

The Fateful Vow

One of the most mysterious and intriguing incidents in the Torah occurs in this week's sidrah. Moshe, after reluctantly accepting the task of leading Bnei Yisrael out of their Egyptian bondage, leaves Midian with his wife and two sons. Hashem instructs him on how to address Pharaoh:

"וַאֲמַרְתָּ אֶל פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּנֵי בְכֹרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו שְׁלַח אֶת בְּנֵי וַיַּעֲבֹדְנִי, וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחֹוּ הֵנָּה אֶת בְּנִי בְּכֹרִי" (ד:כב-כג)

"And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'so said Hashem, My firstborn son is Israel. So I say to you, send My son that he may serve Me - but you refused to send him out; behold, I shall kill your firstborn son.'" (4:22-23)

Immediately after this interchange, in the same Parsha (without a space between the verses, thus indicating a direct connection between the stories,) we read the following:

"וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשֶׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ. וְתִקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צַר וְתִכְרַת אֶת עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ וְתַגַּע לְרַגְלָיו וְתֹאמַר כִּי חָתָן דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי. וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ אִזּוֹ אָמְרָה חָתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלַת." (ד:כד-כו)

"It was on the way, in the lodging, that Hashem encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched it to his feet; and she said, 'A bridegroom of blood you are to me'. So He withdrew from him. Then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood in regard to circumcision.'" (4:24-26)

There are several questions that immediately come to mind:

1. What is the connection, if any, of the incident at the inn and the preceding verses of Hashem's instructions to Moshe?
2. Who does Hashem want to kill?
3. Why does Zipporah perform the circumcision instead of Moshe, considering that a father has the primary obligation to circumcise his son?

In order to answer these questions, let us fast forward some years to Sefer Shoftim, the Book of Judges, chapters 17 and 18, to the story of the eponymous Micah's Idol. Micah, who lived in the mountain of Ephraim in the period soon after Yehoshua's death, had a sanctuary dedicated to idolatry which was centered on a graven image. A young man from the tribe of Levy from Beit-Lechem came to Micah looking for a place to live. Micah asked him to become the priest for his sanctuary, and offered to support him in return. The anonymous Levite accepted the offer.

"...וַיִּוָּאֵל הַלֵּוִי לִשְׁבַת אֶת הָאִישׁ... (וי:יא). This exact phrase is found in Tanach only one other time, (with a different subject), and we will soon come to it. But it is important to remember that this vow concerned serving *avodah zarah*, idolatrous worship. Subsequently some men from the tribe of Dan came to Micah's house, took the idol, and made an offer to the Levite that he could not refuse. Instead of being a priest in the house of one man, the Levite would be a priest to the same idol, but he would minister to the whole tribe of Dan. We then learn the identity of this priest:

"...וַיְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן גֵּרְשֹׁם בֶּן מִישָׁה הוּא וּבְנָיו הָיוּ כַהֲנָיִם לְשִׁבְטֵי הַדָּנִי עַד יוֹם גְּלוֹת הָאָרֶץ" (יח:ל).

"And Yonatan the son of Gershom the son of Menashe (the Talmud tells us that the *nun* in Menashe is raised to indicate the real name is Moshe) both he and his sons were the priests to the tribe of Danites until the day of the exile of the land." (18:30)

We see that Moshe's grandson became a priest to idolatry.

Let us return now to today's *sidrah*. Moshe escapes from Egypt to Midian after killing an Egyptian. He comes to Yitro's house and asks his permission to marry his daughter. We now have the same phrase we had earlier in the Micah story, the only other time it occurs in Tanach. (Is it coincidental that this phrase only occurs with Moshe and his grandson as the subjects?)

"ויואל משה לשבת את האיש ויתן את צפרה בתו למשה" (ב:כא), "And Moshe vowed to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moshe." (2:21)

We know the nature of the vow that the Levite gave to Micah. What vow did Moshe give to Yitro? The Mechilta in the *sidrah* of Yitro (פרשה א, ואת שני בניה) tells us the following: When Moshe asked Yitro permission to marry his daughter, Yitro agreed but with one condition. Moshe had to vow that his firstborn, his *bechor*, would be dedicated to עבודה זרה, to idol worship. "And Moshe vowed.... משה ויואל". (The Mechilta may have come to this radical conclusion because of the unique phrase.)

Now we can begin to answer the questions with which we began by reexamining the relevant verses:

"And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'so said Hashem, My firstborn is Israel.'"

We now reinterpret the next verse.

"So I (Hashem) say to you (Moshe), send out My son that he may serve Me, but you have refused to send him out; behold I shall kill your firstborn (Gershon)."

There immediately follows the story in the inn and Hashem's intending to kill "him" (Gershon) and Zipporah's circumcision of her son. Moshe cannot be the leader to take the Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt from the depths of impurity, while his son is uncircumcised and dedicated to idolatry. These verses logically follow each other and are connected. Zipporah had to perform the circumcision because Moshe was constrained by his vow to Yitro. Unfortunately for Moshe, however, the die had been cast, and his grandson Yonatan fulfilled the vow. Perhaps if Moshe had not made that fateful vow, the כהונה, the priesthood, would have gone to his descendents instead of to Aaron and his descendents.

Postscript- We have seen the relationship between Micah and Yonatan, Moshe's grandson. But could there have been a connection between Moshe and Micah the idolater directly?

There is a fascinating midrash that tells the following story. When the enslaved Israelites did not fulfill the quota of making bricks, the Egyptians immured the Hebrew babies in the walls in place of the missing bricks. When Moshe complained to Hashem, Hashem answered him by saying that the Egyptians were merely ridding the nation of thorns, i.e. of future sinners. Moshe tested God's word by removing one of the babies out of the wall. That child grew up to be the idolater Micah who turned Moshe's grandson towards *avodah zarah*. (Rashi, Sanhedrin 101B and Tanchuma Ki Tissa 19).

Shabbat Shalom.