

SHEMOS - 5773

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After being raised in the Egyptian palace Moshe goes into the field and sees a Mitzri [Egyptian] striking a Jew. In the words of the Torah, “*VA-YIFEN KOH VA-CHOH, VA-YAR KEE EIN ISH VA-YACH ET HA-MITZRI (2:12)*”. Translated: “He looked this way and that way, and when he saw there was no man, he killed the Mitzri”.

The simple and literal meaning of this is that Moshe looked to see if anyone was watching. With the coast clear, Moshe defended the Jew. This interpretation is difficult to digest because in the middle of a working field, it's hard to imagine that no one was there. Therefore, there are many different commentaries concerning this phrase.

Rashi writes that Moshe looked deep into this Mitzri and prophetically saw that no future proselyte would descend from this Mitzri so his conscience permitted him to kill the Mitzri. The Netziv [Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin] reads it differently. In his opinion, seeing a Jew being beaten, Moshe looked to see if any Egyptian would stand up for him. Moshe looked this way and that way but sees no one who seems to care. In the absences of Egyptian justice, Moshe took the law into his own hands. Things are not so different today; one can look here and there, from one country to the next, but the world is silent as Jews are attacked. Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha'kabala [Rabbi Ya'akov Tzvi Mecklenberg] has another approach. Moshe knew that no Egyptian would come forth. However, he looked to see if any Jew would care enough to save his own brother. When no Jew did, Moshe killed the Egyptian. Tragically, too often even today, many Jews do not respond to the suffering of their fellow Jews.

I have another way of looking at this event, and I later discovered that Rabbi Avi Weiss came up with the same approach.. Moshe was raised in an Egyptian home, but nursed by his biological Jewish mother. Consequently, Moshe was always ambivalent as to who he really was. When seeing an Egyptian striking a Jew, *he looked within himself* and he was emotionally torn between two loyalties, should he help the Egyptian or defend the Jew? So the meaning of “he looked this way and that way” is that he looked within himself to see who he really was, Egyptian or Jew. When he fully grasps that until now he had not firmly established his identity, so he senses that this is the moment of truth and decision- he kills the Egyptian. Thus, he symbolically eliminates a part of himself, by declaring unequivocally, that he was a JEW.

We often find ourselves in a similar quandary. We have to make choices whether we are American Jews, or Jewish Americans, whether we are Israeli Jews, or Jewish Israelis. In voting for an American president, do we vote for the candidate that we think

will be the best for the country or for the one that seems best for Israel? In Israel, do we vote for the candidate [or party] that is best for the country or the one that is best for Torah observing Jews within the country? At some point in our lives we have to ***look within ourselves***, and make that identity decision.