

Shemot 5779

He Saw There Was No Man...

With the beginning of the book of Shemot, we once again meet Moses – the leader of the Children of Israel, the hero of the Torah. Like other heroes we encounter from other cultures, Moses's life begins in ignominy and contains a number of adventures in which he discovers his true self and purpose.

In terms of heroism, some of those adventures are more ambiguous than others. One example is in the early part of today's Torah portion, in the part of the story that describes Moses' gradual becoming sensitized to the suffering of the Israelites:

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that, and seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

Whichever way you read this, it's disturbing. Moses doesn't seem to consider his behavior in any way – his reaction is kneejerk. He witnesses the cruelty and straight away he kills the Egyptian (which, we might think, is just as cruel, if not more so). It's an act of private, impulsive, enraged vengeance.

Our traditional commentators struggle with this episode. They eventually rationalize it by flipping forward in the Torah to an incident in Leviticus – the anonymous son of one Shlomit ben Dibri curses God and is stoned to death. A Midrash postulates that this man's father is none other than the Egyptian taskmaster we meet here – and when Moses looks around, he is really looking into the future and verifying that this man's line would come to an end, thus relieving him of responsibility for the death. And in any case, he already deserved to die for committing adultery with the Israelite woman. It's ingenious, but hardly satisfactory.

Even the directors of *Prince of Egypt* (which I recommend as an excellent introduction to *Shemot*) had trouble with this scene. They turn it into an accident – Moses is high up on a scaffold, throws himself on the taskmaster to try to prevent him whipping the Israelite any more, but they both overbalance and the taskmaster plummets to the ground. Afterwards, Moses is penitent – “I killed a man!” and refuses to stay, despite Pharaoh’s offer to make it all go away. All in all, a significant departure from the Biblical text.

But if we turn towards this episode instead of turning away from it, there is a profound lesson for us to learn from it. And the key phrase that conveys the lesson is the one that was translated *He turned this way and that, and seeing no one about...*

That’s not exactly what the Hebrew says.

A better translation would be, *He turned here and there and saw there was no man...*

My friend and former colleague from London, Andrew Levy, has a reading of this phrase which to my mind unlocks it. The ‘man’ referred to is Moses himself. In the moment that he kills the Egyptian, the ‘man’ that is Moses is nowhere to be found – because it is impossible to take the life of another human being unless the killer has themselves sets aside their own humanity. Moses killed a ‘bad guy’ – but in doing so he also abandoned a part of himself.

It is no wonder that Moses then buries the body in the sand. This is not only pragmatic – covering up what he has done – but also, read in this light, carries something of the shame that the directors of *Prince of Egypt* wanted to convey. We can imagine Moses slowly coming back to himself, looking with horror at what he did in the moment where he was not human, panicking, fleeing.

It is poignant that as the Torah unfolds it does not allow Moses to resolve this episode. We might hope that he would remember it, mention it later in his life as he mentions so much else; but we look in vain for any reference to it. Instead, we are confronted with other incidents in which Moses continues to give in to rage – when the people complain, when the Golden Calf is built, when he is told to talk to a rock in order to produce water. And we see that in the end, the price he pays for his impetuosity is a heavy one.

But the lesson is complex. In every case, Moses' rage is justified. As a Levite, Moses comes from the tribe that is dedicated, in a way, to avenging wrongdoing. And yet, this episode sets up right from the outset that when Moses gives in to his rage, he loses. The result is whatever it is, the story continues to unfold - but *there was no man*.

Let me suggest three take-homes for us:

The first is that the Torah is once again reminding us that our historical leaders and heroes, the protagonists of our story, are not paragons. Even Moses – who the Torah twice describes as unique – is imperfect. Sometimes it's a case of "do as I say, not as I do." We can learn more from a leader's mistakes than from their victories.

A second thought is to note the way that the system of mitzvot set out in the Torah can only legislate so far. Moses will bring the people to the first articulation of the mitzvot – but even they cannot fully govern our morality. That has to be left, in the end, to our individual consciences. As Moses demonstrates in this episode, the choices we make in any given moment really do matter.

And a third and final thought, as we stand on the brink of a secular new year. Amid the turbulence, the fear and the posturing that we see happening on a worldwide scale, it is tempting to try to double down on our own ideas of what is right and what is wrong. It can be reassuring to think of our existence in terms of absolutes. But this episode teaches us that in order to see the world, as Moses does here, in categories of absolute right and wrong, we have to set aside a piece of our humanity. We need to consider very carefully – is being 'right,' being justified, worth the price we might have to pay? Or is there a deeper lesson we need to learn?