

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Shemot
January 2, 2016

פרשת שמות
כ"א בטבת תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 1:1-6:1

In this *parasha*, Bnei Yisrael become slaves to Paro; Paro's daughter saves Moshe from the Nile and, after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, Moshe flees to Midian where he marries and has children; Hashem instructs Moshe to liberate the people; Moshe returns to Egypt, and Moshe and Aharon approach Paro, who refuses their request for liberation.

After Moshe and his wife, Tzipporah, have their first child, the Torah [2:22] tells us, "וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ גֶרְשֹׁם: כִּי אָמַר--גֵּר הָיִיתִי, בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיהָ." – and he called his name Gershom [literally, "stranger there"]; for he said: 'I have been a stranger in a strange land.'"

Many commentators question the meaning of this reason. Sforino (16th Century Italy) explains it as meaning "I am a stranger in a land in which I was not born."

Or Hachaim (18th Century Morocco) opines, "He said 'I have been a stranger in a strange land' because the righteous are in this world merely as sojourners without a permanent residence [until they spend eternity in the world to come] or perhaps [he said this meaning that] he was not with his brethren or in his father's house."

Of course, "his father's house" could refer either to Paro's palace where Moshe was raised, or the Jewish house of Amram, of which he knew he was a part. Moshe must have felt like a stranger no matter where he was. In Midian, he was in a

country and culture with which he was not familiar; in Paro's palace, he was like a fish out of water, being an Israelite dwelling in the home of his people's oppressor; and among the Bnei Yisrael, he was the prince of Egypt, probably feeling like a fraud no matter where he was.

I would like to offer an additional suggestion as to the meaning of "I have been a stranger in a strange land." Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik in his book *Lonely Man of Faith* talks about the concept of "existential loneliness," the idea that each of us has times in our lives when we feel that no one can possibly understand us or comprehend what we are currently going through and feeling. Moshe, with his complex history, surely must have felt this frequently, as if he were a "stranger in a strange land" no matter where he went or what he did. Rav Soloveitchik's ultimate solution for existential loneliness is to create a close bond with God, as God will always be with each and every one of us and will, indeed, understand everything we are going through. And indeed, in the very next chapter, Moshe meets up with God in the episode of the burning bush and begins a lifetime of the closest interactions with the Almighty.

Interestingly enough, Moshe names his second son "Eliezer," literally meaning "God is my help," in stark contrast to the meaning of his first son's name. Perhaps, beginning at the burning bush, Moshe found a way not to feel like a perpetual stranger; he began speaking regularly with Hashem and found his place of comfort in the world.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Have you ever experienced "existential loneliness"? When? How did you resolve it?
- What emotions do you think Moshe experienced as he went through his life becoming the leader of Bnei Yisrael, leading them through the Reed Sea and shepherding them through the wilderness for 40 years? How would you have grappled with those feelings?
- Where do you feel like a stranger? Where do you feel "at home"? Why do you think this is so?