

## HE WENT HOME

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*And it came to pass in those days, and Mosheh grew up and he went out to his brothers to see their hard labour, and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers. He looked this way and that, and he saw that there was no man, and he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And he went out on the next day, but look! There were two Hebrews fighting. And he said to the one that was in the wrong, "Why do you smite your fellow?" But that one said, "And who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me, as you killed that Egyptian?" And Mosheh was afraid and said, "So! The matter is known!" And when Par'o heard of the incident, he sought to put Mosheh to death and Mosheh fled from before Par'o ...*

*(Shemos, 2 : 11 — 15)*

The sun was high over Thebes. A young man of eighteen was walking in the shade of the sycamores in the Park of the Par'o. The ornaments in his hair and on his robes of fine byssus marked him out as a Royal Prince, but he was lighter of skin and taller than Egyptians of his age and his handsome features had a Semitic shape. Birds were twittering in the trees and from the distance came the rhythmic shouts of oarsmen on the river and the cries of children at play, but Prince Mosheh's mind was not at ease.

"Why is it," he thought, "that I am not happy? I am surrounded by luxuries and there is no pleasure I cannot have for the asking. My Royal mother loves me as much as any real mother could. Indeed, my own name is the one that she bestowed upon me when she drew me from the water and she even changed it slightly from the Egyptian word to the Hebrew form just to make me happy. I am liked by all the Royal Household and I am a favourite of Par'o himself. Did he not, on my petition, grant his Hebrew slaves a weekly day of rest? Did he not banish the Midyanite magician because he was plotting against me?"

"Yet I am lonely, like a man in a strange land. Yes, these people who have brought me up, to whom I owe everything, even my life — in my heart they are strangers to me. Their pleasures seem childish to me — and I shudder at their cruelty. The scribes read to them about wisdom and justice — yet at the same time they work the slaves to death to build them ever more marvellous monuments. They are so clever, so refined — but they worship their gods by behaving like savages. Indeed, my body-servant is happier than I, for he at

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least has no part in all this. He knows he is enslaved, and can pray to the G-d of his fathers to redeem him.”

Suddenly he stood still.

“The G-d of *his* fathers? He is the G-d of *my* fathers too, and I, too, though I live in the Palace, I am enslaved in their evil life!”

For a time, he continued pacing up and down the side of the ornamental pool, his head bowed, deep in thought. After a while, he straightened up and turned round, calling: “Come here, Uri!” The boy, who had been discreetly following his master at a distance, came running at once.

“Run to the stables,” commanded Mosheh, “and get my chariot. When I am gone, give my respects to my mother and tell her I have gone for a drive in the country.”

The boy bowed and turned quickly to carry out the order, but Mosheh recalled him. “One more thing, Uri.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“You care for me, do you not? Can I trust you with a secret?” asked Mosheh.

The boy looked up at the Prince with such devotion that there was no need for an answer. Tears welled up in the boy’s eyes as he spoke. “My master! You have taken me from the clay pits ... you treat me like a brother ... there is nothing I would not do for you!”

“Would you risk your life rather than betray me?” asked Mosheh.

“I would not betray you, my master,” said Uri solemnly, “even under torture. I swear it by the G-d of my fathers!”

“Then,” said Mosheh, “I will tell you where I am going, but don’t tell any living person. I am going to visit *our brothers* and see their work.”

When Uri had grasped his meaning, he almost broke down with happiness and excitement. The Prince had called the Hebrews *his brothers*!

“Wait!” said Mosheh, “you must not go about with shining eyes. If they get suspicious they might kill us both. Think of that and control yourself. Nothing has happened, I am going for a joy-ride, that’s all. Do you understand? Now run!”

Soon the chariot arrived and he passed through the gates to the salutes of the guards. He took the road leading to the nearest building sites.

The gilt chariot with its well-greased, leather-tyred wheels ran smoothly on the paved road. He let the thoroughbreds run as fast as they pleased. The air rushed past him and he felt the exhilaration of speed but it did not make him forget the seriousness of his venture.

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He had visited the building sites before, as part of the entourage of Par'o, but on those occasions they had come to inspect the progress of some project or to see some newly-finished sculptures and care had been taken that nothing should be seen that might upset some Royal lady. Seeing the colossal undertakings and the enormous amount of sheer physical labour they involved, one could only imagine the actual treatment of the slaves that had been used. Now Mosheh wanted to see what went on behind the pretences that were put on for a Royal visit. He wanted to let himself feel — the words still sounded strange to him as he repeated them aloud to himself — he wanted to let himself feel *for his brothers*.

The paved road gave way to a well-worn wide track as the horses sped him onwards. He knew that he would soon come to one of the new towns that were being built all over the country and sure enough, after a time, he came across a column of slaves. A hundred men or more in single file, each slave carrying two hods of bricks slung from a pole, the sweat streaming down their sides. Each gang of ten had a Hebrew foreman running from man to man and exhorting them to keep up the pace. One gang broke its order and Mosheh saw that it was the Hebrew foreman who tasted the vicious whip of the Egyptian overseer.

When Mosheh reached them he stopped, and at an order from the Egyptian the column stopped, too. Mosheh ordered the overseer to give them a pause for rest whilst he would inspect them and they put down their loads and sat by the roadside.

Mosheh questioned the overseer about such things as the places between which they transported the bricks, the distances involved, how long they took, how many journeys they made in a day and then he told him that he wished to inspect the men alone.

He walked along the line. The men were slumped on the ground, silent and listless. So, this was what slavery had made of people who could have been as lively and quick-witted as Uri — or himself!

He stopped in front of a young man who seemed more alert than the rest. The man stood up and bowed.

“What treatment do you receive?” Mosheh asked him.

The man averted his eyes as he answered: “The will of Par'o is carried out correctly, as my lord can see.”

Mosheh made another attempt: “Have your people always been slaves?”

At this, the man straightened himself and clenched his fists: “Our fathers were free men, and one day we shall be free again, in a land of our own.”

Then, realizing that he was speaking to an Egyptian and a noble, he added: “Forgive me, my lord, I forgot myself. I am in your hands.” And he threw himself down on the ground before Mosheh in fear and subjugation.

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Mosheh found it hard to contain his pity. A people once free and proud, and now brought so low. *A people? His own people!*

“Stand up,” commanded Mosheh. “I will not punish you, nor tell anybody about your outburst. But only if you are open and frank with me and tell me what I want to know from you. How did your servitude begin, and when?”

The man looked up at him in surprise. The nearest slaves also raised their heads imperceptibly and cast interested glances at this strangely humane nobleman. The man stood up and began, hesitating at first, then more forcefully:

“May G-d remember you this mercy, my lord. Par’o declared us slaves before I was born, but my father was then a grown man and was not born a slave. Before that, our people used to keep our sheep in the land of Goshen, which a Par’o had given us for great services rendered to the country. Then, there was the Invasion, and our men fought bravely for Par’o. When the enemies had been driven out, Par’o called upon all his people to build fortresses in case the enemies returned. Our people answered his call, all but the Tribe of Levi, and we worked together with the Egyptians as free labourers, for good pay. Gradually, the Egyptians went home and returned to their own trades and livelihoods, but we could not. We found that we were under guard and the soldiers did not let us go. We were housed in barracks and were not allowed to return to our own homes. Then they stopped paying us and the work was intensified. Par’o had proclaimed us slaves! But we know that when the time is right, G-d will redeem us from this place and we will be free again!”

So *that* was how it had come about, thought Mosheh. Not a slave people were his fathers, but free men made prisoners by a trick! But he went on:

“Why do you go on trusting G-d when He does not help you?”

“Our G-d,” answered the man with dignity, “is mighty. He did great wonders for our forefathers and He has promised them the land of Kanaan for their descendants. But first, He said, we must be strangers in a strange land and slaves for many years. And so it indeed came to pass. But we trust in G-d that as this came true, so will the rest.”

Mosheh became aware of the Egyptian overseer hovering uneasily at a distance. He understood the man’s fears and stepped back, signalling him to proceed. At a shout of command the slaves resumed their order and shouldered their loads.

The overseer helped Mosheh into his chariot and saluted him. The slave who had been holding the horses stood back and Mosheh drove off — in the direction of the brickworks of which the overseer had told him.

He thought over what he had seen and heard. The dumb resignation of the slaves had affected him even more deeply than the sufferings he had imagined. But the spirit of the man, once it had been awakened, had both increased his pain and given him comfort. If they were all like that man, he thought to himself, if they remembered what freedom meant

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and had not allowed their spirit to be crushed, then there was still hope. He found himself calculating the chances of a successful revolt — if they could find a leader, that is — and realized with a shock that he was already a traitor to Par’o. No, not a traitor, but an enemy of Par’o.

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The brickworks were now in sight: he could see the stacks of finished bricks. As he came nearer, he could see the different parts of the works, with groups of slaves doing various things: here, slaves bringing up the clay; there, the slaves kneading it; further away, slaves moulding it into bricks ready for the kilns. But there was one thing that held his eye and made him urge the horses to their utmost speed.

An overseer was furiously hitting a man, a man who was down already, hitting him again and again with all his might.

Mosheh brought the chariot to a skidding stop, making the horses rear up. “Stop this!” he shouted at the surprised Egyptian, even before dismounting. “Why are you beating this man so hard?” he demanded sharply.

The overseer, still panting from his exertions, took time to answer. Then he said, pompously: “My lord, this slave is rebellious and refuses to obey orders. He were better dead and an example to the rest.”

“And what do *you* say?” Mosheh asked the Hebrew. The man was painfully picking himself up. His body was covered with vicious weals and there was blood on his face.

“My lord,” he brought out slowly, “I have done no wrong. But I am the only witness of a terrible crime that this overseer committed this morning and he wants to kill me so that he shall not be found out.” And he told him what he had seen.

“The slave is lying ... !” began the Egyptian. But when he saw Mosheh, he stopped, frightened. For a holy fire was burning in the young man’s eyes.

“I can see who is lying!” said Mosheh sharply, fixing the Egyptian with a penetrating glare. “For what you have done, you doubly deserve to die.” Raising his fist, he spoke with awesome fervour: “The G-d of the Hebrews punish you!”

The Egyptian crumpled, fell and lay still, his open eyes staring unseeing at the sky.

Mosheh turned to the trembling Hebrew. “G-d has avenged you. Have no fear; no man is here but your brothers and they will not betray us. I shall hide the body. If you are asked, say that he walked away and did not return. Help me put the body on the chariot.”

When this was done, Mosheh drove into the nearby desert and buried the body in the sand.

He turned for the Palace, bewildered and elated at the same time. One day’s happenings had changed him from being the favourite of Par’o into a champion of the Hebrews, for from now on he was fighting for them.

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The stiff, pompous pose that was fashionable at the Palace helped Mosheh to conceal his change of heart. He did not tell even Uri what had happened.

Next morning, he drove out again, this time to a building site. The place was full of furious activity: brick-layers and their supply gangs; sculptors pounding away at statues; long chains of slaves dragging huge blocks of stone on sledges; overseers; stonemasons, architects ...

The Egyptian official in charge was somewhat confused by having an unannounced inspection, but Mosheh explained that his visit was not official. He just wanted to watch the work, he explained breezily, and he needed no guide. At last, he managed to convince the official that he really was not wanted.

Mosheh strolled round the place looking for a chance to get into conversation with a Hebrew. He saw a gang sitting down to a hasty meal of the round, flat cakes of pitta-bread that was the common food of the slaves, and started to walk over towards them. It pained Mosheh greatly to see the blank expressions and the lifeless eyes of the slaves. They seemed to take no interest in anything else going on around them because of the pressure of the work that had to be done. Even those who were not actually engaged in hard labour appeared to be dull and listless, resigned to their life of misery.

As he made his way across, Mosheh suddenly heard behind him angry voices. He turned round and saw two Hebrew foremen involved in an argument. The Hebrew he had learned from Uri was not quite enough to follow their rapid exchanges, but it seemed to be about whose gang was more efficient, or something like that.

The argument seemed to get more heated. Then one of them raised his hand to strike the other. Hurrying to them, Mosheh called out: "Stop! Why should you hit your own brother?"

Both of them turned to him, and the one who had started the fight measured him with a defiant look. Then he folded his arms over his chest and said maliciously: "Listen to the Hebrew son of Princess Bityoh! And who made *you* an official and judge over us? Perhaps you'd like to kill me, as you killed that Egyptian?"

Mosheh was dumbfounded. He had not expected that the Hebrews might not want his sympathy. Also, he was afraid: there was an Egyptian overseer sitting quite near and he might have understood the words. He turned away, the two men's laughter ringing in his ears, and went to his chariot.

He was on his way back before the thought struck him. "So, the matter is known!" he exclaimed. If it had spread to another site, many people must already know both his act and his description. And if that man dared to defy a Royal Prince, it could only mean that Par'o knew too — or would know very soon. Would it be safe to go back to the Palace, he wondered, or would he be going to almost certain death?

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Mosheh was not wrong in his fears. As soon as he arrived back at the Palace gates, Uri hurried to him in great excitement. “My master,” he began, “the Captain of the Household Guard has been asking after you urgently. He respectfully orders you, my master, to report to him as soon as you returned.” Then he added, “There are rumours, my master ...”

Mosheh didn't have a chance to reply before the Captain himself appeared, together with two soldiers. Curtly, he told the Prince that he was to come with him at once. Par'o had summoned him.

The small group made its way through the labyrinth of corridors towards the State Rooms. Mosheh noticed that the Palace staff, who usually showed him deference and even friendliness, averted their eyes as he passed them. He realized that he was being taken towards the Grand Hall.

As they entered, a deathly silence descended upon the gathering. Mosheh saw that almost every place was taken. Par'o was there, too, and it was clear straightaway that much discussion had already taken place.

Mosheh was shown to a place in the middle of the Hall. He saw the large King's Sword of Punishment on the table. “So,” Mosheh thought to himself, “they *are* talking of the death sentence!”

Par'o himself spoke first. “So, you have returned!” The statement was cold and threatening. He continued: “We have been informed of a serious crime that you committed yesterday. The evidence against you is irrefutable and my advisers insist, as I do, that you shall suffer the penalty that you deserve.” He stopped, indicating that Mosheh might speak, although it was chillingly clear that in his absence sentence had already been pronounced.

“My lord King!” began Mosheh, fearlessly. “I am aware that everything I am today, I owe to you. I have been brought up by my Royal mother, my lord King's daughter, the Princess Bityoh, with love and affection. I have been given everything that I need — all paid for from the Royal coffers. For all this, I am truly grateful.

“Yet, my lord King knows that I am a Hebrew. My lord King will understand that I feel for my Hebrew brothers. I have spoken for them before and my lord King has been gracious to grant my request on their behalf. But injustice to anybody, even to a slave, is a grave offence. The G-d of the Hebrews, I have heard tell, will not condone injustice and He will punish those who unjustly oppress others just as He will reward those who seek to help them.

“The taskmaster had no right to beat that man with such cruelty. The man was neither disobedient nor insubordinate. But the taskmaster was intent on killing the Hebrew because he was the only one who knew of the crime that the Egyptian had committed.”

“Even so,” said the king, “your killing an Egyptian is a capital crime. You are, after all, a Hebrew, and any Hebrew, prince or slave, who rises up against any Egyptian, let alone who

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kills him, is put to death. Any insurrection or rebelliousness of the slaves, by them or by anyone acting on their behalf, is punished with death.”

There was no remorse in his voice. Not even one of the courtiers and advisers in the Hall said anything. Par’o nodded to the Executioner standing near the block. As the Executioner went over to the table to take the Sword, the two soldiers on either side of Mosheh showed him where he was to kneel.

The Executioner raised the King’s Sword high above his head and brought it down with force. Then the incredible happened. The Sword just bounced off the kneeling man, as if his neck had changed to marble! Without thinking, the Executioner tried again, and the same thing happened.

It was then that everything was thrown into confusion. The Executioner was in a state of shock, as if he had just seen a ghost. He just stood there, rooted to the spot, as did the two soldiers and the other guards. The advisers and courtiers were paralysed with fear at what they had just witnessed.

Mosheh himself also was dazed, completely bewildered by what had happened and then realized that he had been saved by nothing less than a miracle. He saw the terror and confusion on the faces of the assembled courtiers and, taking in the situation straightaway, wasted no time. Raising himself from his kneeling position, he rushed to the doors of the Hall. Nobody could move to stop him. The only one who could speak was Par’o and he was frantically giving orders: “Stop him! Hold him!” But no one heard, or if they did, they could not do anything. And then he was gone. It was all over in a few moments.

Mosheh hurried through the maze of corridors like only a boy brought up in the Palace could. Once he was at the stables, he quickly took a chariot and horses which were standing already harnessed and hurried on to the Palace gates. The guards on duty recognized him straightaway and froze as he approached. He passed through without any trouble and was on his way.

But to where?

If he was to do anything for the Hebrews, thought Mosheh, he must go amongst them now. Firstly, he had to hide himself. He was sure that now, even more than before, Par’o would want to have him killed. And secondly, he wanted to meet their Elders. Perhaps even now the time was ripe for an uprising!

It was then that his true plight struck him in all its full sickening force: If there were Hebrews who could betray someone who helped them, then he was not safe amongst them. What was worse, as long as they were like that, it surely would be useless to fight for them. Mosheh felt that G-d would surely not save them from their oppression if they were so undeserving of help. Yesterday, he had found his people. Had he lost them today?

He must flee. He would go into the desert, live the life of an outlaw. Perhaps later on he could lose himself in a strange country or take service in some foreign army.



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He searched his memory for a place where he could hide. There were some Burial Cities of long ago, now neglected and surrounded by desert, where fugitives and criminals went into hiding. Which of them was nearest?

Mosheh wondered what was going on at the Palace. By now they must surely have realized that he had escaped. How long would it be before they started looking for him? He must be quick.

It was then that he noticed that he had lost his bearings. Whilst he had been thinking, his horses had taken him off his route ...

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A village grew out of the horizon. In this outlying place they might not know of the search for him yet — if indeed it had begun. He would ask the way to Thebes, and from that he would find out where he was.

In the village, he came upon an elderly woman. She was a Hebrew, but from her graceful, unhurried walk he could see she was not of the slaves.

As he came near her, he slowed up the chariot. Then he saw her face. It was ... it was how he imagined his mother.

He reined-in the horses and sprang from the chariot. In his halting Hebrew, he addressed her in the way that the Hebrews usually addressed older women: “Who are you, mother?”

She stared at him, as if he was an apparition, but then with an effort she recovered her composure and answered respectfully:

“My name is Yochevved, my lord, a daughter of the Tribe of Levi.”

“Yochevved?” He knew that name! “Did you ever serve at the Court of Par’o?” No, it could not be! “Did you once nurse a baby for Princess Bityoh?”

She could not answer; she had begun to weep. But that was answer enough. He embraced her. “You are my old nurse!”

She restrained him. “My lord,” she said tearfully, “when I returned you to the Princess, I had to promise never to try to see you! We must not incur the wrath of Par’o!”

“Par’o?” asked Mosheh, with bitterness. “I am now fleeing from Par’o, fleeing for my life!”

Yochevved cried out in fear. “Why?” Then she put her arms round him. “What has happened, my poor son? Have I not suffered enough in giving away my child?”

Mosheh was stunned. “Your child? Are you then not only my nurse but ...?”

Yochevved was silent, looking at him tenderly. “Are you ... my mother ...?” asked Mosheh, and then, almost imploring, “Please tell me!”

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She could only nod and he went on: “Praise be to G-d Who has shown me my mother before it is too late. Does my father live? Have I brothers and sisters ...?”

Then he realized that people had begun to crowd round them.

It must not be known that he had stayed here for this could have repercussions upon them all. At least there were no Egyptians among them. He explained, in Hebrew, that they must keep his arrival secret, or else the whole village might be punished. “Don’t look at my clothes,” he concluded, “I am a true son of Israel!”

“And *my* son, brothers!” added Yocheved. “Please, my brothers, give him shelter in our village.”

A man came forward to take the reins and Mosheh asked him to hide the chariot and tend to the horses, for he would be leaving again soon.

His mother took him to her small house. He embraced his father Amrom, a saintly elder, and his brother Aharon, a learned young man full of love of G-d and Man. Then Miryam came in, and he was introduced to the sister who had helped to save his life.

Later, over the food, he told them of his life at Court and of his experiences, and he told them too of his present danger. They listened, and questioned him, with love and understanding. For the first time in his life, he felt at home.

“How I wish I could stay with you,” he exclaimed, at last.

Yocheved swallowed her tears and answered: “You will always be with us, my son, for now you are suffering with us and for us.”

His father added: “You will escape this danger, my son, for you fought for G-d’s People. He will help you as He has helped you in the Palace and as He has saved you from the sword of Par’o. But when you are in exile, in strange countries, it will be your difficult duty not to forget your G-d and your People.”

Then he continued telling Mosheh of the Patriarchs and of G-d’s promises to them and their descendants. He told Mosheh of G-d’s commands, too, and went on talking to Mosheh all the time. Mosheh listened to it all, and absorbed each word and meaning. Finally, Amrom said: “Maybe you will be able one day to come back and help your brothers. But you have much to learn first. To seek nothing for yourself, and all for G-d; to strive to improve your brothers, yet to love them, with all their faults. Above all, humility and patience, for you cannot change men in one lesson and you will not be able to teach them at all if you seek power or honours for yourself.

“Look out for these things and learn them from whatever trials G-d will send you. When you will have learned enough, G-d will show you what you have to do.”

These words remained with Mosheh when he set out on his wanderings.