

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

SHEMOT

VA'ERA

BO

BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

KI TISA

VAYAKHEL

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REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

The Talmud states that when Moses was born, the entire house was filled with light,¹ indicating the birth of greatness. However his pedigree seems rather plain since all we know is that he was conceived by, 'a man [that] went from the house of Levi and took a daughter of Levi.'²

Nachmanides suggests that if the Torah would have stated his parent's actual names, it would have had to elaborate on their ancestor's names as well. However, given that Moses is going to be the savior of the Jewish nation, the Torah wants to arrive at the announcement of his birth as quickly as possible, and as such it is brief with the more peripheral details of his ancestry.³ Perhaps, however, there is a more existential reason for the omission of the details of his lineage.

If someone's birth is announced with a full set of details on their complete ancestry, one might mistakenly think that their identity and mission are defined by their roots. This omission comes to teach us that one's past pedigree is not as important as one's future. At the moment of his birth it almost does not matter who Moses' family is and indeed, the same is true for any person.

While of course our ancestral roots dictate our genes and our family shapes our upbringing, it is up to us to define our own destiny and choose the person we want to become.

While the reason for the omission of their names at his birth makes sense in inspiring a forward-thinking mentality, why, are they explicitly named as Amram and Yocheved, a mere four chapters later?⁴

When Moses' parents brought him into the world, his natural aptitude was already palpable in an uncanny way. Yet at that stage, he was still a mere unaccomplished infant. It is not until four chapters later, that Moses is identifiable as a true leader. Rather than remaining in the comfort of Pharaoh's palace, he ventures out, moves forward, notices the suffering of his brethren, and acts upon it.⁵

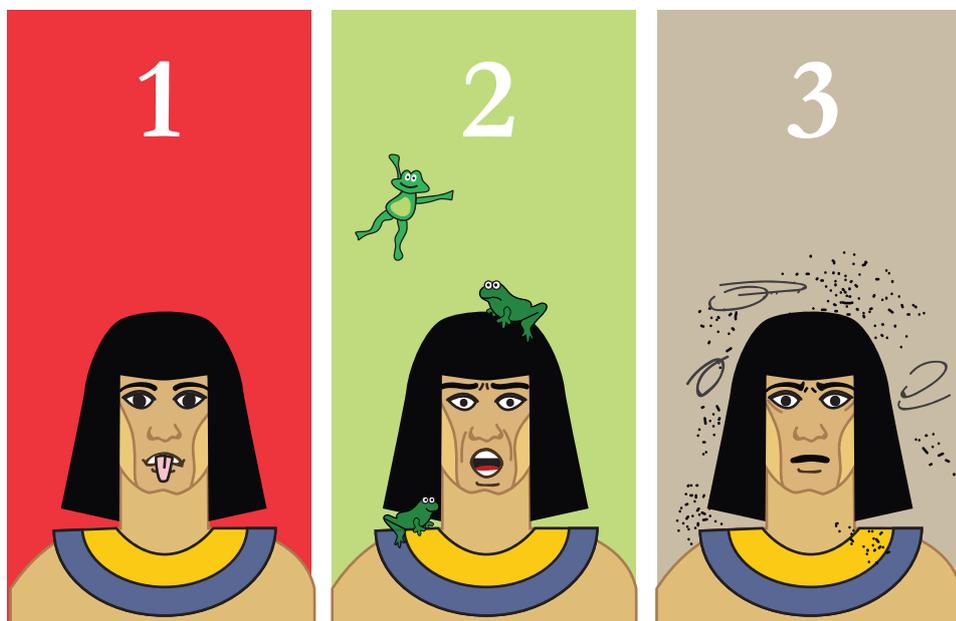
Moses has grown up, matured and finally accepted his pivotal role in the Exodus of the Jewish people, etching his name into the annals of history.

Only at this point, when Moses begins to actualize his potential, does the Torah acknowledge Amram and Yocheved as his parents, for only then do their seeds bear fruit.⁶

In the context of the story of creation, at the completion of each distinct day, God places his stamp of approval: ‘...and God saw that it was good.’⁷ Upon reflection over the entire week however, in the final verse of the first chapter of the Torah, ‘God saw all that He had done and beheld it was *very* good.’⁸ Picking up on the emphatic use of the word ‘*very*’, Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the term ‘good’ is used to describe a single entity. The phrase ‘very good’ however, defines the combination of each of those distinct entities - the actualization of potential.⁹

Much like a single day of Creation, at birth Moses is described as ‘good’, reflecting the raw potential with which he is born. It is only later in life however, when he takes real steps towards fulfilling his mission in this world, that his potential is actualized, at which point he is described as ‘very great’ using similar terminology.

Potential in and of itself amounts to nothing. It is simply a dormant expectation that bears little relevance unless acted upon.



Perhaps it is for this reason that Moses’ parents are not initially explicitly named. Indeed, they are the parents of the most iconic leader of our nation. Yet it is only when their son, who represents the potential they brought into the world, rises to the occasion and begins to realize his potential, that they are worthy being identified. While our roots are pivotal in setting us on the right path towards fulfilling our potential, **we hold the key to our own destiny.**

Only when we begin to fulfil our potential, can the impact of what our forebears brought forth be truly recognized.

Parasha Fact:

Moses did not initiate the first three plagues as they involved the earth and Nile river, both of which provided safety for him in his youth. If gratitude can be extended to intimate objects, we should consider how we share gratitude to the people around us.

Next week in Bo:

In today’s free world, the concept of being a servant to anything goes counter to the values of freedom and liberty. And yet in order to be a religious Jew, the expectation is to act as a servant of God. A cruel and strategic move on the part of Pharaoh when dictating the slavery of the Jewish people in Egypt, sheds light on a liberating perspective of theological freedom.

Notes

¹Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sotah* 12a. ²*Exodus* 2:1. ³Ramban ad loc. ⁴*Exodus* 6:20.

⁵*Exodus* 3:11-13. ⁶Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Drash Moshe, Parashat Vaeira, Exodus* 6:20.

⁷*Genesis* 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25. ⁸*Genesis* 1:31, italics added for emphasis.

⁹Rabbeinu Bachya on *Genesis* 1:31. ¹⁰*Exodus* 2:2. ¹¹*Exodus* 11:3, italics added for emphasis.

שבת שלום