

Dreamworks Rabbah: Reading the Prince of Egypt as a Midrash on Identity and Leadership

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This article is adapted from a chabura delivered at JLIC Jerusalem's Bet Midrash Programme. My thanks to the participants whose questions, challenges and insights helped shape and refine the ideas explored here.

The Prince of Egypt opens with a panel of white text, appearing on a black screen: "The motion picture you are about to see is an adaptation of the Exodus story. While artistic and historical licence has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide."

To make the film, the producer Jeffrey Katzenberg consulted with somewhere between 300 and 700 religious scholars, biblical scholars and theologians (the exact figure varies depending on who you ask) including Rabbi Sacks, who was invited to review the film while still in development. Much ink has been spilled on the film's "accuracy" to the original text, but I want to suggest that there's something to be gained specifically by diving into where the film diverges from the text, using the model of aggadic midrash.

The word for midrash, rabbinical traditional interpretation, is derived from the Hebrew root "ש-ד-ח" (to seek/inquire/investigate) and broadly split into two types: Midrash Halacha, legal interpretation and Midrash Aggadah, narrative interpretation. When people use the word midrash colloquially (as I will throughout this article) it is generally the latter they refer to. Much has been written on what Aggadic Midrash is and what it does. For the purposes of this exploration, though, we will work with a model in which midrash has three defining characteristics:

The first is parshanut (exegesis – filling the gaps in the text). In his essay "Odysseus' Scar," the literary critic Erich Auerbach compared Greek narrative, exhaustive and leaving nothing implicit, with biblical narrative, which he described as deliberately spare, "fraught with background." The Torah leaves gaps, as small as seemingly unnecessary details omitted or as major as entire decades skipped in a character's life.

The second characteristic is the why – the lesson or purpose that the Midrash comes to teach us, in filling that gap. The Sifrei (funnily enough, a textbook example of Halachic Midrash) makes a striking claim: "Do you wish to recognise the One who spoke and brought the world into being? Learn aggadah." Midrash isn't filling the gaps to make the story flow better, but to bring a specific moral lesson in the process.

The third characteristic is divine origin. Aggadic midrash is *min hashamayim*, part of Torah Shebe'al Peh, the oral tradition received at Sinai. Rav Sherira Gaon and his son Rav Hai Gaon, two of the preeminent rabbinic authorities of tenth and eleventh century Babylonia,

cautioned against reading midrash as literal history for exactly this reason, that its authority comes, not from historical accuracy, but from its place within a divinely given tradition.

It is the final characteristic that DreamWorks, unavoidably, cannot claim. Read with that caveat in mind, though, I want to suggest that the film fulfils the first two well enough to serve as a resource for parshanut and derush, filling the gaps left by the Torah and drawing meaning from them, deepening our reading of Yetziat Mitzrayim and the lessons it comes to teach us.

The Prince of Egypt diverges from the biblical text in a midrashic way in many places and almost every divergence is worth examining. A few of these divergences even find parallels in existing midrashim. A few examples, briefly:

- The Torah gives us very little of Pharaoh's personal life, but the film humanises him, presenting a man driven by insecurity as much as malice or evil. This cuts against the classic fairytale reading of Yetziat Mitzrayim as a simple good vs. evil story but, funnily enough, finds support in midrashim on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (see Shemot Rabbah 13:3 and Rav Dweck's psychological analysis in his parasha podcast on Parshat Bo 2024).
- The film dives deeply into the experiences of the women whom the Torah mention only briefly. A beautiful refrain in the opening song captures Yocheved's anguish as she lowers Moshe's basket into the Nile and Tsipporah is shown as a full supporting character to Moshe on his journey.
- In the film, Yitro serves as an ethical guide for Moshe during his decades in Midian. I imagine they took the episode later in Shemot and extrapolated his character backwards.
- The film ends, not at the sea, but with Moshe descending Sinai, tablets in hand. I particularly appreciate that, here, it resists the temptation to universalise Shemot into a generic story of liberation, but closes with what we, as Jews, believe the story is in fact all about: not just "let my people go" but "let my people go so that they may serve me [God]."

I want to focus, however, on one element in particular: the question of Moshe's identity. It is a theme at the emotional core of the entire film and it centres on decades of Moshe's life that the Torah moves past in just three pesukim from Shemot 2:11-12:

וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבַאֲהוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׁיתָהוּ׃

וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מִכָּה אִישׁ־עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו׃

וַיִּכֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיֵּד אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל׃

When the child grew up, [Yocheved] brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moshe, for she said, 'I drew him from the water'.

And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown, that he went out to his brothers and looked upon their burdens and he noticed an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers.

He looked around and saw that no man was there, he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.”

The narrative moves deceptively fast. An entire childhood is compressed into a single clause, decades pass, and Moshe leaves the palace and lives out the pivotal moment of his life in the course of just a few words. Those words, though, give us plenty to explore and draw meaning from, with the help of various traditional midrashim and commentators.

The word *vayigdal* (“he grew up”) appears twice in quick succession. *Vayigdal hayeled*: the child grew up enough to be weaned and brought to Pharaoh's daughter, followed by *vayigdal Moshe* in the next verse: Moshe grew up and went out to his brothers. The Ramban notes the distinction, that the first *vayigdal* is relative, a child no longer needing nursing, while the second is absolute: Moshe has reached full maturity of mind. The Torah, though, skips over the entire gap between them, his childhood in the Egyptian royal household. That gap, highlighted by the repetition, is the first thing to notice.

Then there is the word *echav* (“his brothers”), which also appears twice, this time in a single verse. The Torah’s repetition of the word might lead us to believe that it describes two different groups. He went out to his brothers and saw their burdens then he noticed an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers. The second use of *echav* clearly intends to refer to the Hebrews. But he has grown up as a prince of Egypt. His brothers, at this point in his life, would most naturally be the Egyptians, the household he has always known. This is a fundamental question that the text of the Torah leaves unanswered: When Moshe left the palace, did he know that the people he saw were his people? Did he know who he was?

Most commentators resolve this without too much difficulty. The Ramban reads *vayeitzei el echav* as entirely deliberate, that Moshe was told he was Jewish, went out specifically to see the Jewish people and could not stand by what he saw. The Ralbag suggests it was perhaps common knowledge throughout Pharaoh's palace that Moshe was Hebrew. Shadal points out that Yocheved, who would have lived in the royal household while she raised Moshe as a wet nurse (an idea consistent with historical records at the time) might have revealed his true identity to him. Based on these readings, by the time he goes out of the palace, he knows exactly who his brothers are and he leaves the palace to find them.

But then there are his puzzling actions in the next pasuk. His initial reaction to seeing his Jewish brother being beaten is *vayifen koh vakoh* — he looked this way and that — followed, after beating the Egyptian, by *vayitmenuhu bachol*, burying him in the sand. The Bekhor Shor, a twelfth century Tosafist, reads the whole scene as his response to a sense of compassion. Moshe saw their crushing yoke, his heart burned for his brother, and he acted.

But I struggle with this reading. I think there’s more to it. A Prince of Egypt checking over his shoulder before he acts, and then burying the body afterwards - that is not the behaviour

of someone acting from a settled, secure sense of who he is but the actions of a Prince in crisis.

Ibn Ezra, addressing the repetition of “echav,” offers a different key entirely. Where most commentators read both uses of *echav* as referring to the Hebrews, Ibn Ezra reads the first as the Egyptians. Moshe goes out to his Egyptian brothers, because, after all, that is his most familiar identity, the people among whom he was raised. The second *echav*, he argues, simply means a member of his family in a biological sense, distinct from his Egyptian upbringing. Ibn Ezra is making a purely grammatical point, but it begins to explain something much larger that I believe the text is hinting at.

If the first *echav* means the Egyptians, then Moshe does not go out that day knowing (or if he knows, having truly internalised) who he is. He goes out as an Egyptian, but sees a Jew being beaten, an encounter that shifts something in him. By the next mention of *echav*, he has either realised or internalised that his brothers are in fact the Jews.

This resolves my difficulty with his strange behaviour around the incident with the Egyptian too. Based on my interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s reading, we see here the results of the internal experience of a man coming to terms with his identity. Moshe is suffering an identity crisis.

The Torah, even with the additions from Ibn Ezra, leaves it there, but this is where I believe a careful reading of the Prince of Egypt’s interpretation takes us further.

By the point in the narrative marked in the Torah by the second *vayigdal*, where Moshe is fully grown, about to leave the palace, the film adds an aggadic invention, a scene where Moshe finds out his true identity:

Walking through the Hebrew quarter of the city, Moshe stumbles across Miriam and Aaron. Miriam, recognising him, tells him directly: “I know who you are. And you are not a Prince of Egypt.” When he tries to dismiss her, she cries, “You were born of my mother, Yocheved. You are our brother.” Moshe’s reaction is one of hostility and disbelief: “be careful, slave,” as he begins to walk away. But then she sings the lullaby Yocheved had sung over his basket as she lowered him into the Nile (and perhaps, per Shadal, as she nursed him) and his stern expression wavers.

Moshe runs back to the grandeur of the palace, singing, with certainty “this is my home ... all I ever wanted,” but the song shifts beneath him and, as he’s confronted by the murals of Pharaoh’s massacre of the Hebrew children, it morphs from a confident declaration to a desperate plea.

It is only after this that he goes out and sees the Egyptian beating the Hebrew slave. Katzenberg and his team are making a specific interpretive choice here: Moshe may have been told about his origins, but it takes time for him to truly internalise them, prompted first by the lullaby, and then by the sight of his brother being beaten. At this point, between the first “echav” and the second, his sense of justice means he simply cannot deny it any longer.

In another beautiful creative choice from the Prince of Egypt team, as he flees to Midian, he tears off the golden armbands and throws away his ring, symbols of his Egyptian identity.

Katzenberg and his team have, here, fulfilled the first characteristic of the midrash. They've filled a gap, opened wider by the Ibn Ezra, with an exegetical narrative. But midrash, as we established, is not just about smoothing over the story but about coming to teach us something in the process.

To understand the lesson here, we need to appreciate what the experience of Yetziat Mitzrayim actually was for the Jewish people. The standard retelling of Yetziat Mitzrayim tends toward the triumphant “fairytale” narrative, a story of helpless slaves who were freed by a benevolent God, performing miracles on the way and a song to follow. But the tradition, especially when we look at accounts of Yetziat Mitzrayim in other books of Tanach, offers a considerably less rose tinted picture of the state Bnei Yisrael were actually in.

On the very first seder night, that first Korban Pesach in Egypt, Moshe commands the people: *mishcu u'k'chu* (“draw and take”) a lamb. Rashi, drawing on the Mechilta, explains that the word *mishchu* is there to add a second meaning, that because Bnei Yisrael “were sunk in idolatry,” God tells them not just to “take the lamb” but first “withdraw your hands from idols.”

Bnei Yisrael, in other words, were not just physically enslaved, but culturally and spiritually embedded in Egypt. The avodah zara of Egypt was not just something foreign imposed on them but had become part of their identity.

Yetziat Mitzrayim, therefore, was not in fact a fairytale liberation in the physical sense only, but required Bnei Yisrael to undergo a serious crisis of identity themselves. It's an oft quoted seder night dvar torah that there was extra significance to the lamb because of its deification by the Egyptians, meaning Bnei Yisrael had to show confidence in taking it, tying it up and slaughtering it in front of the Egyptians. This takes on an extra dimension, though, when we remember that Bnei Yisrael were also embedded in that culture of avoda zara around it.

I'm reminded here of the well-known wordplay on the word *mashber*, meaning both “crisis” and “birthing stool.” The moment of becoming a people, the night we have memorialised every night for centuries, was also the most painful and disorientating moment they had yet faced.

It was through this simultaneous birth and crisis that they needed to be led. So how could a leader bring a people through such a rupture of identity if he had not already lived through one himself?

This, I think, is the lesson we can learn here. The Alshich, a sixteenth century darshan from Safed and a student of R' Yosef Karo, comes closest to naming it on his commentary on the very pasuk we have been exploring, delivering with it a lesson in leadership. He writes that the phrase *vay'hi bayamim hahem* (“it came to pass in those days”) teaches us that a person of Israel who rises to greatness while his people are in distress cannot say “my soul is at

peace” but must share in their suffering. Moshe, raised in the palace and educated as an Egyptian had every reason to stay, even after discovering his true identity. But, as the Alshich teaches us, he could not, because greatness does not exempt a person from the pain of their people.

By the reading of the Prince of Egypt’s aggadic addition, it is not just that Moshe chose to share in his people’s *mashber* on that first seder night. He had already lived through his own version of it. He knew what it meant to leave Egypt and to tear it from your own identity, because he had gone through that rupture himself. When Bnei Yisrael were asked to tear away an identity they had held for generations, their leader was not asking them to do something he had never experienced, but something he understood from the inside.

There is a final scene in the film that draws this idea to a close beautifully, reminding us of the cost of the greatness of which the Alshich writes. After the sea has closed and the Egyptian army is destroyed, Rameses is left alive, sitting on a rock amid the wreckage, calling his step-brother’s name, “Moses!”. Moshe looks back at him across the water, his face struck with grief, for his step-brother and his childhood he has left behind. Then he turns away and joins his true people in song and celebration.

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