



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

*Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.*

**Shabbat Parashat Shemot**  
**December 29, 2018 - 21 Tevet 5779**



**By: Rabbi Adam Greenwald**  
**Director, Miller Introduction to Judaism Program**  
**Lecturer in Rabbinics, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies**  
**American Jewish University**

## What Did He Know, and When Did He Know It

Torah Reading: [Exodus 1:1 – 6:1](#)

Haftarah Reading: [Isaiah 27:6 – 28:13, 29:22 - 23](#)

One of the great mysteries of Moses' life is when he learns his own origin story. We, the readers, know that the infant Moses was saved by a collection of rebellious women – the midwives who deliver him and do not turn him over to the authorities, the mother and sister who hatch a desperate plot to place him in a basket on the Nile, and the princess who takes a foundling child into the palace and raises him there as a son.

However, the Torah is silent on when and how the young Moses discovers his slave origins.

While we read that the daughter of Pharaoh hires Moses' actual mother, Yocheved, to be his wet nurse, we do not know what she might or might not have told the child. Did she whisper the secret of his birth to the baby at her breast? Did he call her "mother" when there was no one around to hear? Or, did she keep the secret buried deep inside of her, knowing that her child was safe and his safety depended upon his ignorance? We simply do not know.

All we learn is that at some point in Moses' early adulthood he suddenly responds to the slavery that must have surrounded him every day with an act of desperate violence:

“When Moses had grown, he went out to his kin and saw their suffering, and he witnessed an Egyptian man striking an Israelite man, one of his kin. And Moses looked this way and that, and determined that there was no one there, and he killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand” (Exodus 2:11-12).

Fully understanding this incident, one of the defining moments in the life of Moses, is impossible without the context, which the text withholds from us.

Had Moses known his origin story for many years, holding his shame and anger at bay, until one day he snapped and could not take it any longer? Alternatively, had Moses just that very morning learned of his true beginnings, and this fateful encounter happened as he fled the palace in disgust and despair? Or, perhaps most intriguingly of all, did Moses still not know the full circumstances of his birth on that day, but over time came somehow to identify more with slaves than with than with his own class, to see them as “kin” regardless of bloodline, to recognize injustice and feel compelled to act?

The Torah is an elusive book – for all of the meticulous details it gives about the proper dimensions of the curtains in the desert sanctuary or the precise way that the blood an offered he-goat needs to be sprinkled on the altar, it does not answer some of our most burning narrative questions. In these “white spaces between the black letters,” we find the fertile soil for reflection and creative interpretation.

Writing personally, I find myself most drawn to scenario number three, in which Moses does not know that he is an Israelite at the moment when he intervenes to save the slave receiving the beating. In that case, Moses' worthiness to serve as a leader of the Israelites comes precisely from his capacity to feel empathy and outrage, even on behalf of those he does not yet know are his brothers and sisters. Such a morally sensitive individual is indeed an excellent choice to play the role of our liberator and champion. However, then again, we cannot know for sure.

**I would love to hear your interpretations! If you have a theory about when Moses learns his origin story and how that impacts the arc of his moral development, write me back at [agreenwald@aju.edu](mailto:agreenwald@aju.edu) and share it. Together, we can bring greater insight to one of the Torah's most fascinating unanswered questions.**

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**Rabbi Adam Greenwald**, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. Before coming to AJU, he served as Revson Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR, a Los Angeles congregation often recognized as one of the nation's most creative and fastest-growing spiritual communities. Prior to ordination, he served two years as Rabbinic Intern at Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, CA and as Director of Education of the PANIM Institute's IMPACT: DC program. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011.

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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University  
15600 Mulholland Drive  
Bel Air, CA 90077  
310-440-1218  
[www.aju.edu/ziegler](http://www.aju.edu/ziegler)

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