

"Have You Heard About Moses, What's His Name?"

by Yakov Azriel

"Moses kept the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness..." (Exodus 3: 1)

Hello darling, long time no see,
Sit down, have something to drink.
Have you heard the news?
What do you mean, about whom?
Let me be the first,
They've found old Moses.
What, don't you remember,
That Jew who grew up in the Palace,
Who could have risen to a position in the Court, but-
You can't have forgotten the scandal!
An Egyptian nobleman chooses
To be one of the Jews,
To turn his back on us, and for what?
Simply revolting.

Now where do you think he's been hiding all these years?
Hiding from justice
And hiding his fears.
In Midian, in Sinai,
Dreadful, God-forsaken places.
Excuse me, what did you ask, how old he is?
Well, he must be 79 years old now.
An old man, a nothing,
A missing glove,
A broken stove.

Could have been,
Might have been,
Has become
A has-been.

How odd to choose the Jews.

Enough.
Tell me, where's the menu for lunch?

*Published in "Jewish Frontier," a Labor Zionist Journal, Winter 2001, Nahum Guttman,
Editor - www.ameinu.net/publicationfiles/LXIIN34.pdf*

"In the Shadow of a Burning Bush: Poems on Exodus," by Yakov Azriel (2008)

Commentary by Gail Lipsitz - April 7, 2020

In this really original poem, Yakov Azriel imagines a conversation between two ordinary Egyptians during the time the Israelites were still enslaved.

The context is a series of events that took place many years before this conversation, as told in Exodus, chapter 2, verses 11-25. The baby Moses we met in Azriel's poem, "Lullaby for Moses", is now an adult, having been adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the royal palace. The story narrates several important incidents: *"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 hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting." When he tried to break up the fight, one of them challenged Moses: "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of this, he sought to kill Moses, but Moses fled."* He arrived in Midian, where he met Reuel (Yitro), the priest of Midian. Reuel had seven daughters, and he gave one of them, Zipporah, to Moses as his wife.

Three important qualities of Moses' character are highlighted in this story: compassion for the downtrodden, a sense of justice, and his identification with his fellow Jews suffering in slavery, even though he has been raised as an Egyptian.

The story continues: *"A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out, and their cry... rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob."* (Exodus 2:23-25). In chapter 3 of Exodus, Moses, innocently tending his father-in-law's sheep, comes upon a strange bush that is burning but not consumed. In this pivotal, life-changing experience, God calls to Moses from the bush, telling Moses that He has chosen him to go before Pharaoh and to demand he free the Israelites from slavery, and then lead the people out from Egypt. Moses tells God he is not up to this huge task and tries to argue his way out of accepting the mantle of responsibility. God insists that Moses is his man and reassures him that God will be with him every step of the way; in addition, Moses' older brother Aaron will be his partner and helper in this historic undertaking.

The lead-up to the burning bush event is the starting point for Azriel's poem. As in many of his other poems, he begins with a direct quote from the Bible: *"Moses kept the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness..."* (Exodus 3: 1)

In order to understand Azriel's poem, we must take note of the fact that, according to the Bible, when God called to Moses from the bush and drafted him, **"Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three, when they made their [first] demand on Pharaoh."** (Exodus 7: 7). Just when the brothers should be enjoying quiet retired lives, everything suddenly changes, and they are obliged to confront huge challenges and shoulder responsibilities they never could have imagined.

Now we can eavesdrop on the conversation recorded in the poem. It's written in contemporary, casual language ("long time no see"), such as we might overhear in any restaurant where two friends are meeting for lunch, catching up on what's been going on (a pleasure denied to us for the time being). One speaker -- since he/she is not identified, let's say it's a woman -- is just bursting with eagerness to share the latest news ("Have you heard...? Let me be the first..."). The juicy information she imparts is that "They've found old Moses." It has been so many years since Moses disappeared that her friend needs to be reminded who Moses was. The answer:

"That Jew who grew up in the Palace,
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The speaker is indignant that Moses betrayed his "own" Egyptian people, disdained his social rank, and instead chose to join the Jewish people. He has been "hiding from justice" -- remember that he fled after killing a cruel Egyptian taskmaster. Her friend could care less; what does Moses have to do with them now? The friend does inquire how old Moses is; the answer is 79. He is just "an old man, a nothing... Might have been,/ Has become/A has-been./ How odd to choose the Jews." Dismissing the whole subject, the friends go back to their lunch.

Little do they know that a volcano is about to erupt under them. Connecting the dots, we realize that this conversation happens while God is talking to Moses from the bush in a place that turns out to be the total opposite of "God-forsaken". It happens just before 80-year-old Moses will come roaring back to Egypt to demand that Pharaoh free the Israelite slaves, *Moses' real people*. The Egyptians' lives are about to be turned upside down as God gets ready to inflict 10 plagues on them, because that is what it will take to get Pharaoh to agree to let the Jews go.

The whole poem is built on **dramatic irony**: the technique a writer uses to "construct a discrepancy between the appearance of a situation and the reality that underlies it," or a situation in a play (or in this case, a poem) when "a character speaks lines which are understood in a double sense by the audience, though not by the characters on stage." (*A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, by Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz). There is the irony that the Egyptians don't know that Moses is really a Jew, while we do, and there is the irony that they can't foresee what is about to happen to them, although we know it, and we know that Moses is no "has-been."

There is also the irony in the poem's title, which refers to "Moses, What's His Name?" Moses is the Egyptian name Pharaoh's daughter gave to the baby she saved; yet he becomes the greatest Jewish leader. As Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, concludes:

"Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses - whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel."

This is one of the most imaginative poems I have encountered. As you listen to and read this poem, how does hearing the story of Moses from a totally different perspective affect you?

Best wishes to all who are celebrating Passover. It will be very different this year, but I hope it will also be meaningful.

Gail

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