When Moses Went Through DeMille

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CECIL B. DEMILLE had a problem. He had already cast all the roles for his forthcoming blockbuster about the Exodus story, *The Ten Commandments,* but he had yet to find a suitable voice for God. According to the Bible, it was when standing before the burning bush at Sinai that Moses, by then a shepherd in Midian, was first addressed by the divine. Who, then, could provide a voice that was suitable for the Almighty? Scott Eyman's biography of DeMille, *Empire of Dreams*, informs us that the great director was flummoxed:

> They tried individual actors, they tried a chorale. They tried voices underwater, they tried voices amplified in canyons. There was even some thought about using mechanical means, as with an organ, with the sound department organizing the tones into words. "We tried everything, and everything was wrong," said DeMille.

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In the end, DeMille's quandary was solved by his chief researcher, Henry Noerdlinger, whose solution speaks volumes, literally and figuratively, to Jews around the world preparing to celebrate Passover again this year.

Because the Bible tells us little about Moses's early life—he was 80 years old when called at the burning bush to embrace his role of redeemer—Noerdlinger was tasked by DeMille with discovering additional texts to use as fodder for the script. Noerdlinger, *Empire of Dreams* tells us, combed through religious works connected to all three Abrahamic faiths, so that "sources for the script included the Midrash Rabbah, an ancient compilation of rabbinic commentaries, the Qur'an, Philo's *Life of Moses*, and the writings of Josephus and Eusebius."

Noerdlinger discovered a rabbinic midrash that homiletically described the Almighty with a quandary similar to that of DeMille: What voice should be utilized in the first revelation to Moses? Too loud a tone would frighten the desert shepherd, and too soft a voice would leave Moses uninspired. DeMille describes this in his own autobiography:

> The Midrash Rabbah says that from the Burning Bush God spoke to Moses in the voice of

> Moses' father, Amram, so as not to frighten him. That lovely courtesy of God suggested that our audience too might accept a not unfamiliar voice, a little slowed and deepened: and so the Voice of God at the Burning Bush is Charlton Heston's voice.

The midrashic passage is a profound reflection of the drama at the center of Moses's life. According to Exodus, Moses was born a Hebrew, but he was raised in the palace of Pharaoh. He had every incentive to ignore the travails of the people to whom he was bound by blood and yet could not resist making their cause his own. According to this magnificent midrash, it was a sense of connection to his familial past that never left Moses; what called him back was the recollection of a voice from the past, a father that he might never have seen since entering the Egyptian palace. Moses, in other words, embraced his Hebrew heritage because he was drawn by what Lincoln called the "mystic chords of memory."

DeMille understood that the drama of Moses's story was one of identity. In his 1956 film, when the hero embraces his Hebraic heritage, he is asked: "A moment ago you were a prince of Egypt, and now you are a son of slaves; you find no shame in this?" To this Heston replies: "If there is no shame in me, how can there be shame for the woman who bore me, or the race that bred me?"

Yet this scene reveals a profound irony. Cecil B. DeMille was himself of Jewish descent; his mother, Beatrice Samuel, was a cousin of Viscount Herbert Samuel, the first commissioner of British Mandate Palestine. An actress in Brooklyn, she was seen on stage by Henry Churchill DeMille, who fell in love with her; she soon converted, and, to the consternation of both their parents, they were married. As Eyman notes, DeMille obscured all this in the very autobiography that mentioned the midrash:

> The creative problem of the book's early pages stemmed from the fact that DeMille had devoted paragraphs to his father's family, but couldn't figure out how to introduce his mother's Jewish origins....Ultimately, DeMille decided to give his mother's maiden name in full and let it go at that....He had spent a lifetime painstakingly constructing a patrician persona that didn't have much room in it for Jewish second-hand silver merchants from Liverpool. He had always believed that in some way his mother's heritage, perhaps even her life, began only when she converted to her husband's religion, and he wasn't about to change his opinion now.

For Eyman, DeMille's conduct here was no surprise: "As with other great talents born in that era, such as Douglas Fairbanks and Fred Astaire, a part-Jewish heritage was something to downplay, not proudly proclaim."

Yet DeMille's movie, and the midrash that it utilized, reminds us that Moses's story is one of family loyalty and identity, one that speaks to our own age. "Several centuries of Western thought," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflected, "have left us with the idea that when we choose how to live, we are on our own. Nothing in the past binds us. We are whoever we choose to be." And yet, Sacks adds, it is against this idea that "Jewish life is a sustained countervoice. To be a Jew is to know that this cannot be the full story of who I am. A melody is more than a sequence of disconnected notes. A painting is something other than a random set of brushstrokes. The part has meaning in terms of its place within the whole, so that if history has meaning, then the lives that make it up must in some way be joined to one another as characters in a narrative."

The Exodus is a tale that changed the world, its impact extending far beyond the Jewish people, but the story of the hero that brought it about is one that speaks particularly to Jews who, in this age of assimilation, still continue to gather every year to retell and re-experience its story.

The credits at the end of *The Ten Commandments* do not divulge who provided God's voice at the burning bush; and there is, perhaps, meaning to be derived from this cinematic lacuna. God's call resounds differently to each of us, and, especially at Passover, it is made known in our memories of seders past, in the voices of parents and grandparents, calling for us, asking us to discover who we are—and who we are called to be.