

THE GENEALOGY OF MOSES AND AARON

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Exodus 6:14-26 contains a detailed account of the ancestry of Moses and Aaron. While Moses had been introduced in Exodus 2:1-10, the names of his parents and siblings were not recorded there. We were merely informed that he was from the tribe of Levi. Only in Exodus 6:20 do we find out that his parents were named Amram and Jochebed. In addition, we are given much additional information about the lineage and family of Moses, including how long Levi, Kohath and Amram lived (6:16, 18, 20) and the name of Aaron's wife (6:23).

Many elements of this genealogical listing are puzzling. Firstly, why is it found in this particular location? It interrupts the narrative of God sending Moses to speak to Pharaoh, necessitating a brief recap before we can return to the story.¹ Additionally, by this point in the narrative we are already familiar with Moses and Aaron. The ideal place for this section would seem to be at the very beginning of the Moses narrative in Exodus 2. Why is this information given here?

The second major difficulty with this section is that before getting to the genealogy of Moses and Aaron, two verses are spent listing the sons of Reuben and Simeon (6:14, 15). It is clear that the main intent of the passage as a whole is to tell the background of Moses and Aaron, since their genealogy is very detailed and includes information on wives and longevity. Reuben and Simeon get one verse each, simply repeating information that is already known from Genesis 46:9-10. Why is this information about Reuben and Simeon given again here?

The medieval rabbinic commentaries focus on the second issue, the inclusion of Reuben and Simeon. The standard simple approach [*pshat*] is that Reuben and Simeon were not listed for any particular intrinsic reason, but simply in order to reach Levi in the chronological order of the sons of Jacob. For this reason, the information about them is sparse. The goal of the passage is to get to Levi, and to do so one must go through the older brothers Reuben and Simeon.²

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A different approach is taken by Sforno, who explains that the list here is of all the heads of the families of the Israelites, which he understands as the leaders of the entire Israelite people. The leaders were all from the tribe of Reuben, Simeon or Levi. According to *Seder Olam*, Chapter 3, Levi outlived all of his brothers. Since Reuben and Simeon died before Levi, they were only able to instruct their sons in the ways of leadership, while Levi, who lived longer, was able to instruct his grandchildren as well.³ The advantage of the interpretation of Sforno is that we have a reason for listing the sons of Reuben and Simeon here. The complication with this approach is that it proposes that the leadership of the Israelites came from only three of the tribes. While such a situation is possible, it is very unusual. We would have expected every tribe to have its own leadership, and that if the leaders came from only some of the tribes, Judah should have been represented, as Judah is traditionally the foremost tribe.

Aside from these *pshat* explanations of the inclusion of Reuben and Simeon here, there is a midrashic explanation as well. This explanation states that Reuben, Simeon and Levi appear here because they did not receive a blessing from their father Jacob. Their inclusion here demonstrates that they are an important part of the Israelite people despite the fact that their father did not bless them.⁴

We are still left with the general question of why the genealogy appears here at all, and why it is placed as an interruption of the narrative flow. We can begin to understand the placement of this section when we compare the verses of the narrative which appear before and after it. In Exodus 6:12, we read: *But Moses appealed to the Lord saying, 'The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!'* In verse 6:30, understood as a recap of 6:12, we read: *Moses appealed to the Lord saying, 'See, I am of impeded speech; how then should Pharaoh heed me?'* This restates the general intent of 6:12, but there is a significant change. Moses omits one of his reasons for not going before Pharaoh; namely, that if the Israelites did not listen to him, certainly Pharaoh will not. Moses leaves out a criticism of the Israelite people from his reasons.

In fact, the transition from 6:12 to 6:30 marks the end of the critical com-

ments of Moses regarding the Israelites. Up to this point, Moses tells God that the Israelites would be skeptical of his claims (3:13, 4:1) even though they did believe him (4:31). Later, when the Israelites do not listen to Moses, we are explicitly told that this was only because of the hard labor that they were being forced to perform (6:9). Still, Moses is critical of them, and uses them as an excuse not to go before Pharaoh: *'The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!'* (6:12). Many commentators noted that this argument is not really logical, since it is only because of the extreme hardship they are enduring that the Israelites do not accept the message of Moses.⁵

Moses' critical attitude to the Israelites is emphasized by the Midrash. It is explained that the first two signs God gave to Moses, his staff turning into a serpent and his hand becoming leprous, were meant as a criticism of Moses' negative perception of the Israelites. The rod turning to a snake was meant to hint that just as the serpent in the Garden of Eden said evil things about God, so Moses spoke evil about the Israelites when he said that they would not believe that God sent him.⁶ Moses' hand became leprous as a punishment for speaking evil about the Israelites as well, just as Miriam would later be stricken with leprosy for speaking evil about Moses.⁷

Where did this negative feeling toward the Israelites originate? We can find the root in the description of Moses' initial encounters with Israelites as an adult. In his first encounter Moses *witnessed their labors* (2:11). He saves the life of an Israelite slave by killing his Egyptian tormentor (2:12). The next encounter is with the two fighting Israelites. Moses tries to break up the fight but is told to mind his own business (2:13,14). The text contains a veiled threat to expose the fact that Moses killed an Egyptian. This is amplified by the Midrash, which states that these Israelites did inform on Moses to the authorities.⁸

After this, Moses flees to Midian, begins a new life, marries, has children and works as a shepherd. Is it any wonder if he gives up on the Israelites? Based on his experience, they are not interested in a savior. Moses essentially retires from his role as potential savior of the Israelites and settles into life in Midian. He still feels the impulse to help the oppressed, as is evidenced by helping the daughters of Jethro against the nasty shepherds (2:17), but this impulse is not directed toward the unappreciative Israelites. Again, the Mi-

drash emphasizes this feeling, by noting that when the fighting Israelites threatened to turn him in, Moses decided that they deserved their fate and did not merit redemption.⁹

At what point does Moses change his attitude and decide that the Israelites are indeed worth saving? There is no clear indication in the text when this takes place, but we have already noted the difference between his protests to God in 6:12 and 6:30. After the genealogical listing, Moses does not complain about the Israelites; not even when they verbally attack him by saying: *'Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?'* (14:11). When does Moses change from skeptical outsider to willing leader? It is during the genealogical listing.

The genealogy of Moses comes in 6:14 to show that it is precisely at that point that Moses begins to consider himself a part of the Israelites. He is no longer rejecting his brethren and speaking negatively about them. He is now fully prepared to lead them out of slavery. Furthermore, by beginning the genealogy with Reuben and Simeon, the Torah demonstrates that now Moses is prepared to consider himself more than just a part of the Israelite community. He also recognizes that this community includes people like Reuben, Simeon and Levi, who did unsavory things and were not blessed by their father. Moses accepts this and still views himself as part of the community.

Again, this theme is emphasized by the Midrash. Just before the genealogy comes the verse (6:13): *So the Lord spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites . . .* The midrashic comment is that God commands that they must lead the Israelites even though the people may be unruly, difficult and contentious. Indeed, according to the Midrash, God commands Moses to lead the people even if they curse and stone him.¹⁰ Moses heeds this command and is transformed in the way he looks at the Israelites, and at himself in relation to them. This transformation is indicated by the genealogy of Moses in verses 6:14-26.

It is especially significant to note the interpretation given in Pesikta D'Rav Kahana on *So the Lord spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites . . .* There it is stated that God commands Moses never to call the children of Israel "rebels." Moses does so, once, in Numbers 20:10: *Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to*

them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?' God punishes Moses for this by not allowing him to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land.¹¹ This midrash sums up the lesson of the genealogical listing here. As long as Moses felt that he was part of the people, he could be their leader. However, once he no longer saw himself that way, and took a negative view of the Israelites, he was no longer able to be their leader.

NOTES

1. See Rashi and Ibn Ezra on Exodus 6:29.
2. See Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Ramban on Exodus 6:14.
3. Sforno, Exodus 6:14.
4. See Rashi and Rashbam on Exodus 6:14.
5. See Rashi, Exodus 6:12 and the commentary Divrei David on Rashi.
6. See Rashi, Exodus 4:3.
7. See Rashi, Exodus 4:6.
8. See Rashi, Exodus 2:15.
9. See Rashi, Exodus 2:14.
10. See Shmot Rabbah, 7:3. See also Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Exodus 6:13.
11. Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, end of chapter 14.

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