

Hot Burning Questions

By Phyllis Chesler

Burning Bushes that do not burn. A Chariot of Fire that does not harm a prophet. Here's a burning question that consumes me daily.

Should Israel stop fighting and lose the war against Hamas/Iran, the intended genocidal war against the Jews, for the sake of redeeming the still barely living Israeli hostages before they die—as well as the corpses of the martyred for burial?

How can I—or anyone—answer this question? Israelis and Jews are hotly divided on this issue. Some blame PM Netanyahu for everything that, in their view, has gone wrong in the country, especially the unbelievable failure of Israeli military intelligence in terms of 10/7. Such Israelis and Jews are so desperate and so bitter about *all the issues* that they are prioritizing the lives of the hostages over and above the future survival of Israel. Their slogans reveal their state of mind: “Bring Them Home” rather than “Let Them Go.”

Let My People Go.



But we are no longer slaves in Egypt; we are the most militarily powerful ghetto that we've ever been forced to inhabit; but we are totally at the mercy of a world-wide propaganda campaign, one that stays our hand, judges us unjustly, demonizes us as the aggressor when that is not true.

Who are we to sacrifice a single living soul? But how can we value a single living soul over and above the future possibility that millions more will be kidnapped, enslaved, murdered, exiled, or that Israel itself will be wiped off the map? It's happened before, and more than once.

Isn't this a question for God—not for mere mortals?

We did not, and could not, save ourselves when we were slaves in Egypt; that was God's doing. And yet, many humans played pivotal roles in this drama.

I hereby implore God for a miracle. But I also call upon Israelis and the world to do all that we can do in terms of the Islamist war against Israel and Western civilization.

About fourteen years ago, on April 18, 2011, I published a piece at Israel National News titled "The Exodus Lessons."

Please note how many mortals were involved in the story of our redemption. Joseph, the former Grand Vizier of Egypt; the midwives; Miriam, Moses's sister; Yocheved, his mother; Bat-Ya, the daughter of both Pharaoh and God, the woman who adopts the baby Moses; the reluctant and ultimately radiant Moses; Moses's father-in-law Yitro, the High Priest of Midian who both shelters and advises him. Moses's wife, Zipporah, who saves his life; Moses's brother, Aharon, who "speaks" for him.

Here's what I wrote back then. I might write something entirely different now but...I haven't, as yet.

Lessons of the Exodus

Time is short and the Jews are, as usual, in trouble. What does the Exodus teach us about what to do?

Yes, the Jews are in trouble both today and long ago, when we were slaves in Egypt. Apparently, Jews can be in trouble both as slaves and as citizens of our own Jewish state and as citizens of the world in an era in which a Jewish state exists. It's like a bad Jewish joke.

In Egypt, we are literally enslaved and we cannot save ourselves. We need God to save us –and God chooses a redeemer for us. This is how we, the "Hebrews" are pulled out of "Mitzrayim."

We have many midwives who free us from the narrow place of affliction so that we can be born as God's people.

Moshe is not raised like all the other Hebrew slaves. In a memorable act of civil disobedience, Pharaoh's own daughter saves the infant who cried out. For this act of hesed, or merciful kindness, she is midrashically and rabbinically renamed "Bat'ya, because by this act she becomes God's daughter too. Pharaoh's daughter adopts Moshe and raises him as if he is an Egyptian prince.

Moshe is a more evolved version of Yosef: someone who is both a Jew and an Egyptian. He is a Jew who knows his way around the larger, non-Jewish world –but he is also a Jew who breaks with that world with wrenching and utter finality. Ultimately, even though he has grown up away from his Jewish family, Moshe, rather paradoxically, remains close to, even dependent upon, his Jewish brother and sister, Aaraon and Miriam.

In a sense, Moshe is also the anti-Yosef. Yosef is born and reared as a Jew and remains a Jew—but he also becomes a powerful and assimilated Egyptian. Moshe is born as a Jew but is reared mainly as an Egyptian. Yosef helps Egypt store up food against a coming famine and Moshe is part of God's plan to "spoil" Egypt and to render her bare of food, food sources, first-borns, gold, silver, and clothing which are all given or lent to the Hebrews—or are really, all back pay for the 210 years of slavery.

Still, it is Moshe-the-Egyptian who becomes miraculously Jewish and who becomes God's greatest intimate.

How do we know that Moshe is Egyptian royalty? Moshe has unlimited access to Pharaoh's palace. No one stops him when he enters. One wonders if his adoptive mother Bat'ya is still there; does she accompany him to his meetings with Pharaoh? If so, how poignant, even wrenching, because the break with Egypt, when it comes, will be dramatic and final. (Here, I am reminded of the children's film, "Prince of Egypt" in which Pharaoh is conceived of as Moshe's adoptive brother and who suffers the loss of Moshe's company and loyalty. The film constitutes an interesting midrash).

How else do we know that Moshe is an Egyptian? Moshe is recognized as an "eesh Mitzri" in Midian where he meets and weds Yitro's daughter Zipporah. After so many years of first wandering around, (some say sixty years), can Moshe still possibly have Egyptian royal attire? Or is it how he wears his hair? Or speaks? Does he wear Egyptian jewelry?

Therefore, this much is clear: Moshe has not been enslaved. He has, in fact, been reared as a Prince. This is very important. He has not been broken by slavery. He is not afflicted with "kotzer ruach," a shortness of spirit, a lack of generosity, indeed an absence of humanity which slavery and oppression causes. He is fully entitled. (We find the phrase in Vaera 6:9 and I will return to it shortly).

Perhaps Moshe was even more arrogant than Yosef—although his alleged speech impediment speaks to us of his having also been marked by trauma, loss, "differentness." In fact, Moshe never exactly fits in anywhere except in his relationship to God and in God's plan.

In Shmot 2:11-2:12, Moshe sees, he really sees, a fellow Egyptian (an "eesh Mitzri") beating a Hebrew slave to death. Moshe first looks around. He turns "coh v'coh," this way and that way. Some say that he is looking to see whether any other Egyptians are there watching him before he kills the Egyptian taskmaster and buries him in the sand. Others suggest that he is looking within himself as well. Who am I? Am I an Egyptian or a Hebrew? What must I do?

I do not think that Moshe is afraid of another Egyptian. He is a Prince and can possibly get away with murder. I think that Moshe does not yet understand what slavery is and can do. Moshe waits—but he sees that there is "no man" there among the Hebrews, no one who will come to his brother's aid.

On the question of Moshe's turning "coh v'coh," Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi of Mecklenburg, in his Ha-ketav Veha-kabalah, notes that "Moses thought that one of the other Hebrew slaves who were standing there would rise up against the Egyptian taskmaster and would save their brother whom he was beating to death." But he saw that there was no man." (Ain Eesh). Moses saw that there was no "real man," no mensch ("gever b'govreen") amongst them, and no one was paying attention to the distress of his brethren to try and save him."

Moshe returns the next day and in Shmot 2:13 and 2:14 sees “shnai anashim ivrim neetzeem vayomer l’rashah lamah takeh raecha?” He sees two Hebrew slaves fighting and asks the wrong-doer why do you hit your friend/neighbor/fellow Hebrew? The evil Hebrew famously responds: “Mee samha l’eesh sar v’shofet alenu? (Who appointed you our overseer and judge?)

This is almost a reverberation or a variation of Cain’s “Hashomer ani anochi?” (Bereshit 4:9). Am I my brother’s keeper? Only this time, the question is more like “Are YOU your brother’s keeper? Or “Who appointed you as your brother’s keeper?” “Halharganee atah omayr ca’asher hagarta et hamitzri?” (“Are you going to kill me the way you killed the Egyptian?”)

Moshe has already decided. Yes, he IS his “brother’s keeper,” and with this single act, adopts the entire Jewish people as his own—just as his Egyptian adoptive mother once claimed him! Being raised Egyptian has somehow empowered him to embrace his Judaism.

Nothing here is simple. Moshe may also have learned his bravery and his knowledge of civil disobedience from his adoptive, Egyptian mother when she defied her Pharaoh-father’s ruling and, rather than killing Moshe—saves him instead.

The concept of “kotzer ruach,” or shortness of spirit, (heavy breathing brought about by hard labor), explains why slaves can be divided against each other and why they are loyal to their oppressors. The phrase is contained in Vaera, (6:9). There, it is given as the reason the slaves won’t listen to or can’t hear Moshe. This concept also explains the psychological phenomenon of internalized self-hatred or identification with the aggressor. Slaves cannot bear it when one of their own rises above the common fate. “Who does he or she think they are?”

A slave is someone who will turn on his or her own liberator.

It is a working definition of a slave. They do not see a way out. If someone tells them about one—maybe it's a trick? No slave can be this powerful. No Egyptian would really risk his life to save a slave.

Pharaoh might not try to kill Moshe if he had simply killed another lower-caste Egyptian in a fit of temper. But that Moshe killed an Egyptian in order to save a Hebrew slave—that was unforgivable, even dangerous to Pharaoh. It means that despite all his privileges, that Moshe has a Jewish heart and has sided with his people. Moshe is disloyal to Pharaoh.

Now, even Moshe, the royal Prince “vayirah,” he becomes frightened because “achayn nodar ha’davar” (Ah, so the matter is known).

Indeed, when Pharaoh finds out, he tries to kill Moshe. So much for Moshe’s royal privilege. Who has informed Pharaoh? It could be that an Egyptian has—but when one of the Hebrew slaves addresses Moshe in a bitter, threatening voice, when the Hebrew slave takes the Egyptian side against Moshe-the-Jew—this shakes Moshe to his core and he flees.

This is why Moshe must flee Egypt, not because Pharaoh is after him but because the Hebrew slaves have challenged, mocked, and turned on him; perhaps they have also turned him in.

Now, let me turn to a few important things that are specific to the end of the story. Bo is the parasha in which God unleashes the last three plagues: locusts, darkness, and the killing of the first-born and it is the parasha in which we gain our freedom.

However, as important, we also receive our first mitzvot, or holy deeds, (12:2) not as an individual, not as a family, not even as a tribe, but as a “nation.” We are given Rosh Chodesh to observe. We begin to count, and therefore control our own time, something that slaves cannot do. We are also told to

observe the first Pesach, to teach it to our children, and to remember it as a festival forever after.

Here is where we are told to do so even before we leave Egypt and certainly before we receive the Torah. In this sense, Bo is an early precursor to “Na’aseh v’ Nishma” which we say in Dvarim and partly say while standing at Sinai. “We will do, and we will then listen or hear or learn.”

Finally, most interestingly: When Moshe asks Pharaoh for permission to leave for three days to worship our God, Moshe says that everyone must come: the old people, the young people, both the sons and the daughters. Moshe understood that both daughters and sons, women and men, are crucial in God’s worship.

May his example be followed widely and always.

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This learning is dedicated to the memory of my parents and grandparents. May their memories be for a blessing.

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