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Reflection: *Theology*



## Moses in midrash

*Is Moses the greatest leader in the Bible? If so, how should Christians regard the story of Moses killing the Egyptian? By turning to the work of Bryna Jocheved Levy, a contemporary practitioner of the ancient Jewish practice of midrash, writes Jason Byassee.*

by [Jason Byassee](#)



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Who is the greatest leader in the Bible?

Ask that question of random people on the street and the quick answer is likely to be: "Moses." For in truth, far more people are likely to have seen Disney's "Prince of Egypt" than to have perused the Bible for exemplars of leadership.

But what about the awkward story of Moses killing the Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-15)? Is impetuous, murderous rage a mark of leadership?

The rabbis have long struggled with this and other troubling passages of Scripture. They have responded with the Jewish art of midrash -- filling in the silences of Scripture by asking and answering questions left unposed by the text.

Why did Moses kill the Egyptian? How is this action not a violation of the very commandments Moses would one day deliver on Sinai? Different rabbis have different answers. The point is not to close off a

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question definitively. It is to make us more attentive to the text and allow our imaginations to be shaped by the Bible and its particular silences. Midrash is often spoken of as the white space on the face of the Bible. The biblical writers themselves provide the ink; midrash fills in the margins.

Bryna Jocheved Levy, one of the leading biblical scholars in Israel today, gathers midrashic reflection on Moses in her article "Moshe: Portrait of the Leader as a Young Man." She sees this episode as a pivotal one in Moses' development. In previous stories about Moses -- his miraculous rescue from Pharaoh's effort to kill Hebrew boys, his deliverance from the Nile and adoption into Egypt's royal household -- he was entirely passive. The rabbis' interest perks up with the seemingly innocuous introduction, "In those days": "In those days, Moshe grew up. He went out to his brethren . . ." (Exodus 2:11). No more passive Moses here. He's all grown up (just physically or also morally?), he ventures forth from the comfort of the royal palace, he looks around and sees what's going on.

What may have seemed like mere information, a storyteller's clearing of the throat, is actually a moral lesson: "Don't separate yourself from the community," Levy quotes Rabbi Hillel as saying. Moses easily could have stayed in the lap of Egyptian luxury in the palace. Instead, he showed a key lesson of leadership: one "should share the burdens of others."

Not that Egyptian court royalty is all bad. It saved Moses from the fate of his fellow Israelite boys. Further, "By being raised among nobility," Levy writes, summarizing the rabbis, "the young man earned a degree of respect from his brethren." Had he been from among them they may not have listened to him at all. As the New Testament also attests, a prophet is not without honor except in her or his hometown (John 4:44). Perhaps, the rabbis imagine, the self-regard of the Israelites under slavery had become so debased that they had "lost sight of the promise of redemption and only an outsider had a chance of restoring that vision," Levy writes.

And does Moses ever act on his newfound moral wherewithal when he sees an Egyptian killing one of his kinsfolk. Levy marvels, "How is it that the spiritual giant who comes to lead the Jewish people out of servitude embarks on his career with an act of murder?"

The rabbis fill in this white space by imagining the moral evils of the particular Egyptian. Perhaps Moses caught him in an act of adultery with the wife of the Hebrew he was beating and intended to kill him? We can't say. The Bible itself displays its characteristic reticence here, telling us no more than absolutely necessary. What is clear, ancient commentators attest, is we see Moses' "moral tenacity" on display. Moses "championed the cause of justice" by defending the Hebrew slave. Perhaps, some rabbis surmise on the basis of ambiguity in the original Hebrew, Moses did not realize he himself was a Hebrew, until he saw the Egyptian's injustice. Perhaps the reference to what the NRSV calls "one of his kinsfolk" (Exodus 2:11) is actually to the slavemaster and not the slave. Beholding this injustice restores Moses' kinship with the people he'd forgotten or not known until then. Who knows?

In any event the deed is done, and Moses goes out "the next day" (Exodus 2:13), or perhaps even less specifically, he "sallied forth a second time." He clearly fears no reprisal, as a prince of Egypt, for killing a random taskmaster -- until he intervenes in a fight between two Hebrews. "Do you plan to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exodus 2:14).

Moses is assailed here and betrayed by one of the very people to whose defense he had leapt the previous day. How did the man know? Again, the rabbis fill in the blank: perhaps the Hebrew for whom he intervened the previous day betrayed him. Perhaps it was Dathan, who would rise up against Moses again later in the wilderness (Numbers 16).

Whatever the case, Moses is introduced to the nature of the people he will lead. They will grumble; they will betray. Moses is "mistreated by just those individuals for whom he is to provide succor," Levy writes. He provides even more aid as deliverer of and law-giver to Israel. And he is to do so for precisely these sorts of people -- murmurers and tale-bearers. And, interestingly enough, he will not tell tales on them in return. He will in fact advocate for them when God wishes to destroy them, sticking his neck out on their behalf repeatedly as in Exodus 32.

These two quarrels into which Moses intervenes, together with his defense of the daughters of the priest of Midian in the next story (Exodus 2:17) show that Moses stands up for justice regardless of race, religion or creed. We might quarrel with Levy and say these episodes show a man standing up for justice not regardless of race or religion, but regardful of them -- as Israel is called to be God's agent of justice in whatever circumstance.

Moses' reactions here also foreshadow the more famous ones he will have later in the story. He will show moral outrage in sending the plagues upon the Egyptians. He will show intolerance against injustice in leading the Israelites on their Exodus. And he will show compassion in teaching the Torah to the people from Sinai and for the rest of his life.

Moses also may show an ability to learn from mistakes here. Whether his murder of the Egyptian was unreflective rage or not (commentators are divided), he certainly committed no murder when intervening in the second fight. Perhaps he has learned from his fury the day before?

Moses is clearly not without flaw, as later events will show (Numbers 20). He makes mistakes, lets his anger get the best of him, disobeys and ultimately is punished by God for it. "But he will never question where his loyalties lie. ... Nor will he deprecate his brethren," Levy writes.

In all this Moses is a bit like the God who will choose him via a burning bush a few chapters later. It is God who stands up for justice in all circumstances, who shows outrage at injustice and compassion in teaching us. And in all this the Israelites are a bit like the whole world full of people God has made. We grumble, tell tales, assail and betray the One who leads us. Yet God leads all the same, for our good and the world's.

It can be dangerous for a leader to see herself too much like Moses and her followers too much like the grumbling Israelites. It can feed megalomania and tale-bearing in its own right. Precisely then it is good that God leads his chosen through Exodus with a murderer as his proxy and a band of murmurers as his people.

Surely then God can use us? And surely we have no place to complain about those we lead?

As always, midrash is more about questions than answers.