

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

SHEMOT

VAERA

BO

BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

KI TISA

VAYAKHEL

PEKUDEI

BESHALACH

THE CLEANSING EFFECT OF GETTING HANDS DIRTY

16

Amidst the epic events of the Exodus, the Torah's words are triumphant, celebratory and truly joyous in describing redemption from Egyptian servitude. Yet embedded within these verses, is a short and often overlooked episode, 'Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had firmly adjured the children of Israel, saying, "God will surely remember you, and you shall bring up my bones from here with you."¹ Stylistically and thematically this verse does not belong and serves as a deviation from the very jubilant celebration, yet it contains subtle heroism, revealing the true leadership of Moses our teacher.

With the frenetic departure from Egypt, the Jews do not even have time to fully bake their bread. The Talmud notes that while Moses concentrated on taking Joseph's remains with them, the nation was acquiring the valuables of Egypt.²

At face value, Moses simply recognises the eternity of invaluable values in contrast to monetary pursuits.³ But on a deeper level, there is a moral aspect to his choice. In the explicit mention of the oath that Joseph made with the Children of Israel, the Torah is highlighting the personal element that Moses felt he owed his ancestor.⁴

Moses' leadership is reflected in the fact that he did not lose the capacity to pursue common, basic moral obligations, even amidst the grandeur and intensity of his pivotal role at that moment in history. Given that he was in the midst of leading the greatest Exodus of all time, Moses could justifiably have excused himself from the tedious task of gathering his ancestor's bones by simply dispatching someone else to carry out the chore. Furthermore, since Moses does indeed choose to busy himself with such a matter, one could

understandably presume that these bones were enshrined in a mausoleum which Moses marched to as an act of pomp and glory. However the Midrash explains that the bones of Joseph were buried deep in the Nile and that Moses treaded through the swamps to recover the coffin in a far from glamorous manner.⁵

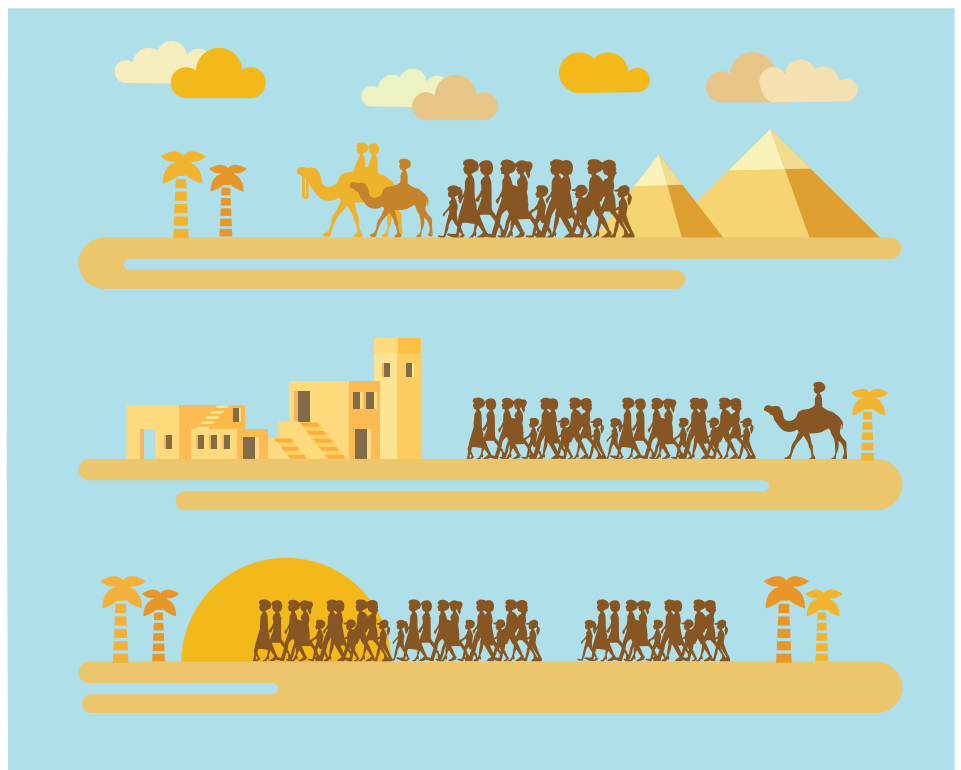
While the rest of the nation appears in their fancy attire, pockets full of treasures ready for the momentous event of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses arrives on the scene with his hands dirty from recovering Joseph's bones. Moses' ultimate act of benevolence and respect towards his deceased ancestor shows that true nobility is not found in external adornments, but rather in one's inner convictions. Though the placement of the verse is contextually disjointed, perhaps it is nestled specifically where it is in order to show that Moses did

not 'lose his head' amidst everything that was going on. Although he grows up in the royal palaces of Pharaoh, and becomes the leader of the Jewish people, through all of this, Moses maintains his humility, preserves his humanity and wades into the Nile to honour a multi-generational promise. It is this ability to remember and act upon such menial tasks, while carrying out his key role within the historic events at the time, that reflects Moses' true heroism.

Whether tending to sheep, saving damsels at the well or rising in moral indignation when witnessing a person being beaten, Moses' life is punctuated with these moments of humane heroism.

It is a universal mistake to sever oneself from original character moorings in the journey towards influence and sophistication.

One of the most powerful, yet subtle dangers to the human character is the trait of avarice - the lust to obtain and to acquire. There is no greater desire for greed than when it's free for the taking and legitimate. But when the Jewish people busy themselves with acquiring warranted valuables from Egypt, Moses recognises the danger of this feeding frenzy and instead busies himself with honouring a pledge. To Moses, they are more than physical bones, they are the remains of a pioneer who built foundations of Jewish identity and continuity.



For Moses, recovering these bones means retaining humanity and redeeming Jewish values worth far more than the Egyptian valuables.

Parasha Fact:

The city called Pi HaChiot (gateway to freedom) where the Jews camped while leaving Egypt, was actually the Egyptian city of Pithom which the Jews had built as slaves. They renamed it upon their exodus, recognizing that even the symbols of their slavery had been part of the ultimate plan for redemption.

Next week in Yitro:

Standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Children of Israel are on the brink of receiving the Torah. One would expect this momentous unparalleled event in history, to be highlighted as special, with a majestic name relating to its historical and significant meaning. Yet our sages choose to name this section of the Torah, Yitro. This puzzling choice presents profound insights into the type of mindset that the Jewish Nation needs to develop as a prerequisite for receiving the Torah and embarking on a relationship with God.

Notes

¹ Exodus 13:19, alluding to Genesis 50:25.

² Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sota 13a.

³ Rabeinu Bachya on Exodus 13:19.

⁴ Exodus 13:19.

⁵ Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, Parashat Beshalach.

שבת שלום