

Parashat Shemot 5771, 2010:

*We Can Change the World*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

An often quoted anonymous poem depicts the feelings and frustrations of an old man in the twilight of his years, who poignantly realizes that he did not achieve the fulfillment of his hopes and dreams:

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation.

When I found I couldn't change my nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realize that the only thing I can change is myself, and I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family.

My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could, indeed, have changed the world.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman *zatzal* (1874 – July 6, 1941) was one of the greatest disciples of the saintly Chafetz Chaim *zatzal* (Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan, 1838-1933). In his *hesped* (eulogy) for his beloved rebbe, he noted that the Chafetz Chaim had felt much like the anonymous author of our poem. At first he had wanted to change the world, then he lowered his expectations to his community, then to his family, and finally settled upon changing himself. According to Rav Wasserman, Rav Yisrael did not realize that because he changed himself, he changed his family, his community, and the entire world. In sum, the Chafetz Chaim's act of self-transformation ultimately changed the world.

I believe our *parasha* contains a similar narrative of self-transformation in the person of *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moshe). Let us briefly review Moshe's story as presented herein. Moshe was born to Amram and Yocheved, two of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people during the 210-year period of the Egyptian Exile. In addition, he was the brother of Aharon and Miriam, two individuals who brought their singular leadership to our nation during the events that preceded the Exodus and for the duration of the 40 years of wandering in the desert. Yet, Moshe's youth was not spent in the warmth and comfort of his beloved family. Instead, as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, he was raised amidst palatial opulence and received all the benefits befitting a prince. As Rashi (1040-1105) notes in his comment on *Sefer Shemot* 2:11, Pharaoh went so far as to designate Moshe the head of his household (*"she'minahu Paroh al beito"*). Most people in his situation surely would have basked in the glow of living in the lap of luxury, and most likely would have done everything in their power to repudiate their enslaved people and family of origin. Moshe, however, even at this stage of his development, acted quite differently than one might naturally have expected.

Although the Torah is completely silent regarding the inner workings of Moshe's mind and consequent actions as the head of Pharaoh's household, we can readily deduce that he viewed his Jewish faith, identity, and connection to his people and family with pride and respect. Thus, he "changed himself," and differentiated himself from the hedonistic culture and heartless individuals who surrounded him. When viewed from this perspective, we can understand why Moshe defended the husband of Shulamit bat Divri (Rashi, *ibid.*) against the life threatening blows of the vicious Egyptian taskmaster. After all, like any other nobleman of his day, he simply could have chosen to ignore the blatant

violence, as this was how most slaves were treated. Instead, Moshe steadfastly refused to stand idly by, and ran to the rescue of his fellow Jew:

Now it came to pass in those days that Moses grew up and went out to his brothers and looked at their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. He turned this way and that way, and he saw that there was no man; so he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (*Sefer Shemot 2:11-12*, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The next day, Moshe once again went out of the palace to look after the welfare of his nation. To his shock and dismay, he found two of his own people (Rashi 2:13, Datan and Aviram) in the midst of a heated argument that bordered upon physical violence. He immediately asked them to refrain from striking one another. Rather than viewing him as someone nobly trying to resolve their conflict, they viewed him as an interloper and rejected his intervention out of hand. Furthermore, their harsh rebuke revealed that Moshe's actions against the Egyptian taskmaster had become public knowledge:

He [Moshe] went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were quarreling, and he said to the wicked one, "Why are you going to strike your friend?" And he retorted, "Who made you a man, a prince, and a judge over us? Do you plan to slay me as you have slain the Egyptian?" Moses became frightened and said, "Indeed, the matter has become known!" (*Sefer Shemot 2:13-14*)

Now that Moshe realized "the matter has become known!" he knew he had little choice but to flee Egypt and seek asylum in Midian. This was a very wise choice, since when "Pharaoh heard of this incident he sought to slay Moses." (Ibid., 2:15) Thus ended Moshe's life as an Egyptian prince. He had risked everything in his identification with and defense of his brethren. From now on, he would begin to grow and develop into his ultimate persona – that of *Moshe Rabbeinu*.

It is at this point that Moshe's focus expanded beyond himself and his nation and began to encompass the needs of non-Jews. After all, true justice and righteousness knows no national or ethnic boundaries:

... so Moses fled from before Pharaoh. He stayed in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. Now the chief of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew [water], and they filled the troughs to water their father's flocks. But the shepherds came and drove them away; so Moses arose and rescued them and watered their flocks. (Ibid., 15-16)

Herein we see that Moshe has completed another crucial step in becoming a leader *par excellence*: At first, he changed himself and refused to be corrupted by the life of a palace prince. Next, he grew in his love and devotion to his nation, his fellow Jews. Thus he saved Shulamit bat Divri's husband from all but certain death, and sought to bring ethical behavior to Datan and Aviram. Now, in a true test of his moral rectitude, he demonstrated his desire for universal justice and fought to protect the non-Jewish daughters of the chief of Midian. With righteousness, conviction of purpose, alacrity, and bravery, Moshe arose as a true representative of the *Ribono shel Haolam* (the Master of the Universe).

With G-d's help, may we have the will, desire, and wisdom to emulate *Moshe Rabbeinu* and the Chafetz Chaim. May we be blessed with understanding the far-reaching impact of our actions, and strive to develop positive changes in ourselves, our nation, and ultimately, our world. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/index.html>.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com).