

HATAN DAMIM – THE BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD

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Exodus 4:24-26 has been justifiably described as "arguably the single most bizarre and baffling passage in all of the Hebrew Bible."¹ Moses has just been given the charge to journey to Egypt, there to commence the most audacious, awesome and dangerous mission of demanding that the great Pharaoh release his vast cadre of Israelite slaves.

According to the text, these were not the usual motley group of slaves, dragged back in bonds as the booty of a victorious battle. They had been resident in Egypt for generations, albeit ethnically alien, and consciously singled out and enslaved because they were deemed to constitute a direct threat to the security of the realm (Ex. 1:9-10). Without God's assured promise of protection, providence and ultimate victory, such a mission was a recipe for disaster, spelling suicide for its instigator and bitter consequences for those it had intended to benefit.

The relationship between God and the leader chosen to undertake such a mission must have been exceptionally close, and the spiritual credentials of the latter so impeccable as to justify the trust placed in him by God. And yet, no sooner has he set out on the journey, disaster strikes:

And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the Lord met him and sought to kill him. The Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me.' So He let him alone. Then she said: 'A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision' (Ex. 4:24-26).

What it was that caused God to launch that fearsome attack on His chosen leader is mystifying in the extreme. Moses had hardly had time – or opportunity, given that he was escorting his wife and young children – to do anything to offend his God so heinously during the few days that had elapsed from the time he left Midian to the time he arrived at the inn in the desert.

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If, as the text seems to suggest, Moses' sin was neglect of the circumcision of his son, then we also need to understand why, at that critical moment, with Moses' momentous mission about to be launched, it was just circumcision that loomed so large in the scheme of Divine priorities. Was God prepared to abort His great plan for Israel's deliverance through the taking of the life of the leader He had chosen to carry it out? If circumcision was, indeed, the issue, then one might also question why Moses deserved the death penalty and why it was being administered without any prior warning (even Pharaoh was forewarned, time and again, before the punishment of the plagues was administered!) and why mitigating circumstances were not taken into consideration. After all, Moses was reared and lived until this time in total isolation from the traditions of his Hebrew brethren, and may well have been completely ignorant of that precept, its significance and the precise time in the life of the infant that it had to be performed.

The precise meaning of Zipporah's outburst, '*A bridegroom of blood art thou to me,*' also needs to be clarified. Why "bridegroom" and not "husband?" Also, what additional point, if any, did she mean to convey by unnecessarily repeating that pejorative description, '*a bridegroom of blood in relation to the circumcision*'?

The whole episode is complicated even further by the absence of subjects for the verbs employed. We are told that *God met him and sought to kill him*, but we are not told to whom this refers. Yes, we have assumed above that it was Moses who was the object of the attack, but it might also have been one of the two sons that accompanied him, presumably the one who was peremptorily circumcised by Zipporah in order to save his life. But which son was that? Again, that fact is suppressed. The reference is merely to "her son," so it could have been either Gershom, the firstborn, or the second son named in 18:4 as Eliezer.

We are also told that Zipporah cast the foreskin "at his feet," though we know not whether this means the feet of the circumcised son or of Moses. Indeed, there is also the possibility that her outburst was addressed to the former, and that he is the one being referred to by the phrase *bridegroom of blood*. And, as if we were not short of problems, there is that of the strange formulation that God "sought to kill him" – as if this were some difficult and protracted challenge in which God was engaged.

For an elucidation of this most enigmatic episode we would instinctively turn to the wisdom, insights and tradition of our classical commentators. Quite surprisingly, most of the above issues are ignored. Nachmanides allows the episode to pass without a single observation, almost like an angel fearing to tread where others might readily rush in.

Rashi, quoting the Talmud,² views Moses as the victim of the Divine attack because of his failure to circumcise his younger son, Eliezer. (Rashi clearly follows the Midrash in its identification of the son,³ whereas Targum Yonatan identifies him as Gershom, the firstborn⁴). The Talmud excuses Moses' delay in performing that mitzvah on the grounds that he considered his first priority to be responding to the Divine summons mandating him to set out immediately into the desert, rather than to circumcise his son first. Although the act of circumcision only took a few minutes, Moses was cognizant that he could be jeopardizing the life of a weak, circumcised child by subjecting him to a journey through the desert.

Rashi explains that the foreskin was cast at the feet of Moses, but that Zipporah was addressing her son Eliezer when she made her subsequent outburst. Rashi therefore renders *Hatan damim attah li* as, "You [*attah*] were (almost) the cause [*gorem*] of Moses, my beloved's [*hatan li*] blood [*damim*] being shed." The repetition of that outburst, according to Rashi, took the form of an act of realization, when the heavenly attacker withdrew [*Vayiref mim-menu*], that the attack had indeed been occasioned by the failure to circumcise [*la-mulot*].

A bracketed gloss on Rashi's last point reveals that Zipporah was confused as to the precise offense that her husband had perpetrated against his God to evoke this terrible retribution. It was only when, subsequent to her circumcision of Eliezer, the heavenly attacker withdraws, that she realizes [*az amrah*] that it was the failure to circumcise, and not any other sin, that had been the cause of the attack.

The text implies that Zipporah did not know that the cause of the heavenly attack was the lack of circumcision until after she had performed that emergency operation. This begs the question of what it was that alerted her to just that course of action as a means of saving her son.

A commentator⁵ offers the suggestion that Zipporah was always troubled by Moses' marriage with her, the daughter of an idolatrous priest, and feared

some retribution. At this moment she instinctively assumed that this might well have been the real reason for the attack on Moses, and that he could not presume to become Israel's liberator if he retained her as his wife. When she saw the attack subside immediately after her act of circumcision, she breathed a sigh of relief and cried out, *A bridegroom of blood on account of the circumcision* – and not for the other reason!

This purely speculative explanation does have the benefit of offering a reason for Zipporah's use of the otherwise abstruse nomenclature "bridegroom" to describe Moses. Psychologically, she is returning to, and articulating, her long-standing apprehension; namely, that Moses, her bridegroom, had chosen a bride from a family of idolators, rather than from his own monotheistic people.

The usually incisive and original Ibn Ezra is of little help in unraveling the mystery of this episode, and in offering a solution to all the difficulties which we have enumerated. He is unusually expansive, and merely reiterates the talmudic presentation of Moses' dilemma over taking a circumcised child on a journey. He quotes R. Samuel ben Hofni, who could not bear the thought [*chalilah!*] that God would attack Moses, the agent of His mission on behalf of Israel. According to him, the attack could only have been leveled, therefore, at Eliezer.⁶ It is most perplexing, however, that neither R. Samuel nor Ibn Ezra was troubled by the terrible injustice that would have been perpetrated, if they were right, on an innocent babe.

I believe that the key to resolving all the problems we have raised above lies in the relation of this episode to the verses that precede and, I believe, introduce it. It is important in this context to note that our "bloody bridegroom" episode runs on from the previous verses, with none of the usual textual indicators that would demarcate it as a separate episode.

In those introductory verses, Moses is commanded to tell Pharaoh: *'Israel is my firstborn son, and I tell you to let my son go and serve Me [v'ya'avdeni]; and if you refuse to do so, I shall kill your firstborn son.* Service of God is emphasized here as being so vital that its prevention is a capital offense.

It is against that background that the very next episode is set. Moses cannot deliver that religious message to Pharaoh because he himself is guilty of that identical act of prevention of religious practice through his failure to circumcise his own firstborn son, Gershom.⁷ The latter is being prevented from serv-

ing his God in the prescribed manner through the failure of his father to initiate him into the sacred covenant of circumcision.

It stands to reason, therefore, that Moses is on course to suffer the prescribed consequences of that sin. That is, his own firstborn, Gershom, should have his life forfeited. It is him that God *encounters and seeks to slay*.

Zipporah rescues her son's life, literally in the nick of time. Her thrusting of the foreskin at the feet [*vatagga' leraglav*] of her husband is indicative of the fearful haste she felt impelled to employ and her profound anger at Moses for having endangered their son's life. She verbalizes this anger in the problematic cry, '*ki hatan damim attah li* [literally: *For a bridegroom of blood you are/were for me*].'¹

I offer here two possible explanations of this most puzzling condemnation. The first takes account of the fact that, in the cognate early Semitic languages, one of the nuances of the basic meaning of the verbal root underlying the word "*hatan* [son-in-law]" is "to circumcise." This is was retained in classical Arabic where "*hatana*" has the meaning "to circumcise" and "*hitun*" means "circumcision" or "circumcision feast." The lexicons elucidate the relatedness of these two meanings by explaining that "circumcision [is] performed on young men just prior to marriage."⁸ Hence, the particular nuance of Zipporah's condemnatory cry *hatan damim attah li*: You should have been the circumciser for me! You should have done it, not me!

A second possible interpretation takes account of the usage of the word "*damim*" in the sense of "guilt," or "responsibility." Hence, in the legislation providing for the establishment of cities of refuge, where the manslayer can escape the revenge of the near relative, the Torah states that [it is] *so that no innocent blood be shed in the midst of thy land* [*v'hayah alekha damim*] – *nor shall any blood be upon you* (Deut. 19:10). *Damim* here is clearly a synonym for "guilt," "responsibility" for the taking of innocent life.

And this may well be the condemnation that Zipporah was levelling against her husband, *hatan damim attah li*: A guilty groom you've proved to me! You have let me down by jeopardizing the life of our child! She may well have employed the term *hatan* here pejoratively and idiomatically, underlying the fact that, through his neglect of the circumcision, Moses had behaved more like an inexperienced groom than a mature and responsible husband.

The Targum Yonatan on Exodus 4:24 says that "Gershom was not circumcised, on account of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who would not permit Moses to do so, though Eliezer was circumcised, according to the agreement made between them." This is an allusion to the tradition contained in the Mekhilta, that Jethro's condition for giving his daughter in marriage to Moses was that the first son should be brought up in the idol-worshipping tradition of Midian, whereas the second son could be reared according to Israelite tradition.⁹

Now, circumcision was already practiced among the ancient Egyptians as early as 4000 BCE, as well as in many other Middle-Eastern societies. "Whenever the operation is performed as a traditional rite it is done either before or at puberty, and sometimes, as among some Arabian peoples, immediately before marriage."¹⁰ We may assume, therefore, that the delay in circumcising his firstborn son was, as the Midrash suggests, prompted by Jethro's insistence that Midianite practice be observed, and that Gershom would eventually have been circumcised at puberty or as a prelude to marriage. Thus, Zipporah's oblique reference to Moses as a *hatan* [son-in-law] who had concocted an unseemly – and clearly dangerous – pact with his father-in-law.

Hence, once the immediate threat had passed, she breathed an audible sigh of relief [*az amrah*], reflecting, a little more calmly, though also more specifically, on the precise issue wherein her husband had let her down: *hatan damim la-mulot* [a bridegroom guilty (of dereliction) in relation to circumcision.]

Ironically, it is Zipporah who stands out here as the one brimming with righteous indignation, and Moses, the future law-giver, is cast as the religious compromiser!

As to the difficulty of God's attack on an innocent child, I believe that the inclusion of the word "*vayyevakesh* [And He attempted (to slay him)], is highly significant. It clearly betokens a role-play, a symbolic and harmless acting-out of the slaying of a firstborn. It was a charade with a double purpose: to reassure Moses that every threat he was to aim at Pharaoh would be carried out, even to the extent of the slaying of Pharaoh's firstborn, as referred to in God's most recent communication to Moses. This was calculated to embolden Moses so that he would undertake his most hazardous mission without any reservations or fears for his own safety. At the same time, it was

a not-so-subtle reminder to Moses that he had to put his own house in order and circumcise his firstborn without a moment's delay.

NOTES

1. J. Kirsch, *Moses: A Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998) p.130.
 2. Talmud Nedarim 31b.
 3. See Midrash Shemot Rabbah 5 (8).
 4. See Targum Yonatan on Exodus 4:25.
 5. See the eclectic commentary contained in *Mikra'ot Gedolot Rav Peninim* (Jerusalem, Brothers Levin-Epstein, 1955) vol. II, Sefer Shemot. Essay entitled, "*Inyan pegishat ha-mal'akh*," on Exodus 4:24.
 6. See Ibn Ezra, Commentary on Exodus 4:24.
 7. Brown, Driver Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) p.368.
 8. See Targum Yonatan on Exodus 4:24
 9. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta d'Amalek, ed. Jacob Z.Lauterbach, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976) p.168, ll. 96-101.
 10. "Circumcision" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1970 ed., Vol. 5, p. 799.
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RESPONSES from
Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book
TORAH DIALOGUES

1. The principle that *pikuah nefesh*, danger to life, takes precedence over a prohibitory *mitzvah*. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 74a) lists three exceptions to this rule: idol worship, illicit sex and murder.
2. Both the majority and minority reports appear to turn emotional at Numbers 13:28 when the former exclaim: *ephess!* (it is nothing), whereas Caleb predicts success in superlative terms (v. 30). Note his emphatic doubling of the verbs for ascending and overcoming. We can only imagine the strong tones of voice used in making the respective statements.