

Naming Moshe Rabenu's sons - Deja Vu?

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The parshah begins with Yitro reuniting Moshe Rabenu with his wife and two sons. We are told that the older son, Gershom is so named because his father was a stranger (*ger*) in a strange land. The younger son Eliezer's name is based on the "God of [Moshe's] fathers helping him, and saving him from the sword of Pharaoh". The appearance of Moshe's family is a throwback to parshat Shemot. There, the name of Gershom and its explanation are already revealed. Eliezer was presumably the younger son who was born just before returning to Egypt. Moshe's choices for his sons' names offer an insight into his reflections on his own life. The Torah's timing in presenting these names is also teaching us something. The mefarshim raise several questions about the presentation of Moshe's sons and their names:

- If Eliezer was named for G-d's saving Moshe from Pharaoh's attempt to execute him, why didn't Moshe commemorate this miracle right away and use this name for his first son?
- Why did the Torah wait until now to reveal Eliezer's name, in stead of placing it parshat Shemot?
- Why does the Torah reiterate the explanation of Gershom's name in our parshah if it was already explained before?

Several mefarshim (e.g. Chizkuni Shemot 2:22) answer the first question by noting that even if Moshe had been temporarily saved from Pharaoh when he fled to Midian, he was still in danger. It was only after G-d promised Moshe safety in travelling back to Egypt and facing Pharaoh that Moshe could feel truly safe. Ramban (18:3) takes this theme one step further in answering the second question. The Torah waited until our parshah to reveal Eliezer's name because Moshe's appointment as leader of the Jews and the defeat of Egypt further underscored G-d's kindness to Moshe in his battle against Pharaoh. Taking this line of reasoning even further we can suggest that after the events of the Exodus being "saved from the sword of Pharaoh" took on a new, and greater, meaning in Moshe's life. It was no longer about Moshe's personal safety, but about the much larger battle for the nation's freedom. This shift in perspective from the the individual to the collective leads to two answers to the third question. According to Malbim (18:4), the names of Moshe's two sons demarcate two phases in his life. The first is that of the individual, who was isolated as a stranger. The second phase began with G-d's call to Moshe to assume a central historical position and lead his nation.

By this reading, the explanation of Gershom's name is presented in our parshah as a foil for Eliezer. However, perhaps Gershom's name also has a double meaning which illustrates Moshe's transformation. Moshe began his journey as an "Egyptian man" (2:19), living as a stranger in Midian. But in the end he became the Jewish man who found himself a stranger in the Egypt. By this reading Gershom's name is presented to show that even this earlier part of Moshe's life and identity can be viewed, in hindsight, as integral to his transformation into a leader.

There are important lessons here in seeing our lives as a process of spiritual growth. Do we seek and can we identify critical moments of change? Do we view every moment of the past as a potential springboard for reaching our potential?

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