

Moshe is sent back from Midian to meet Pharaoh and demand the freedom of the Bnei Yisrael.

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמֶּלֶן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הָמִיתוֹ:

וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתְּכַרֵּת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנֶהּ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי
חַתוּדָמִים אַתָּה לִּי:

וַיֵּרָף מִמֶּנּוּ אַז אָמְרָה חַתוּ דָמַיִם לְמוֹלֶת: {פ}

“And it was on the way, in a lodging that HaShem appeared to him. And he wanted to kill him. Tzipporah took a flint blade and circumcised her son. Then she held it to his feet and she said, ‘Because you are a groom of blood to me. So he left them alone. Then she said, ‘a groom of blood for the circumcisions.’” (Shmos 4:24-26).

These are of the hardest pesukim in Chumash to understand. This episode appears to be disjointed from the previous narrative. Further, it ends a parsha/episode as there is a break in the Torah just after it (פ).

What is a groom of blood? Who is talking to who— a couple are identified (HaShem and Tzipporah) and the rest are pronouns without identification. Why was she circumcising her son then? What does it mean she touched the feet? If we read these pesukim carefully with the previous narrative we can start to understand their meaning.

The entire narrative of Moshe and his upbringing, until he confronts Pharaoh, is shrouded in mystery. His parents are not named here. (Shmos 2:1). Moshe’s name at birth is not mentioned. (Ibid 2:2). His sister is mentioned but not named here. (Ibid 2:4). He grew up and was weaned, and returned to the daughter of Pharaoh. (Ibid 2:10). He is then named by the daughter of Pharaoh. He then grows up into adulthood and ventures out to see his brethren. (Ibid 2:11). Nothing is told to us about his upbringing on Pharaoh’s lap or in his house. We do not know Moshe’s age except that he is eighty when he took the Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim and one hundred and twenty when he dies. We do not know how long he sojourned in Midian before

he met Yisro. (see Ibid 2:15 – “he settled in Midian. Then [one day] he sat by the well”). We do not know how long he lived with Yisro and Tzipporah before HaShem spoke to him by the Burning Bush. “Many days passed.” (Ibid 2:23).

It is up to us to parse the words of the Torah and derive the meaning, with the help of Chazal.

Gemara Nedarim 31b says, *Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korkha says: Great is the mitzva of circumcision, as is evident from the fact that the punishment of Moshe the righteous for not circumcising his son when he was capable of doing so was not postponed for even a full hour. It is taught in another baraisa that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korkha says: So great is the mitzva of circumcision that all the merits that Moshe our teacher accrued when he performed mitzvot did not protect him when he was negligent about performing the mitzva of circumcision, as it is stated: “And HaShem met him and sought to kill him” Because he was occupied with lodging first and did not immediately perform the mitzva of circumcision, as it is stated: “And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place.”*

The Gemara here says that it was HaShem that wanted to kill Moshe for not doing the mitzvah of circumcising his new son. His son must have been born right when Moshe was about to leave because it does not mention a second son before the passuk says, “So he took his wife and sons.” (Shmos 4:20). However, the obvious question is, if Tzipporah was not quick to act, and HaShem then killed His messenger, what would have been of the entire narrative until this point? HaShem killed Moshe and then sought a new messenger? This explanation, while giving a great reason for circumcision and its great reward, appears more parabolic than literal.

The Gemara does have another explanation of our verse. Gemara Nedarim 32a says, *Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: It was not Moshe our teacher that Satan wanted to kill, but rather, that infant who was not circumcised, as it is stated: “Surely a groom of blood are you to me” (Shmos 4:25). Go out and see: Who does it make sense would be the one that is called the groom in this instance? You must say this is the infant, since he is the one who entered the covenant of Avraham by means of the circumcision.*

Thus, this Gemara actually says it was not HaShem but Satan who wanted to kill Moshe. It also says that it was Tzipporah calling Moshe the “groom of blood” but it was Satan calling Eliezer the groom of blood. And it was Eliezer who was in danger. What did the infant do to warrant execution?

Another explanation offered by that Gemara is *Rabbi Yehuda bar Bizna taught: At the time that Moshe our teacher was negligent about the circumcision, the destructive angels named Af, meaning anger, and Kheima, meaning wrath, came and swallowed him, and only his legs were left outside. Immediately, “Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son” (Shmos 4:25), and immediately “He let him alone”*

Thus, it was not Satan but other destructive angels who came to kill Moshe and Tziporah saved him by circumcising their son. This Gemara can also be read that Af and Kheima swallowed the infant up his legs—top down—and Tziporah circumcised him and they spit him out.

Gemara Avodah Zarah 27a further infers that Moshe was not being swallowed, but the child was. *And is there anyone who says that a woman may not perform circumcision? But isn't it written: “Then Zipporah took [vattikkah] a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son” (Shmos 4:25). This verse explicitly states that a circumcision was performed by a woman. The Gemara answers that one should read into the verse: And she caused to be taken [vattakkaḥ], i.e., she did not take a flint herself. But isn't it written: And she cut off [vattikhrot]? Read into the verse: And she caused to be cut off [vattakhret], as she told another person to take a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and he did so. The Gemara provides an alternative explanation: And if you wish, say instead: She came and began the act, and Moshe came and completed the circumcision.*

According to this, it must be the child that was in danger because Moshe ended up performing the circumcision (so he could not be the one being attacked).

Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim 3:9 also explains the circumstances this way. *Because Moshe was lazy for circumcision, the angel tried to kill him. That is what is written “HaShem met him and wanted to kill him.” Rabbi Yose said, far be the thought that Moshe was lazy for circumcision but he argued on his own: To perform circumcision and leave would be dangerous so he decided to wait. The Holy One, praise to Him, told him: “Go, return to Egypt.” But because he was lazy in preparing for the overnight stay before circumcision; that is what is written “It was on the way, at the overnight stay.” Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, far be the thought that the angel wanted to kill Moshe; it was the baby. Come and see, who is called ḥātān, Moshe or the baby? There are Tannaïm who state that Moshe is called ḥātān. There are Tannaïm who state that the baby is called ḥātān. He who said that Moshe is called ḥātān: Ḥātān, blood is required from you. And he said that the baby is called ḥātān: Ḥātān, in blood you are*

preserved for me. “Tzipporah took a flint stone and cut her son’s prepuce and touched his feet.” Rebbi Yehudah, Rebbi Nechemiah, and the Rabbis. One said, Moshe’s feet. Another said, the angel’s feet. Another said, the baby’s feet. He who said Moshe’s feet: Here I cut your obligation for you. He who said, the angel’s feet: Here your mission was accomplished. He who said the baby’s feet, she touched the baby’s body. “He left off from him; then she said, a blood *hātān* for circumcisions.”

Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbos 19:2 says that the *passuk* says, *Shmos* 4:26, “the circumcisions.” The plural teaches that one for the uncovering the skin and one for cutting the skin; two part of *bris*.

Rashi explains our *passuk* using the Gemaras, saying, *the issue was that Moshe prepared lodging ahead of the circumcision.*

However, this portion of Rashi and the Gemara is questionable. If Moshe was correct to leave immediately because HaShem told him to return, so Moshe was correct for not delaying his journey to circumcise his son. If so, when he lodged, he would have delayed his journey by circumcising his son. The days of recuperation for his son would be the same before his journey or in middle of journey. The net sum would be the same length of time to travel from Midian to Mitzrayim. Why was Moshe wrong in delaying his son’s circumcision at the lodge?

Ibin Ezra answers this. *They had a tradition that a child should not be circumcised on the eighth day if he was sick, or while traveling when it was not possible for his guardian to tarry and circumcise him. Now because Moshe could not tarry in carrying out the Lord’s mission he concluded that he should not circumcise his son, because the child would be in danger if he were taken along. HaShem therefore sent an angel. This is the meaning of that the Lord met him to tell Moshe to put his decision aside and to circumcise the lad. The child would then remain with his mother until healed and Moshe would continue on by himself.*

If so, why couldn’t Moshe just leave the infant at home with Tzipporah and go on his journey after the *bris*?

Rashi explains: *כי חתן דמים אתה לי* which means, *you have brought it about that my husband (Moshe) was on the point of being killed because of you: you have been to me my husband’s murderer. The word למלות means on account of (ל) the circumcision (מולות). The word מולות it a noun, and the ל prefixed it used in the tense of על, “on account of”, just as in (Shmos 14:3) “And Pharaoh will say regarding the children (לבני) of Israel”. Onkelos, however,*

translated the word דַּמַּיִם as having reference to the blood of the circumcision and not Moshe's blood.

Ibin Ezra explains why Tzipporah was the one to circumcise the child. He also explains how HaShem would want to kill his messenger. *Its meaning is that the Lord sent an illness upon Moshe because it did not occur to him to circumcise his son immediately. This then is the meaning of "and sought to slay him": HaShem sought to slay Moshe if he would not circumcise his son. Now because Moshe was seized with trembling--he was shivering due to the illness—he could not circumcise his son. Tzipporah circumcised him because Moshe revealed this secret to her. Do not be surprised that it is written, "HaShem met him" as the reference is to an angel of HaShem. "And the Lord went before them" (Shmos 13:21) is similar, and there it is written, "And the angel of HaShem...removed" (Shmos 14:19). However, Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni says: Perish the thought that HaShem would seek to slay Moshe who was on HaShem's mission to redeem His people. It was rather Eliezer whom was to be slain, and it is to Eliezer that the third person pronominal suffixes of va-yifgeshehu (met him) and hamito (slay him) refer. The Torah then goes on to explain that the reference is to Eliezer. That is, to her son. The name Eliezer is not used in our passage. The Torah therefore states, and cut off the foreskin of her son. He is not at first mentioned. However, before referring to a person in the third person, one has to first identify him. The Torah does not identify the object of va-yifgeshehu and hamito because he did not yet have a name. "And it came to pass, when she travailed, that one put out a hand" (Bereishis 38:28) is similar.*

Accordingly, this elaborates on the Talmud Yerushalmi that the entire reference is to the child—he was in danger, he was saved by his mother, and he is referred to as the “groom of blood.” However, we question this simply by asking why would an innocent infant be harmed and killed because his father neglected to circumcise him?

Sforno ways, *"when he was on the way" from the desert to Midian with his wife and children. The Torah tells of this incident after concluding the report of how HaShem appointed Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people. In other words, HaShem met Moshe on the way back and gave him further instruction (Shmos 4:21-23). HaShem met him. This is the 8th day on which he should have circumcised his son. When the baby is circumcised the presence of the שכינה—the Holy Presence—is perceived as being present waiting to induct the new member of the Jewish*

faith. Perhaps this is even the source of the practice to place a chair for the prophet Eliyahu at the circumcision ceremony.

Chizkuni adds, *“it was while they had been on the way, at an inn; this verse ought to have been appended to verse 20 where we were told: “Moshe took his wife and his sons;” it is similarly out of place. The reason why it is written where it is, is that the Torah did not want to interrupt what HaShem had been saying to Moshe.*

Daas Zekeinim points out why it had to be at the lodging. *“It was on the way, at the inn;” Rashi, explaining why the location was necessary to be given here, explains that the word מלון was chosen for what an inn represents. It represents the comfort it can offer the traveler in an otherwise hostile environment. Moshe is criticized for not having his priorities straight, and in paying attention first to the comforts offered instead of dealing with the law to circumcise his son at the earliest opportunity, i.e. the eighth day. This seems questionable, seeing that immediately after leaving the inn the baby would be exposed to the dangers of traveling in the desert. We must therefore assume that this took place after the meeting of Moshe and Aaron, when the latter had already told Moshe not to expose both his wife and his family to these dangers but to let them go back to Midian. He did so although members of the tribe of Levi such as Moshe and Aaron were not required to perform menial labor in Egypt. Therefore, seeing that they intended to turn back home, there was no excuse for not performing the circumcision at once. Tziporah would have stayed on at the inn until the infant had recovered from the circumcision. This is why Moshe was punished.*

Accordingly, we can use this comment and that of Sforno and Chizkuni that our verses are not necessarily in order. Again the Torah states a generality and then moves to specifics. Moshe is instructed by HaShem and then the specifics of where and how are mentioned. Also, it finishes up one narrative—HaShem’s instructions—and then completes it by giving the remainder of the facts, that of the travels and the inn—even out of order.

When looking at the entire narrative we understand this episode. This parsha / section begins after the break in passuk 4:17. *“And Moshe went and he returned to his father-in-law.”* (Shmos 4:18). This is superfluous. It should say he went back to his father-in-law (from the Burning Bush) or *“he returned”* but not both. Additionally, Moshe then asks permission to have leave to check on the Bnei Yisrael. The next passuk says, *“HaShem said to Moshe in Midian, Go, Return to Egypt.”* (ibid 4:19). If Moshe already told his father-in-law that he wanted to go to

Egypt to check on his brethren, why did HaShem repeat the instruction to return to Mitzrayim? HaShem already said so previously. (Ibid 3:10). HaShem reassures Moshe further by saying “all those that sought to kill you are dead.” (Ibid 4:19). This seems to placate Moshe because the next passuk says “So he saddled up his sons and wife...” (Ibid 4:20).

We can explain the narrative as follows. It was Pharaoh and those tattler Israelites (see Shmos 2:14) who wanted to kill Moshe. A long time passed and the Nomarch King of Egypt (not Pharaoh) died. (Ibid 2:23). The Nomarch didn't want to kill Moshe. It was Pharaoh who did because Pharaoh knew of Moshe's secret. (Ibid 2:15). The verses do not tell us if Pharaoh died. Even if Pharaoh did die, Moshe was a wanted man by royal decree and a co-regent or successor would fulfil the decree.

It is beyond this essay but Moshe may have had issues with his faith (he protested too much and HaShem became angry at him for not believing in Him—Ibid 4:14). So after HaShem instructed Moshe to return to district of Mitzrayim and speak to the leaders of the Israelites, he did so. He asked his father-in-law and boss permission to leave and was granted leave. He spoke with the new King of Egypt but was rejected. Thus, he returned back to Midian. “He went” from the Burning Bush directly to Mitzrayim. Then “he returned” to Midian having failed his mission. He may have also run into trouble there. HaShem then said to him “return to Egypt because all those that sought you harm have died.” Now it was time to speak to Pharaoh himself without fear that he would be killed or imprisoned upon return.

Moshe packed up his family because in his mind he would go on his mission, be successful, and have his family with him to leave bondage. Upon his return to Midian, Eliezer was born. There is one more omitted piece of information in Moshe's narrative here: the name of his son. We know the name of his first son, Gershon. (Ibid 2:22). However, Eliezer's name is not revealed to us until Shmos 18:4.

Moshe has his newborn son and the rest of the family with him at lodging. He starts to prepare for the bris of his new son. Tziporah has the flint knife. At this time HaShem appeared to Moshe and gave Moshe his final instructions. “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the People go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you, “Let My son go, that he may worship Me,” yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.’” (Ibid 4:21-23). During

this time an assassin from Mitzrayim came to the inn to kill Moshe. “And it was at the lodge that HaShem appeared to Moshe. At the same time, Pharaoh’s assassin came to kill Moshe.” (see our verse 4:24). The edict from Pharaoh was still in existence and the news of Moshe’s first visit already reached the royal palace, likely from the tattlers before they died. Tzipporah had the knife in her hand instead held it up to the assassin.

Then Tzipporah, holding the knife to the assassin, says that he was to be the killer of her husband. The assassin relented. Not only that, but she circumcised her son and also the would-be assassin. That is they it says “circumcisions” *plural* in our verse. (Ibid 4:26). Because of these circumstances, Tzipporah wants to name her son ‘blood-groom of milah.’ (Similar to how Leah and Rachel named their children, see Bereishis 29:32 – 30:24). This was because it was the knife and preparation for the bris of her son that ended up coming in handy to save her husband. However, Moshe gives a different name to his son. “And the other son was named Eliezer, meaning, “The Lord of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.” (Ibid 18:4).

If Moshe was saved from HaShem, or Satan, or Af or Kheima, why would he name his son “Eliezer” because he was saved from Pharaoh? The answer is he was saved from Pharaoh. The Gemaras are parabolic and teach important lessons about the mitzvah of dam bris. They also could be talking about what was going on in the spiritual plane.

The plain meaning of our verse, however, seems to be that Moshe could not circumcise his new son before he left, as his son was not 8 days old yet. When he was, Moshe stopped at an inn to do the mitzvah. He was receiving instruction from HaShem when the assassin arrived to kill him. This assassin was activated by Pharaoh prior to “all those who wanted to kill *Moshe* have died.” The assassin was in waiting still on instruction.

Tzipporah saved Moshe from Pharaoh’s killer with the same knife to be used for the bris. Not only that, they end up converting the assassin. This could be why no other assassins came, because Pharaoh would see how unsuccessful he was in trying to kill Moshe—or because the Pharaoh that wanted Moshe dead had died. Thus, the Pharaoh in the Land of Mitzrayim that negotiates the redemption ends up simply negotiating with Moshe instead of killing HaShem’s messenger.

BONUS SHTIKEL

And HaShem said to Moshe, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have taken the People out of Egypt, you shall worship the Lord at this mountain.” (Shmos 3:12).

Where is Mount Sinai? Common thought among historians and scholars is that it is in the Sinai Desert. Obviously, the Sinai Desert was named *after* scholars and historians picked the location as the site of Har Sinai. This is not an instance where the Torah names a place by its commonly used name (i.e. Raamses or Chevrone). The common location and route of the Yitzia is as follows on this map:



This puts Mount Sinai in the Sinai desert, the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. However, that is problematic on two accounts. First, that would mean the Israelites leaving Egypt crossed the

Red Sea (Sea of Reeds/Yam Suf) on the border of Goshen, on the western fork of the Red Sea. (See map to left). However, how can it possibly take seven days to travel from Goshen to here, even burdened by children, cattle, and possessions? Even if we consider “Tell the Israelites to go back....and encamp before the sea” (Shmos 14:2), that is too many days to go so short a distance; just a few miles.

Second, the People would go south to the Sinai Desert and receive the Torah. This is the same mountain Hashem spoke to Moshe on. Moshe was tending flock near

Midian when he came upon Horeb, the Mount of Hashem. (Ibid 3:1). That means Moshe wandered from Ancient Midian, located on the north western tip of current day Saudi Arabia, to the Sinai Desert. That is 250 miles. That is quite a distance,





even to chase a wandering sheep. More likely, the Israelites left Goshen eastward, traveled into the Sinai Peninsula on land, then made their way south and crossed the peninsula. (See map to left). They foundered along the Yam Suf, there, by Pi-Hachiros, on the west bank of the eastern fork. Pharaoh chased them and caught up with them there and that is where they crossed the Yam Suf, south of Midian. From Goshen, the eastern border of

Lower Egypt (just south of the Mediterranean Sea), to the eastern fork of the Red Sea is 275 miles. That is 39 miles a day. If walking at 3 miles an hour, average pace—especially given children and carts of loot and possessions—that is 13 hours a day of walking. The passuk said they traveled day and night. (Ibid 13:21). So 13 hours of walking time allowed plenty of time to rest, if traveling day and night. The passuk says “וַיִּסָּב” that HaShem took them around about. (Ibid 13:18). Like in a circle. They traveled to the edge of the desert. (Ibid 13:20). These descriptions match this route, perfectly. They went around, looping into the Sinai Desert. They traveled to the edge of the desert, “בְּקֶצֶה” having the same shresh/root as ‘קֶצֶה,’ meaning end. They went to the other end of the desert.

It could be the edge of the desert was Goshen leading into the desert, but that means they would not have gone anywhere, because Goshen is at the edge of the desert.

It also makes sense that Yisro heard about the Israelites and miracles that happened to them at the Yam Suf. (Ibid 18:1). The krias Yam Suf would have happened very near to Midian and he would have heard about it. He would also choose that time to bring Moshe’s wife and children to him as the Israelites were now close to Midian. (Ibid 18:2). The attack of Amalek here, at Raphidim, the next stop from Midbar Sin, also correlates with this location. (Ibid 17:8). Amalek was a nomadic people but they came from Mount Seir which was due north of Midian. This is a much better location for Amalek to be than in the arid desert of the Sinai Peninsula.