Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Shemot

Moses' Dual Identity

In this week's Torah portion, we are introduced to Moses, the future leader of the Jewish people. To save him from Pharaoh's decree that all newborn boys be thrown into the Nile River, Moses' mother places him in a basket and sets it afloat on the river, where Pharaoh's daughter discovers him.

Exodus 2:5-12	שמות **ב:ה-יב**
(5) Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe by the river, while her maids walked along the river's edge. She saw the box among the reeds and sent her maid, who fetched it. (6) She opened it and saw the child, and behold, a boy was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrew boys." (7) The infant's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nursing mother from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" (8) "Go," Pharaoh's daughter said to her. The young girl went and called the child's mother. (9) Pharaoh's daughter said to the child's mother, "Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will pay your fee." The woman took the child and nursed him. (10) When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, for she said, "I drew him from the water." (11) It was in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and saw their burdens. One day, he saw an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew brethren. (12) Moses looked all around, and when he saw that no one was there, he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.	(ה) וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה֙ לִרְחֹ֣ץ עַל־הַיְאֹ֔ר וְנַעֲרֹתֶ֖יהָ הֹלְכֹ֣ת עַל־יַ֣ד הַיְאֹ֑ר וַתֵּ֣רֶא אֶת־הַתֵּבָ֗ה בְּתוֹךְ֙ הַסּ֔וּף וַתִּשְׁלַ֖ח אֶת־אֲמָתָ֥הּ וַתִּקָּחֶֽהָ׃ (ו) וַתִּפְתַּ֖ח וַתִּרְאֵ֣הוּ אֶת־הַיֶּ֑לֶד וְהִנֵּה־נַ֣עַר בֹּכֶ֔ה וַתַּחְמֹ֥ל עָלָ֖יו וַתֹּ֣אמֶר מִיַּלְדֵ֥י הָעִבְרִ֖ים זֶֽה׃ (ז) וַתֹּ֤אמֶר אֲחֹתוֹ֙ אֶל־בַּת־פַּרְעֹ֔ה הַאֵלֵ֣ךְ וְקָרָ֔אתִי לָךְ֙ אִשָּׁ֣ה מֵינֶ֔קֶת מִן הָעִבְרִיֹּ֖ת וְתֵינִ֣ק לָךְ֑ אֶת־הַיָּֽלֶד׃ (ח) וַתֹּ֥אמֶר־לָ֖הּ בַּת־פַּרְעֹ֑ה לֵ֚כִי וַתֵּ֣לֶךְ הָֽעַלְמָ֔ה וַתִּקְרָ֖א אֶת־אֵ֥ם הַיָּֽלֶד׃ (ט) וַתֹּ֨אמֶר לָ֜הּ בַּת־פַּרְעֹ֗ה הֵילִ֤יכִי אֶת־הַיֶּ֙לֶד֙ הַזֶּ֔ה וְהֵינִקֵ֖הוּ לִ֑י וַאֲנִ֣י אֶתֵּ֔ן אֶת־שְׂכָרֵ֖ךְ וַתִּקַּ֥ח הָאִשָּׁ֖ה הַיֶּ֥לֶד וַתְּנִיקֵֽהוּ׃ (י) וַיִּגְדַּ֣ל הַיֶּ֔לֶד וַתְּבִאֵ֖הוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹ֑ה וַיְהִי־לָ֣הּ לְבֵ֔ן וַתִּקְרָ֥א שְׁמ֖וֹ מֹשֶׁ֑ה וַתֹּ֣אמֶר כִּ֥י מִן־הַמַּ֖יִם מְשִׁיתִֽהוּ׃ (יא) וַיְהִ֤י ׀ בַּיָּמִים֙ הָהֵ֔ם וַיִּגְדַּ֖ל מֹשֶׁ֑ה וַיֵּצֵ֣א אֶל־אֶחָ֔יו וַיַּ֖רְא בְּסִבְלֹתָ֑ם וַיַּרְא֙ אִ֣ישׁ מִצְרִ֔י מַכֶּ֥ה אִישׁ־עִבְרִ֖י מֵאֶחָֽיו׃ (יב) וַיִּפֶן֙ כֹּ֣ה וָכֹ֔ה וַיַּ֖רְא כִּ֣י אֵ֑ין אִ֚ישׁ וַיַּךְ֙ אֶת־הַמִּצְרִ֔י וַיִּטְמְנֵ֖הוּ בַּחֽוֹל׃

- **What can we learn about Moses' character from these verses?**

- **Pharaoh's daughter immediately recognized that the baby was Hebrew. How might she have known?**

As these verses suggest, at some point during his youth, Moses learned of his Jewish identity. However, the Torah does not specify when or how he learned this, leaving room for biblical commentators to fill in the gaps. Each interpretation not only seeks to explain the biblical narrative but also offers a different perspective on Moses' relationship to his Jewish identity as a child raised in an Egyptian home. Naḥmanides, a leading medieval Torah scholar who wrote commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, offers the following explanation:

רמב"ן שמות ב:יא וְטַעַם **וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו** כִּי הִגִּידוּ לוֹ אֲשֶׁר הוּא יְהוּדִי, וְהָיָה חָפֵץ לִרְאוֹתָם בַּעֲבוּר שֶׁהֵם אֶחָיו. וְהִנֵּה נִסְתַּכֵּל בְּסִבְלֹתָם וַעֲמָלָם וְלֹא יָכוֹל לִסְבֹּל, וְלָכֵן הָרַג הַמִּצְרִי הַמַּכֶּה הַנִּלְחָץ	**Nachmanides on Exodus 2:11** **He [began] to go out to his brethren.** This indicates that they told him he was a Jew, and he desired to see them because they were his brethren. Now he looked on their burdens and toils and could not bear it. This was why he killed the Egyptian who was smiting the oppressed Hebrew.

- **Based on this source, how would you describe Moses' relationship to his Jewish identity?**
- **Nachmanides argues that Moses killed the Egyptian because he "could not bear" the suffering of his fellow Jews. Why did this emotional response lead him to take action?**

Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, a Portuguese biblical commentator who survived the Spanish expulsion of 1492, draws on the time Moses spent with his biological mother during his infancy to offer a different interpretation:

אברבנאל שמות ב:יא ואמר ויצא אל אחיו וירא בסבלותם לפי שמשה תמיד דבקה נפשו ביוכבד אשר גדלתו ובבניה ואחרי שנתגדל ידע מהם אמתת ענינו ושהוא מילדי העברים עם היות שבת פרעה גדלתו כבן ולכן היה יוצא אל אחיו העברים שהיו חוץ לעיר בבניני המלך	**Abarbanel on Exodus 2:11** And it says **"he [began] to go out to his brethren, and he saw their burdens"** — because Moshe's soul was always attached to Yocheved, who had raised him, and to her sons. After he grew up, he learned from them the truth of his situation — that he was one of the Hebrew children — even though Pharaoh's daughter had raised him as a son. Therefore he would go out to his Hebrew brethren, who were outside the city at the king's building projects.

- **While the previous source does not explain how Moses learned he was Jewish, Abarbanel specifies that he learned this from his Jewish family members. What does this detail add to your understanding of Moses' relationship to his Jewish identity?**
- **According to Abarbanel, what explains Moses' attachment to his sister Yocheved? Was it simply that she had raised him, or was there something more instinctive about their bond?**

Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, a 16th-century rabbi who lived in Egypt, Cyprus, and Poland, among other places, focuses on the Hebrew meaning of Moses' name in his interpretation of the story:

מעשה השם, שמות ב אבל נראה שבאשר הביאה יוכבד את משה לבת פרעה כאשה מניקת שמביאה הילד לאמו, חשב משה שהוא בנה של בת פרעה, וזהו שנאמר **ויהי לה לבן** שמשה חשב שהיא אמו, וע"כ קראה אותו אז משה בלשון הקדש כדי שידע משה שמילדי העברים הוא ושאינו בנה, (יא-יג) וזהו שהסמיך הכתוב ואמר **ויצא אל אחיו** כאלו יאמר שאחר שנודע אליו היותו מילדי העברים יצא אל אחיו	**Ma'asei Hashem on Exodus 2** But it appears that when Yocheved brought Moshe to Pharaoh's daughter as a nursing woman — [like one] who brings a child [back] to its mother — Moshe thought that he was the son of Pharaoh's daughter. This is the meaning of what is said, **"and he became her son"** [Ex. 2:10] — that Moshe thought she was his mother. Therefore she [Pharaoh's daughter] then called him "Moshe," [a name] in the Holy Tongue, so that Moshe would know that he was one of the Hebrew children and that he was not her son. And this is why Scripture juxtaposes [the next verse] and says **"he [began] to go out to his brethren,"** — as if to say that once it became known to him that he was one of the Hebrew children, he went out to his brethren.

- **Why do you think it was so important to Pharaoh's daughter that Moses know he was Jewish?**
- **This source offers one interpretation of what it means to "become" someone's child. Does this explanation resonate with you, or do you see it differently?**

Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel Weisser, better known as the Malbim, was a 19th-century rabbi, biblical commentator, and Hebrew grammarian. In his interpretation, he focuses on Moses' identification with the Hebrew slaves.

מלבי"**ם, שמות ב:יא** **ויגדל משה ויצא אל אחיו**,יספר מצדקת משה ואיך	**Malbim on Exodus 2:11** **"It was in those days when Moshe was**

מנעוריו היו בו כל המעלות שבעבורם זכה לכל הכבוד הזה... שראה **איש מצרי מכה איש עברי מאחיו,**שהגם שגדל בין המצריים ומתערב עמהם היו כזרים בעיניו, והאיש העברי המוכה הרגיש בצרתו מצד שהוא אחיו עצמו ובשרו, ועל המכה חרה אפו מצד שהוא מצרי נבזה ושפל בעיניו. ובזה עטה כמעיל קנאה על הכותו את אחיו החשוב בעיניו:	**grown that he [began] to go out to his brethren"** — [Scripture] recounts Moshe's righteousness, and how from his youth he possessed all the virtues on account of which he merited all this honor... **"he saw an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew brethren."** — that although he had been raised among the Egyptians and mingled with them, they were as strangers in his eyes; while the Hebrew man being struck, he felt his distress *because he was his own brother, his own flesh and blood*. And against the one striking [him] his anger burned, *because he was an Egyptian* — despised and lowly in his eyes. In this [Moshe] wrapped himself as in a cloak of zeal over the striking of his brother, who was precious in his eyes.

1. **The Malbim describes Moses as "[wrapping] himself as in a cloak of zeal." What does this figurative language add to your understanding of the verse?**
2. **The Malbim presents Moses' instinctive solidarity with his fellow Jews, and his alienation from the Egyptians, as a virtue. What does this suggest about the relationship between loyalty and identity? Do you agree?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Is there an aspect of your identity, large or small, that you discovered or developed later in life? What was that experience like, and how did it affect you going forward?
2. Each of these sources offers a different perspective on the relationship between Moses' Jewish and Egyptian identities. Have you ever had to navigate between different aspects of your own identity? If so, did any of these interpretations resonate with your experience?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Shemot, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Shemot page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Shemot topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Moses, Moses' Birth, Pharoah's Daughter, and Parents.

These sources touched on the ways in which the Jewish slaves were distinct from their Egyptian masters, through the lens of Moses' dual identity. If you are interested in

thinking more about those distinctions, you can read this piece from Leviticus Rabbah, a fifth century work of rabbinic exegesis, which posits that the Jewish people were saved from Egypt precisely because they did not assimilate into Egyptian society. You can also explore the various commentaries which quote and expand on this passage, using Sefaria's "Resources" panel.

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