in English literature, Myriam focused mainly on Jewish American authors and Jewish philosophy. Myriam has had an extensive training in teaching and translation, and regularly gives talks in Jewish as well as academic contexts, and, in 2017, founded a co-ed study group ("Ayeka") for Parisian students and young professionals. A dedicated musician, Myriam has also earned a diploma in transverse flute and loves to enhance the spiritual dimension of Judaism by singing her heart out in prayer groups.