

The Hatan Damim Episode: A Preamble to Yetziat Mitzrayim

Mrs. Rivkah Kahan

Principal, Maayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls

The episode of the hatan damim, told in three pesukim in the fourth perek of Sefer Shemot, is among the most enigmatic narrative sections of Humash. There are several technical as well as philosophical questions that arise from a preliminary reading of the story. In this article, my focus is on the latter: on understanding why Hashem acts as He does in these pesukim, and why this short narrative is placed as a prelude to the story of geulat Mitzrayim.³⁸

The chief philosophical question that arises from the story of the hatan damim is why Hashem would seek to kill Moshe or his son³⁹ for the delay in performing a brit milah. This poses a problem not only because the punishment seems excessively severe, but also because the hatan damim episode immediately follows Hashem's protracted efforts to convince Moshe to accept the mission of redeeming Bnei Yisrael. It is therefore especially difficult to understand why Hashem would threaten to kill Moshe or his son just after Moshe has acceded, and has set out to Mitzrayim as Hashem's shliach mitzvah.

R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, in his sefer Haketav Vehakabbalah, is so troubled by the difficulty of understanding why Hashem would mete out the death penalty in this context that he proposes a radical reinterpretation of the pesukim. He suggests that Hashem, in fact, did not seek to kill anyone in the story of the hatan damim. He suggests that "*vayifgeshehu Hashem*" (Shemot 4:24) means that Hashem punished Moshe in some way for delaying to perform a brit milah on his son,⁴⁰ but that the subject of "*vayevakesh hamito*" is not Hashem, but Moshe:

³⁸ In their commentaries on Shemot 4:24-26, Rashi and Ibn Ezra offer interpretations that address the basic textual questions that arise from peshat in these pesukim, such as: whom does Hashem seek to kill, which of Moshe's sons is the child described in these pesukim, how does Tziporah know that she should perform a brit milah on her son, why does Moshe not perform the milah, and what is the meaning of the phrases "hatan damim" and "hatan damim lamulot."

³⁹ Nedarim 31b-32a records a mahloket between R. Yehoshua ben Karha and R. Shimon ben Gamliel as to whether Hashem sought to kill Moshe or his son.

⁴⁰ Note that "p-g-sh" is not a term generally used to denote divine revelation. The only other pasuk in Tanakh in which Hashem is the subject of the verb "p-g-sh" is in Hoshea 13:8: "אפגשם כדב שכול ואקרע סגור לבם ואכלם שם"

And if not for the opinion of our predecessors, I would have said that 'Vayevakesh hamito' does not refer to Hashem, but rather to Moshe, and its meaning is that through his encounter [pegisha] with Hashem, Moshe realized that his sin was visited upon him, and that he had not done well by delaying the performance of his Creator's will, and so much did his sin become great in his own eyes that this encounter was mild and not sufficient to remove his sin, and he said in his heart, 'If I am evil before God, why should I live? It would be better for me to cease to exist, and to choose death over life,' and this is the meaning of 'vayevakesh hamito,' that Moshe wanted Hashem to kill him.

ולולי דעת קדמונינו הייתי אומר שאין ויבקש המיתו מוסב על ה' רק על משה, וטעמו ע"י פגישת הדבר הרע נתעורר משה כי נפקד עליו עונו, ולא טוב עשה בהתאחרו בעשיית רצון קונו, וכל כך הגדיל עון זה בעיניו עד שפגישה זו היתה קלה ואינה מספקת לנשוא בו עונו, ואמר בלבו אם אהיה רשע לפני האלקים למה לי חיים, טוב לי להתבטל מן המציאות, ולבחור במותי מבחיי, וזהו ויבקש המיתו, חפץ משה שימיתו ה'.

In other words, Haketav Vehakabbalah considers it entirely inexplicable that Hashem would seek to mete out the death penalty for Moshe's delay in performing a brit milah. Rather, he suggests, it was Moshe who sought death for himself, in his shame at having sinned in the eyes of God. Haketav Vehakabbalah goes on to compare Moshe to Yonah, who preferred death to witnessing Bnei Yisrael's failure to do teshuva. By reinterpreting the pesukim in this novel way, Haketav Vehakabbalah dispenses with the philosophical difficulty of understanding Hashem's actions in the story of the hatan damim.

Along similar lines, Abarbanel offers a creative rereading of the pesukim that suggests that Hashem did not seek to mete out the death penalty in the story of the hatan damim. He writes:

Prophecy descended upon Moshe always, and he always needed to meditate and think about his mission. Therefore, when he came to the inn and occupied himself all that night with making provisions for lodging, and he did not meditate on the matters of his mission and his prophecy first, when the prophetic flow came upon him, it found him unprepared for prophecy. When it says "vayifgeshehu Hashem," it means that prophecy came upon him while his heart and his thoughts were burdened with the matters of his lodging and his wife and sons, and since he was found unprepared for the acceptance of prophecy, he experienced pain and danger and his spirit was rattled. And the meaning of "vayevakesh hamito" is not that Hashem wanted to kill him, for He desires kindness, but rather that the divine flow came upon him when he was unprepared, and therefore he was endangered and reached the gates of death.

הנבואה היתה יורדת על משה תמיד והיה צריך לעמוד תמיד בהתבודדותו ומחשבתו בשליחותו. ולכן כשבא במלון ונתעסק בעסקי לינה כל אותו הלילה ולא התבודד בעניני שליחותו ונבואתו תחילה הגה כשחל עליו שמה השפע מצאו בלתי מוכן לנבואה וז"א ויפגשוהו ה' רוצה לומר שבא הנבואה עליו ולבו ומחשבותיו היו טרודים בעסקי לינתו ואשתו ובניו ומפני שנמצא בלתי מוכן לקבול השפע ההוא היה עליו הצער והסכנה ההיא ותפעם רוחו. וה"א ויבקש המיתו לא שהיה רוצה הש"י להמיתו כי חפץ חסד הוא אלא שפגש אותו השפע העליון בהיותו בלתי מוכן ולכן נסתכן והגיע לשערי מות.

"כלביא חית השדה תבקעם". The Koren Tanakh translates this as: "I will meet them like a bear that is bereaved of her whelps, and I will rend their closed-up heart, and there will I devour them like a lion: the wild beast shall tear them." "P-g-sh" in this pasuk connotes a divine attack, supporting Haketav Vehakabbalah's premise that "vayifgeshehu" implies that Hashem did not just meet Moshe, but punished him.

Like Haketav Vehakabbalah, Abarbanel proposes that Hashem did not actively seek to kill Moshe or his son. Rather, because Moshe occupied himself with arranging lodging for his family rather than meditating and concentrating on his divine mission, he was unprepared to receive prophecy when it came to him. In this state, his powerful encounter with the Divine nearly killed him—not intentionally, but as a matter of course.

The interpretations of Haketav Vehakabbalah and Abarbanel, in addition to addressing the moral justification for Hashem’s actions, solve a linguistic difficulty as well. The usage of the word “*vayevakesh*” is perplexing when used to describe an action of God; if Hashem “seeks” to do something, then it is done. In the interpretation of Haketav Vehakabbalah, the subject of “*vayevakesh*” is Moshe. According to Abarbanel, the meaning of “*vayevakesh hamito*” is not that Hashem sought or wanted the death of Moshe, but rather that He almost killed Moshe as a result of bestowing prophecy upon him. In other words, according to Abarbanel, the meaning of “*vayevakesh*” is that Hashem came close to killing Moshe, not that He desired to.

Shadal offers a third, differing explanation of Hashem’s actions in the hatan damim episode, one which will help us explore the related question of why this story is placed as a prelude to the story of geulat Mitzrayim. Shadal begins his commentary on Shemot 4:23 with the question of why Hashem’s speech to Moshe at this point includes a mention of makkat bechorot, given that Moshe does not warn Pharaoh of makkat bechorot until much later:

You shall say to Pharaoh, ‘So said Hashem, My firstborn son is Israel. So I say to you, Send out My son that he may serve Me—but you have refused to send him out; behold, I shall kill your firstborn son.’

Shemot 4:22-23 (ArtScroll translation)

ואמרת אל-פרעה כה אמר ה' בני בכרי
 ישראל. ואמר אליך שלח את-בני ויעבדני
 ותמאן לשלחו הנה אנכי הרג את-בנך בכרך
 שמות ד: כב-כג

Shadal suggests that, in fact, Shemot 4:23 includes a veiled warning from Hashem to Moshe that if he does anything to delay the geulah, his own bechor will be in danger. Given Moshe’s reluctance to accept the mission of returning to Mitzrayim to redeem Bnei Yisrael, the necessity of such a warning is perhaps self-evident.

When Moshe tells Yitro of his plan to return to Mitzrayim, he presents his purpose as a reunion with his kinsmen, not as a mission to redeem Bnei Yisrael from slavery:

So Moshe went and returned to Yeter, his father-in-law, and said to him, ‘Let me now go back to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive.’

Shemot 4:18 (Artscroll translation)

וילך משה וישב אל יתר חתנו ויאמר לו
 אלכה-נא ואשובה אל-אחי אשר-במצרים
 ואראה העודם חיים ויאמר יתרו למשה לך
 לשלום.
 שמות ד: יח

Shadal suggests that, given the backdrop that Yitro (and, presumably, Tziporah) does not know Moshe’s true intentions in returning to Mitzrayim, Moshe’s decision to bring Tziporah and his children with him is problematic. In all probability, Tziporah will prevail upon Moshe not to

antagonize Pharaoh, out of concern for their family's safety.⁴¹ Furthermore, Shadal thinks that the text indicates that Tziporah has already influenced Moshe to circumcise their sons at the age of thirteen in keeping with the customs of her family's culture, rather than at eight days.⁴² He considers it inconceivable that Moshe and Tziporah would bring a newborn baby on a perilous trek across the desert, so he suggests that neither Gershom nor Eliezer were newborn infants. Rather, Gershom was a teenager who had already been circumcised, and Eliezer was a child who was not yet thirteen. When Moshe chose to bring his family to Mitzrayim, indicating a lack of serious commitment to his mission as the goel Yisrael, Hashem caused Gershom to fall ill. Gershom was singled out for punishment not because he was uncircumcised but because he held the privileged, symbolic status of the bechor. Tziporah responded by circumcising Eliezer, the younger son, as a show of commitment to the brit. She then returned to Midyan with her children and Moshe proceeded to Mitzrayim alone, as Hashem desired.

Shadal's approach has the advantage of remaining faithful to the simple peshat that Hashem sought to kill Moshe or his son, while also providing an explanation of why such a forceful divine response was warranted. Hashem meted out punishment not based solely on the delay in performing brit milah, but out of concern that Moshe did not demonstrate sufficient devotion to his all-important mission of bringing the geulah as expeditiously as possible.

I believe that we can build upon Shadal's approach to better understand the significance of the hatan damim story in the broader narrative of geulat Mitzrayim. Nahum Sarna, in the JPS Torah Commentary on Sefer Shemot, points out that the Tanakh explicitly links the hatan damim episode to the surrounding narrative through a number of *munahim mekashrim* (connecting terms). For example, "*vayevakesh hamito*" (4:24) echoes the phrase "*ha-anashim hamevakshim et nafshekha*" (Shemot 4:19). Similarly, the word "*vayifgeshu*" appears in Shemot 4:24 and then again in Shemot 4:27 (in fact, these are the only two times in Tanakh that this precise form appears). These and other textual connections serve to underscore the relevance of the hatan damim story to the pesukim before and after, and thereby to the story of geulat Mitzrayim as a whole.

Yetziat Mitzrayim is the fulfillment of two britot between Hashem and Avraham Avinu: brit bein habetarim (Breishit perek 15) and brit milah (Breishit perek 17). In both, Hashem promises Avraham that his descendants will inherit Eretz Yisrael. While they share a common theme, there are also differences between the two britot: for example, brit bein habetarim foretells Bnei Yisrael's enslavement while brit milah does not, and brit milah mentions the mitzvah of milah

⁴¹ Note that there is a mahloket between Ibn Ezra and Ramban as to whether it was advisable for Moshe to bring Tziporah and their children with him to Mitzrayim (Ibn Ezra Shemot 4:20, Ramban Shemot 4:19). Ibn Ezra posits that it was not appropriate for Moshe to bring his family to Mitzrayim because it would give the impression that he intended to settle in Mitzrayim for a long period of time. Ramban, by contrast, says that it was a praiseworthy decision because Bnei Yisrael's morale would be raised when they saw that Moshe chose to bring his family with him in his belief that redemption was imminent.

⁴² Analogously, the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Parshat Yitro Parsha Alef, suggests that Yitro persuaded Moshe to swear that his first child would be devoted to avodah zarah and his subsequent children to Hashem. According to this midrash, the child that Tziporah circumcised was Gershom, who had been uncircumcised because of Moshe's oath. This was the cause of Hashem's wrath in Shemot 4:24.

while brit bein habetarim does not. In fact, the two britot complement each other; to put it succinctly, brit bein habetarim promises the miraculous, supernatural involvement of Hashem in history, while brit milah presents redemption as dependent on Bnei Yisrael's responsibility to keep the mitzvot. Brit bein habetarim tells that Hashem will redeem Bnei Yisrael from bondage and give them the land of the seven nations. Brit milah presents a more natural vision of redemption, with no mention of liberation from slavery and no mention of the seven nations who must be defeated for Bnei Yisrael to take possession of Eretz Kenaan. Rather, the emphasis is on Bnei Yisrael's responsibility to keep the mitzvah of milah as a "*brit olam*." The two britot describe the destiny of Bnei Yisrael, but brit bein habetarim focuses on God's side in ensuring that destiny, while brit milah emphasizes man's responsibility in his relationship with the divine.

Because of the centrality of brit bein habetarim and brit milah to the story of yetziat Mitzrayim, the mitzvot of brit milah and korban Pesach are closely connected from a halakhic perspective; an uncircumcised man may not eat of the korban Pesach⁴³. For this reason, Yehoshua perek 5 tells of a mass brit milah in preparation for the offering of the first communal korban Pesach that was brought after Bnei Yisrael's entry into Eretz Yisrael, and Hazal connect dam Pesach to dam milah in numerous derashot.⁴⁴

Just as the mitzvah of korban Pesach is linked halakhically to the mitzvah of brit milah, the story of geulat Mitzrayim is linked thematically to the concept of bekhora. "*Beni bekhori Yisrael*" serves as the thesis statement of yetziat Mitzrayim, because yetziat Mitzrayim demonstrates the unique, intense love relationship between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. Midrashim abound with the idea that Hashem redeemed us - *hu velo saraf* - because of His great love for the Jewish people.⁴⁵ The reading of Shir Hashirim on Pesach further accentuates this theme. The reason that makkat bechorot is the culmination of the makkot is not only because it is the most horrific, but also because it most vividly demonstrates the truth of "*beni bekhori Yisrael*": because Pharaoh did not free Hashem's bechor, Hashem shows no mercy to Pharaoh's bechor.

Thus, geulat Mitzrayim is tied to the concept of bekhora, and korban Pesach is tied to brit milah. Nahum Sarna points out a chiastic structure in Sefer Shemot that emphasizes the interrelationship of these themes.⁴⁶ Part A of the chiasm is the bekhora, which is mentioned in Shemot 4:22-23, immediately preceding the story of the hatan damim. Part B is the mitzvah of milah as described in the hatan damim story in Shemot 4:24-26. The second B of the chiasm is the mitzvah of korban Pesach (Shemot 12:3-13), which is related to the hatan damim story because of the connection between brit milah and korban Pesach. Finally, the concluding A of the chiasm is makkat bechorot (Shemot 12:29-30), which revisits the theme of bekhora. This

⁴³ Shemot 12:48.

⁴⁴ For example, see Shemot Rabbah 17:3.

⁴⁵ For example, see Shemot Rabbah 15:1.

⁴⁶ Chiastic structure is a literary structure in which elements of a story appear in a symmetrical order. The unit begins with one topic (labeled A) and then goes on to B, C, and so on. The first topic (A) also appears at the end of the unit, the second topic (B) appears as the second to last topic in the unit, and so forth, so that the structure of the unit appears as ABCCBA, in the case of a unit that has three topics or elements. The purpose of a chiastic structure is to demarcate a literary unit, often in order to highlight the particular themes of that unit. Furthermore, the center of the chiasm often represents the climax or turning-point of the unit.

chiasm illustrates that the concept of bekhora and the mitzvah of brit milah are the central themes of yetziat Mitzrayim. Moreover, the center of the chiasm is formed by the mitzvah of brit milah and the related mitzvah of korban Pesach; the whole story of geulah hinges on the dam brit and dam Pesach. The hatan damim story thus serves two literary purposes: it presents the mitzvah of brit milah as the crux of the geulah, and it also incorporates the themes of bekhora, parenthood, and brit milah into one short episode, thereby creating a prelude that introduces all of the primary themes of the story of geulah.

Several years ago, I had a student named Nikki Press, who made a fascinating suggestion about the literary purpose of the hatan damim story. She observed that the story of Kriyat Yam Suf can be read as a visual reminder of brit bein habetarim; Hashem splits the water into sections, just as Avraham divided the animals into pieces. Therefore, the story of geulah is bookended on both sides by references to the two britot: the hatan damim story of brit milah appears at the beginning of the narrative of geulah, and Kriyat Yam Suf, with its reminder of brit bein habetarim, appears at the end. This structure emphasizes that the geulah transpired entirely within the context of the britot.

We have seen that the story of the hatan damim serves two basic purposes in the broader narrative of the national redemption. It forms a chiastic structure which emphasizes the centrality of brit milah to the geulah and it introduces the story of yetziat Mitzrayim by incorporating all of the major themes of geulah. I believe that it also represents an important development in Moshe's ascendance to leadership.

Earlier, we saw Shadal's suggestion that the reason for Hashem's severe response of "*vayevakesh hamito*" was that Moshe did not demonstrate sufficient dedication in his role as the redeemer of Bnei Yisrael. Whether or not one fully accepts Shadal's interpretation of this story, it seems straightforward that the hatan damim episode represents Moshe's statement of personal commitment to the totality of the brit. Before entering the stage of Jewish history as the redeemer of Bnei Yisrael, it was necessary for Moshe to demonstrate his commitment to Jewish destiny by fulfilling the mitzvah of brit milah.

In Pirkei Moadot, R. Mordechai Breuer notes that geulah is always contingent upon the commitment of the individual. The great nes nistar of Purim came to pass once Esther was willing to take the personal risk of approaching Achashverosh without being summoned. At the other end of the spectrum, the prototypical nes nigleh of Kriyat Yam Suf began when Nachson ben Aminadav declared his faith by stepping into the sea. The story of the hatan damim represents Moshe Rabbenu's statement of personal commitment to the brit, which was a prerequisite for national redemption.

Through an analysis of the hatan damim narrative, we have seen that this short episode is intrinsic to the broader story of geulat Mitzrayim, from both national and individual perspectives. As we approach Zeman Herutenu, may the messages of the hatan damim story—the centrality of the brit and the necessity of the individual's commitment to the brit—be an inspiration and a catalyst for redemption both national and personal.