

פרק ב'יא-כה – Lesson 8

Confronting Injustice

Goals:

- Students will perform a close reading of Shemot 2:11-25, noting keywords and themes.
- Students will be able to list the qualities that Moshe exhibits in his early life that will allow him to become the leader, savior, lawgiver and prophet of his people.
- Students will weigh the considerations that go into deciding between intervening to fight injustice on the one hand, and putting oneself into personal danger and perhaps making matters worse on the other.

Activity:

1. Ask students if they can recall a time when they witnessed an injustice happening, either in person or in a movie or book. What was their reaction to it? Perhaps show a movie clip such as the scene from the end of the movie *Pay it Forward* in which Trevor sees two bullies beating up a kid. Pause that scene and ask students what they would do.

2. Ask students to prepare 2:11-25 in pairs making note of keywords, themes, and any question they might have. Give out the worksheet and ask students to focus on those leading questions.

3. Review the perek, making sure to point out the following:

Pasuk 11

What words are repeated in this pasuk? Why?

The word אָדוּי is repeated to emphasize Moshe's strong affiliation with his nation.

The word וַיִּרֶא is repeated in this pasuk and appears again in pasuk 12 regarding Moshe seeing the affliction of his people and nobody is around to save them. The same word will occur again in pasuk 25 where Hashem sees their affliction as well.

Pasuk 12

The simple meaning of Moshe looking side to side and not seeing anybody is that there were no witnesses. The midrash, however, finds a deeper meaning here; Moshe saw injustice happening and looked to see if there was anybody who cared and would do something to stop it. This same phrase is found with this meaning in Isaiah 59:16 where it is Hashem to look to see if there is a righteous leader and Pirke Avot 2:5 picks up on the same idea.

Pasuk 13

וַהֲנִיחַ – as in pasuk 6 above, this word introduced something unexpected. He felt pain at seeing the Israelites tortured by the Egyptians, but he was not surprised by this. However, when Moshe saw two Israelites fighting with each other, that was unexpected because they should be united against the enemy. This scene in which the Israelite resists Moshe's intervention foreshadows the difficulties Moshe will have later on when trying to free them and Bnei Yisrael complain.

רשע is a legal term meaning the guilty party, as in Devarim 25:1.

Perek 2:11-22 Preparation Worksheet

Prepare Shemot 2:11-25 in pairs making note of keywords, themes, and any question they might have. Here are some guiding questions:

Pasuk 11 - What words are repeated in this pasuk? Why?

Pasuk 12 - What does וירא כי אין איש mean in peshat? How does the midrash interpret these words? Compare the midrash's understanding of this phrase with its use in Yeshayahu and a similar phrase in Pirke Avot:

שמות רבה פרשה א"ד"ה א, כט וירא

וירא כי אין איש...ר' יהודה אומר: ראה כי אין איש שיקנא להקב"ה ויהרגהו.

ישעיהו פרק נט:טז

וירא כי אין איש וישתומם כי אין מפגיע ותושע לו זרעו וצדקתו היא סמכתהו:

משנה פרקי אבות ב:ה

ובמקום שאין אנשים השתדל להיות איש:

Pasuk 13 - What does והנה connote? Where else does it appear in this perek?
What does רשע mean? See Devarim 25:1.

Pasuk 15 - What word is repeated in this pasuk and what does it mean in each case?

Pasuk 18 - What does רעואל's name mean?
Why is it significant that he is כהן מדין and who is Midian. See Beresheet 25:2.

Pasuk 21 - What does צפרה's name mean?

Pasuk 22 - Does the explanation for גרשם's name match the grammatical root of the name?

In perek 2:11-22, Moshe performs three acts of intervention in three disputes. Find them and fill out this chart:

Pesukim	Description of Moshe's act	Parties involved in the dispute

How does Moshe react to injustice? Were his actions correct in each case? Would you have done the same?

Pasuk 15

The first instance of וישב means to dwell, the second means to physically sit. על here means next to – he did not sit on the well but beside it. Wells in ancient times are like water coolers today – that's where people go to meet.

Pasuk 18

רעואל means friend of God. It is also significant that he was כהן מדין – indicating that he was a spiritual person. Remember that Midian are descendents of Abraham (Beresheet 25:2) and so Re`uel/Yitro may have possessed teachings from Abraham and must have been an important influence on Moshe's spiritual growth.

Pasuk 21

צפרה means a bird; bird's are often associated with freedom, as in the expression "free as a bird." Since wives are often the inspirations behind their husbands, his marriage to צפרה here foreshadows his role as the one who fights for Bnei Yisrael's freedom. (הצפור may connect to צפור in Beresheet 15:10 where Abraham splits the animals but leaves the birds intact – ואת הצפר לא ברו – That may symbolize that the hope for freedom will not be severed even when they are slaves and in exile.)

Pasuk 22

The derivation of Gershom as גר הייתי בארץ נכריה does not account for the ש. Perhaps the etymology is גר שם, and we are to assume that ארץ נכריה=שם. This explanation of the name recalls Beresheet 15:13. Now that the first part of בן הברית has been fulfilled and they are strangers in a strange land, we can expect that the second part of the berit, the promise of redemption, will also come to be – which is exactly what we find in Shemot 2:23-25.

However, just as we saw that Moshe's name has a dual meaning, Gershom may also have a double reference. גרשם contains the root גרש – to send away. This verb occurs earlier in this story in pasuk 17 and will occur again later in 6:1, 11:1 and 12:39 regarding Bnei Yisrael being sent out of Egypt. Moshe giving birth to גרשם thus foreshadows Moshe's role in bringing about Bnei Yisrael's expulsion from Egypt.

Moshe's second son is only mentioned in pasuk 18:4. We learn from there that his escape from Pharaoh was a close call.

Pasuk 23

Why did Bnei Yisrael cry out only after the Pharaoh died? New Pharaohs used to celebrate accession by freeing slaves and giving amnesty, as happens with Moshe in 4:19. Bnei Yisrael hoped for this possibility and when it didn't happen they lost hope, became more depressed and had no recourse but to cry out.

Pasuk 25

What does Hashem know? This pasuk leaves us off almost in mid-sentence – thus creating suspense about what will happen. The other shoe drops in 3:7, which elaborates that Hashem knew and empathized with their suffering.

Chart – Moshe first intervenes between an Egyptian hitting an Israelite. This is surely an injustice but if we only had this scene then we might say that Moshe acted only to protect his own. Moshe then intervenes between two Israelites. This shows that he is interested not only in rescuing his people from enemies but also takes upon himself the responsibility to teach them to behave morally towards each other; these two tasks foreshadow his future role as both redeemer and law-giver. In the third scene, Moshe intervenes to save complete strangers from other strangers. This finally shows that Moshe

is interested not only in helping his own people, but also feels compelled to triumph the cause of justice everywhere and for all people.

These three scenes paint a picture of Moshe as bold, courageous, compassionate, zealous and idealistic. Nevertheless, there is room to question his first act of intervention of killing the Egyptian. (See Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Exodus*, "Moses Seeks Out his Brethren.") Moshe did succeed in saving one Israelite from being beaten or even killed; however, he put his own life in great danger and had to go into exile where he was not able to help them at all during that time. Perhaps he could have helped more by rising in power in Pharaoh's court and advocating for their benefit. The point of this speculation is not to criticize Moshe but only to point out an aspect of his character. His sense of justice was so strong that he was unable to stand idly by while watching a slave receiving a beating from a ruthless tyrant. He had to intervene – no matter what the consequences (like Trevor). This is his most essential quality. In Midian, he will also learn patience and the need to temper his idealism with realism; Still, at the core he always remains a champion of justice.

4. If appropriate, have a discussion about bullying. There is a very effective youtube clip called "Bullied to death."

5. Discuss cases when the United States intervened when injustice was occurring in foreign countries. Was the intervention successful? Are there cases where we should have intervened but didn't or did intervene when we shouldn't have? While we all feel the desire to stop injustice, doing so in practice is not simple. Moshe's life presents a model for us to learn from.