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The Syriac Bible of Paris, Moses before pharaoh (folio 8r)

by Phyllis Chesler

This year the Jews are in real danger as we've been so many times before. Can we save ourselves? Can God save us?

What is happening on our campuses and in our streets seems, to some, rather sudden. It is not.

For a quarter century—even for half a century or more, a handful of cognitive warriors have been documenting the rise in Jew hatred, warning of what was to come, predicting that Israeli boots on the ground will be held hostage to the Blood Libels told about Israel and the Jews.

None of the large Jewish-American organizations, and few in the Israeli government took our warnings, analyses, or predictions too seriously.

Now, only now, more and more Jews begin to understand that the cognitive war against the Jews has taken its predictable, almost inevitable, next step. The Muslim Brotherhood as well as their many proxy organizations in America, together with all the left wing funders, have indoctrinated at least five or six generations; their minions now comprise hate-spewing Jihadic mobs on our streets and on our campuses.

Yes, it's like Nazi Germany all over again, or a prelude to the kind of pogroms that took place for millenia in Europe and in Muslim lands.

The crucial difference is that we now have Israel—which, paradoxically, is being used to justify Jew hatred outside of the Holy Land.

What must be done, what can be done? Certainly the White House should call out the National Guard. At the same time, here are a few gleanings of Torah learning for us at this very time. I am taking us back to Shmot, to the very story that we must tell at the seder.

How swiftly the narrative proceeds, almost at a breakneck

pace. In only three parshiot, (Shmot, Va'eira, Bo), and in only 350 sentences, we find ourselves enslaved in Egypt, are granted a God-chosen liberator—and are taken out of Egyptian slavery by God.

Sometimes, a single word catches my attention. It is the word by which this chapter is known—the word “Bo.”

In Shmot, God tells Moshe that “I will be with you’ (3:12) and in Va'eira, almost conversationally, God tells Moshe: “Bo, daber el Pharaoh” (6:10-11)—come with me or, together, let us go to Pharaoh. Again, in Va'eira, in (7:26) God says to Moshe, “Bo el Pharaoh” (10:1). God does not say “Lech.” This is a far cry from Avram’s “Lech Lecha.” Go, leave all that you know in order to find yourself. Moshe and Aharon are never alone when they go to see Pharaoh. God is always with them.

Many chumasim and sages translate “Bo” simply as “Go.” But not I. In parsha Bo, I not only hear the word “Go,” but rather, as the Israeli phrase would have it, I hear: “Bo Alei,” or Come with me, Come to me. God’s invitation, God’s promise is there every time God says ‘Bo” to Moshe.

This parsha is special to me for many reasons.

First, my son, my most beloved son—indeed, my only child—leyned this parsha for his Bar Mitzva 33 years ago. He did not make a single mistake. All I had to do was sit there shepping nachas.

Second: This parsha is special because it reminds me that we are all big-time complainers, even when we are surrounded by miracles. Although we’ve just witnessed the ten plagues and are now three days out of Egypt, we remain terrified as we stand at the edge of the sea. Famously, we complain to Moshe. “Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the desert? (14:11). We told you in Egypt: Leave us alone and let us serve the Egyptians” (14:12).

After God parts the Red Sea; after our safe and miraculous crossing; even after being led, both day and night, by God's pillar of cloud and God's pillar of fire (13:21); even after the destruction of Pharaoh's army—there we are, complaining again, this time about not finding water: "What shall we drink?" (15:24). And again, (16:3), like slaves, whose every need has formerly been met, we "complain" when our bread supply has dried up.

Hot, bitter words: "If only we had died by God's hand in the land of Egypt where we sat by pots of meat and ate our fill of bread." And again, the people cry out for water: "Why did you bring us up from Egypt—to kill me and my children and my livestock with thirst?" (17:3). Finally, Moshe is afraid that he and his brother will be stoned (17:4).

We are blinded by fear and by faithlessness.

And yet, even as we complain, our people are also filled with extraordinary joy. Moshe sings with the men. Miriam sings and dances with the women, "b'micholot," in holy circles. Let us hold onto this very moment—and remember that there is no point in complaining, the journey ahead will be long and hard, and we will have to learn how to better fend for ourselves—of course, with God's eternal help.

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 re-named "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.

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's 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 terms of 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 probably get away with murder. 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 ha-mitzri?” (“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.