

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XIII: Shemot (Ex. 1:1–6:1)

Essay 10. Rebuking an idolatrous Levite

בבא בתרא (דף ק"י) "ויאמרו לו מי־הביאך הֵלֵם ומה־אתה עֹשֶׂה בְּזֶה ומה־לָּךְ פֶּה". אָמְרוּ לוֹ: לֹא מִמָּשָׁה קָא אָתִית, דְּכָתִיב בֵּיהּ: "אֶל־תִּקְרַב הֵלֵם"? לֹא מִמָּשָׁה קָא אָתִית, דְּכָתִיב בֵּיהּ: "מִזֶּה" (מִה־זֶּה) בִּידָךְ? לֹא מִמָּשָׁה קָאִתִּית, דְּכָתִיב: "וְאַתָּה פֶּה עֹמֵד עֹמְדִי"? תַּעֲשֶׂה כּוֹמֵר לַעֲבֹדָה זָרָה, ע"כ בְּגִמְרָא.

In Judges chapter 18, the tribe of Dan seeks a territory in which to settle. Upon entering the territory of Ephraim and reaching the house of Micah, they met a young Levite, who had been appointed as an idolatrous priest by Micah.

Bava Batra (page 101a):

"They asked him, 'Who brought you here [הֵלֵם] [halom]? What [מָה] [ma] are you doing in this place? What is your business here [פֶּה] [po]?' "¹

[The Gemara interprets this as three questions.] **They said to him: "Do you not come from Moses, about whom it is written: 'Do not draw close to here [halom]' " "2 "Do you not come from Moses, about whom it is written: 'What [ma] is that in your hand' " "3 "Do you not come from Moses, about whom it is written: 'But as for you, stand here [po] with Me' " "4 [In other words,] will you, [a descendant of Moses], become a priest for idol worship?**

- Bava Batra 101a

צָרִיד עֵיוֹן לָמָּה הוּצָרְכוּ לוֹמַר לוֹ כָּל אֵלּוּ הַשְּׁלוּשָׁה פְּסוּקִים וּמָה הֵיטָב פְּנוּנָתָם. וְהַסִּיגָנוֹן הוּא כִּף דְּמִתְקַלָּה אָמְרוּ לוֹ הוֹאִיל דְּבִמָּשָׁה כָּתִיב בֵּיהּ "אֶל־תִּקְרַב הֵלֵם" לֹא הָיָה לָךְ לְהִתְקַרֵּב אֶל הָעֲבֹדָה זָרָה. וְלִפִּי שְׁבִיזָה הָיָה יָכוֹל לָתֵת תִּירוּץ וְלִדְחוֹת הָרָאִי, מִשּׁוּם הֵכִי הוֹסִיפוּ לוֹ דְּבִמָּשָׁה כָּתִיב "מִזֶּה" (מִה־זֶּה) בִּידָךְ, וְנִסְתֵּר הַתִּירוּץ שְׁלָךְ, וְלֹא הָיָה לָךְ לְהִתְקַרֵּב אֶל הָעֲבֹדָה זָרָה. וְאִם עֲדִין יִרְצֶה הֵבֵן לוֹי לְדְחוֹת וּלְתַרְץ, מִשּׁוּם הֵכִי הִבִּיאוּ לוֹ עוֹד רָאִי שְׁלִישִׁית מִן הַכְּתוּב "וְאַתָּה פֶּה עֹמֵד עֹמְדִי", וּבִזְנָה נִסְתְּרוּ כָּל הַתִּירוּצִים שְׁלֹו.

Investigation is required why they needed to quote these three verses, and what their intention was. The structure is as follows: Initially, they said to him, "Since regarding Moses it is written, 'Do not draw close to here,' you should not have approached idolatry." Because

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¹ Judges 18:3.

² Ex. 3:5.

³ Ex. 4:2.

⁴ Deut. 5:28.

he might have been able to offer an excuse and refute the proof, as will be explained below, they added for him, “Regarding Moses it is written, ‘What is that in your hand,’ which undermines your excuse, and you should not have approached idolatry.” If the Levite still wanted to reject the rebuke and offer a counter-argument, as will be explained below, therefore they brought him a third proof from the verse, “But as for you, stand here with Me,” and by this they refuted all his excuses.

והינינו דאיתא בנלקוט ראובני בשם תיקוני זוהר, "נמצא אתו כִּי־טוֹב הוּא" דחמת עימיה שכינתיה ומיד דנגעה ביה את[]סיאת מצרעתא דילה, ובגין דא נאמר בסנה "אל־תִּקְרַב הָלֵם" עד דיתפשט מההוא גופא דנגעה בת פרעה, הֵדא הוא דכתיב "שֶׁל־נָעֳלֶיהָ" דא גופא נאִתְלַבֵּישׁ בגופא אִתְרָא נאִתְדַרַּת שכינתיה עליה עכ"ל. ומשום הכי אמרו לו לאו ממשא קא אתית, דכתיב ביה "אל־תִּקְרַב הָלֵם", דמשום דנגעה ביה בת פרעה שְׁהִיתָה עוֹבְדֵת עֲבֹדָה זָרָה נִטְמָא אותו הגוף משום נגיעה לחודה, ומכל שכן שלא היה לה להתדבק בעֲבֹדָה זָרָה כְּדִי לִטְמָאוֹת אֶת עַצְמָהּ.

This is what is written in the *Yalkut Reuveni* in the name of the *Tikkunei Zohar*:

“The woman conceived and bore a son; and she saw he was good, and she hid him for three months.”⁵

[The daughter of Pharaoh] saw the Shechinah was with him, and she immediately touched him, and was healed from her leprosy [but the Shechinah departed from him]. Therefore, it is said at the [burning] bush, “Do not draw close to here,” until you remove the ‘body’ that touched Pharaoh’s daughter. This is [the meaning] of what is written, “Remove your sandals from your feet,” this is the body, [which was as a “shoe” for him, that which the daughter of Pharaoh had touched,] and dress in a different, refined body, and the Shechinah returned upon him.

- Yalkut Reuveni on Ex. 2:6, based on Tikkunei Zohar 48b

Because of this, they said to him, “Do you not come from Moses, as it is written regarding him, ‘Do not draw close to here,’ because by touching Pharaoh’s daughter, who worshipped idols, he became impure just by that touch alone. All the more so, you should not have attached yourself to idolatry, which would cause you to defile yourself.”

אָמְנָם הָבֵן לֵוִי הָיָה לוֹ מְקוֹם לְדָחוֹת וּלְתַרְץ וְלומר שְׁהִיָּה כְּמוֹ מוֹכֵרָה בְּמַעֲשָׂיו, שְׁהִיָּה כְּכֹהֵן הָיָה גּוֹפוֹ טָמֵא וּפְגוּם וְאִי אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְהִטְהָר, שְׁמִינְשָׁה נָשָׂא צְפוּרָה בַּת יִתְרוֹ שְׁהִיָּה כּוֹמֵר לַעֲבֹדָה זָרָה וּבְנָה גֵרָם קִלְקוּל בְּבָנָיו שְׁתַּהֲא הַקְלִיפָה אַחִוְזָה בָּהֶם, לִפִּי שְׁלֹא נִזְהַר בְּעַצְמוֹ לִיקַח אִשָּׁה הַגּוֹנָה לוֹ מִזֶּרַע מִיִּחוּס.

However, the Levite had grounds to reject this criticism and explain, and to say it was as though his actions were compelled, since his body was already impure and defective, and it was impossible for him to purify himself. That is, Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, who was a priest to idolatry, and through this, he caused a blemish in his children, so that the *klipah* would cling to them, because he was not careful to take a suitable wife from a distinguished lineage.

⁵ Ex. 2:2.

ומשום הכי תירצו והוסיפו לומר לו לאו ממשה וכו' דכתיב ביה "מזה" [מה־זה] בְּנֶדֶךְ, ומדכתיב "מזה" בְּמִיכָה אחת אָנוּ דורשים מזה שְׂבִינֶדֶךְ יֵשׁ לָךְ סִמֶּן שִׁישְׁרָאֵל יֵאָמְרוּ לָךְ וְאַתָּה תִּהְיֶה הַשְּׁלִיחַ, דְּאִי לֹא הָכִי לְמָה בָּא הַמָּטָה דְּנִקְא בְּנֶדֶךְ וְלֹא בְּנֶדֶךְ אִישׁ אַחֵר. דְּאִיתָא בְּמִדְרַשׁ זִלְקוּט עַל פֶּסוּק "וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה" שֶׁבְּמִטָּה זֶה הָיָה חֲקוּק עָלָיו שֶׁשׁ הַמִּפְּרֹשׁ, וְגִיתָן לְאָדָם הָרָאוּשׁוֹן וְכֵן לְנֶס וְלֵאבֹת וְכו', וְהָיָה נְטוּעַ בְּגֵן יִתְרוֹ וְלֹא הָיָה שׁוֹם אָדָם יָכוֹל לְעַקְרוֹ. וְהָיוּ אוֹמְרִים מִי שִׁישְׁרָאֵל אוֹתוֹ יִקַּח צִפּוֹרָה לְאִשָּׁה, וּמִיָּד כִּשְׁבָא מֹשֶׁה הִבִּיאוּ בְּיָדוֹ וְתָמְהוּ עַל זֶה רַעוּאֵל וְכָל הַגִּיבּוֹרִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁם וּמִיָּד נִתְּנוּ לוֹ צִפּוֹרָה לְאִשָּׁה, וְאִם כֵּן אָנוּ רוֹאִים שְׁמֵאתָ ה' הָיְתָה לוֹ שְׂיָקָח צִפּוֹרָה לְאִשָּׁה. וְשָׁמַע מִיָּנָה שֶׁהָיְתָה אִשָּׁה הַגּוֹנָה לוֹ, כְּדֹכְתִּיב "כִּי לֹא יָנוּחַ שְׂבֵט הַרְשָׁע עַל גּוֹרֵל הַצְּדִיקִים", וְאִין לָךְ טַעְנָה לֹמֵר שֶׁנִּשְׁמַאת בְּהִיּוֹתָהּ בֶּן צִפּוֹרָה. וְכִמוֹ שֶׁסִּיִּים שָׁם הַמִּדְרַשׁ שֶׁצִּפּוֹרָה לֹא חֲסָרָה דְּבַר מַצְדָּקַת שְׂרָה, רִבְקָה, רָחֵל, וְלֵאָה אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁהָיוּ בָנוּת נְכָרִים, וְאִין לָךְ שׁוֹם פֶּתַחזֵן פֶּה לְהִתְקַרֵּב אֶל הַעֲבֹדָה זָרָה הוֹאִיל שֶׁרְאִיתָ כְּמָה הִיא קִשָּׁה הַטּוֹמְאָה שֶׁל הַעֲבֹדָה זָרָה.

Therefore, they responded and added to him, “Do you not come from Moses, about whom it is written: ‘What [ma] is that in your hand?’” Since it is written, “what is that” in one word,⁶ we interpret that as meaning: “in your hand is a sign that Israel will believe in you, and you will be their agent. For if not so, why would the staff be in your hand and not in someone else’s?”

It is brought in the *Yalkut Shimoni* on the verse, “And Moses fled from Pharaoh”:⁷ On this staff was engraved the explicit Name [i.e., the Tetragrammaton], and it was given to Adam, then to Noah, and to the Patriarchs, etc. It was planted in the garden of Yitro, and no one could uproot it. They used to say, “Whoever can uproot it will take Zipporah as his wife.” When Moses came, he immediately took it in his hand, and both Reuel and all the mighty men there were astonished by this, and immediately they gave him Zipporah as a wife.⁸ If so, we see that it’s from G-d that he took Zipporah as a wife. We hear from this that she was a suitable wife for him, as it is written, “The scepter of the wicked shall never rest upon the land allotted to the righteous,”⁹ and you have no excuse to say that “you became impure by being the son of Zipporah.” As the midrash concludes, Zipporah lacked nothing in righteousness, like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, even though they were daughters of gentiles, and “you have no excuse to approach idolatry, since you have seen how severe the impurity of idolatry is.”

אָמְנָם עֲדִינִין הֵבֵן לוֹי יָכוֹל לְדַחֹת וְלֹמֵר שֶׁאֵף שָׁמֹן הַשְּׁמַיִם נִגְזַר עָלָיו שִׁיקַח צִפּוֹרָה שֶׁהָיָה עָשׂוּ לוֹ הַגֵּס שֶׁל הַמָּטָה, זֶה אִינוּ סִמֶּן כָּלֵל, דְּלַעוּלָם אֵימָא לָךְ שֶׁצִּפּוֹרָה הָיָה לָךְ הַפֶּגֶם שֶׁהָיְתָה בַּת יִתְרוֹ וְלֹא הָיְתָה שְׁנוּה לְמִשָּׁה בְּחֻסְדוֹת וְלֹא הָיְתָה רְאוּיָה לוֹ. וְהָא שָׁמֹן הַשְּׁמַיִם סִיִּיעוּ אֶת מֹשֶׁה שִׁיקְחָנָה יֵשׁ לֹמֵר כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתִיב הָעֵינִן יַעֲקֹב שֶׁהוֹאִיל שָׁמֹן הַשְּׁמַיִם הָיוּ עֲתִידִין לְצִוּוֹת לוֹ לְפָרוֹשׁ מִן הָאִשָּׁה לְכָךְ מֵאֵת ה' הָיְתָה זֹאת כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא תִשָּׁאֵר בַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲגוּנָה. אָבָל אִין הָכִי נִמִּי שֶׁצִּפּוֹרָה לֹא הָיְתָה רְאוּיָה לְמִשָּׁה, מִשׁוֹם הָכִי הוּצָרָכוּ לֹמֵר לוֹ "וְאַתָּה פֶּה עֹמֵד עִמָּדִי", דְּלִפִּי דַעַת הַתּוֹסְפוֹת בְּשִׁבְתָּ (דף פ"ז) מוֹכְרִים אָנוּ לֹמֵר שֶׁזֶה לֹא הָיָה צִוּוִי כָלֵל מִן הַקַּב"ה אֲלֵא מִשָּׁה עָשָׂה מִדַּעְתּוֹ וְהַסְכִּים הַקַּב"ה עִמּוֹ, מִטַּעַם בְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁאָדָם רוֹצֵה לִילָךְ בָּהּ, מוֹלִיכִין אוֹתוֹ. וְהִדְרָא קוֹשְׁיִין לְדוּכְתָא, אִם צִפּוֹרָה לֹא הָיְתָה רְאוּיָה לוֹ לְמָה עָשׂוּ לוֹ הַגֵּס שֶׁל הַמָּטָה כְּדִי שִׁיקְחָנָה.

However, the Levite could still deflect and say that even though it was decreed from Heaven that [Moses] should take Zipporah, since the miracle of the staff was done for him, this was not necessarily a sign that she was suitable. I could always tell you that Zipporah had

⁶ “What is that” is properly two words, מה זה [ma zeh], but in the Torah scroll it is written as a single word, מזה.

⁷ Ex. 2:15.

⁸ Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 168:1–2.

⁹ Ps. 125:3.

the flaw of being the daughter of Jethro, and she was not equal to Moses in piety and was not suitable for him. The fact that Heaven assisted Moses in taking her can be explained as the *Iyun Yaakov* wrote: since it was destined from Heaven that Moses would eventually be commanded to separate from her, after the Torah was given, it was from G-d that this happened, so that a daughter of Israel would not remain an *agunah*,¹⁰ literally “chained.” I.e., if Moses had married a woman of better Jewish lineage, he would have still been commanded to separate from her, and then there would be a daughter of Israel who would have been left an *agunah*, i.e., unable to remarry due to her husband’s absence or refusal to divorce her. So he instead was allowed to marry Zipporah, so that she would suffer instead of a daughter of Israel.

But it is indeed so, the Levite, could argue, **that Zipporah was not worthy of Moses**, and that the result of the marriage was a deficiency in Moses’ descendants, so that he should not be held blameworthy. **This is why they had to tell him** their third argument, **“But as for you, stand here with Me.”** The rabbis cite this verse as the reason for Moses separating from his wife, **but according to the opinion of Tosafot in Shabbat (page 87a), we must say that this was not at all a commandment from the Holy One, Blessed be He, but rather Moses acted on his own opinion, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, agreed with him, “since the way a person wants to go, they lead him” (Makkot 10b).**¹¹

So the question arises again: if Zipporah was not worthy of him, why did they perform the miracle of the staff to enable him to take her?

ואין לומר שעשו כדי שלא תהיה בת ישראל עגונה, שהרי זה הדבר אדרבא בא מבחירתו של משה, ועוד שאם מן השמים עשו זה כדי שלא תהיה בת ישראל עגונה, אם כן נקרא שמן השמים נתנו לו מתחלה רמז על זה, ולא שייד לומר עשה משה מדעתו והסכים הקב"ה עמו, ועוד דאי מטעם שלא תהיה בת ישראל עגונה היה יכול למי לגרשה. אלא ודאי שצפורה היתה ראויה למשה ונסתרו כל הטענות של בן לוי שלא היה לו להתקרב אל העבודה זרה כלל, ומכל שכן שהיה בנו של משה דכתיב ביה "אל-תקרב ה' בן לוי" בן לוי שנגזר בו יד בת פרעה ופנאמר לעיל.

One cannot say that this miracle of the staff was done so that Zipporah would not be left an *agunah*, because this matter of Moses’ separation from his wife, on the contrary, came from Moses’ own choice. Furthermore, if it were done from Heaven to prevent a daughter of Israel from being an *agunah*, if so, it would mean that Heaven gave him an initial sign about this, and it would not make sense to say that Moses acted on his own decision and the Holy One, Blessed be He agreed with him. Also, if the reason was to prevent her from being an *agunah*, Moses could have simply divorced her. Therefore, certainly Zipporah was indeed suitable for Moses, and all the arguments of the Levite are refuted, that he should not have approached idolatry at all. All the more so, as he was the son of Moses, regarding whom it is written, “Do not draw close to here,” because he had been touched by the hand of Pharaoh’s daughter, as was stated above.

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¹⁰ Jacob ben Joseph Reischer (Bechofen) (1661–1733), *Iyun Yaakov* (Wilmsdorf, 1729), Pesachim 87b, note 38.

¹¹ Tosafot on Shabbat 87a: “If he separated due to G-d’s command, and not on his own initiative, how did Aharon and Miryam censure him? Rather, surely at first he totally separated from her on his own initiative, and even though G-d agreed with him, [Aharon and Miryam] censured him, for had he not separated from his own initiative, G-d would not have agreed, for in the direction that a person goes, [from Shamayim] they lead him.”