



## Moses' Awakening—and Ours, to the Scourge of ICE

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Moses remains our Torah's exemplar of moral behavior. When did he come of age? The text offers no clue as to his childhood and early adulthood. [The verse](#) immediately after Pharaoh's daughters claims him from the Nile River and names him, we learn:

**וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם**

On some later day, Moses grew, went out to his kinsfolk, and saw their burdens.

At the beginning of his life as a leader, we encounter three active verbs that suggests his character and potential as a leader: **וַיִּגְדַּל**, “he grew”; **וַיֵּצֵא**, “he went forth”; and **וַיֵּרָא**, “he saw.”

Let's examine each, and see how it affected Moses, and how we might fulfill the task of each.

### וַיִּגְדַּל, Moses grew

At this point in time, Moses was twenty-years old, according to Josephus, and forty-years old in Christian scriptural tradition (see Acts 7:23). Whichever, the text is not speaking of Moses' stature, but of his willingness to grow in his thinking, in his being.

We live as long as we grow, and when we cease growing, we cease living. The good life is one that does not permit us to remain static, does not allow the past or the status quo the final word. Sometimes we stagnate, reach a certain point and stop, and our ideas and values stagnate and become stale. Moses reminds us that we must continually grow in character, in mind and heart, so that we can enlarge and better the world in which we live. That task remains relevant and urgent.

### וַיֵּצֵא, Moses went forth

Moses did not remain ensnared in his palace. He “went forth” to see the world, to encounter others where they are. Moses went forth out of the palace and its luxuries, out of the position of power and authority and security that was his as a prince of Egypt. But he recognized that this life and his really was not everyone's, that beyond the pelf and purple, the celebrations and the ostentations of the palace, others lived differently. In doing so, he lost a throne, but he found immortality.

How many of us sometimes become prisoners of our own narrow environment? And how true is this for many synagogues? Moses models the need for us to get out of the barricades of our

own selves, and move outward and forward to link our lives with others' lives, to penetrate into other hearts, to share someone else's agonies.

ויראה *Moses saw*

Egypt had people of affluence and power, people of education—and every day there were scenes of cruelty and bondage on the streets of Egypt. Anyone who went out saw the taskmasters with whips and lashes, and the people groaning under their burdens. But they did not really see them.

It was only Moses who saw them. He paused, and something happened to him. Their agony became his own experience. He did not rush past in his carriage and pull the shades down because the slaves' cries distressed him. He saw what was happening and then had eyes for nothing else. He saw slaves as human beings. What was happening, he now knew, was terror. And he saw that these unkempt, unrecognized, enslaved people, society's lowest rung, were entitled to dignity and freedom.

When we go out, what might we see? We see people protesting, peacefully, but with determination, and we see ICE agents responding by:

- firing pepper balls at close range, targeting heads, and using tear gas and other munitions against crowds, in violation of their own agency's policies which prohibit aiming at the head or neck;
- tackling protesters, using chokeholds, and engaging in violent beatings, even against journalists covering protests;
- arresting and detaining people, using suspicionless stops and warrantless arrests
- employing banned chokeholds, knee-to-neck restraints, and other, potentially fatal, maneuvers on immigrants, protesters, and U.S. citizens

If we would "go forth," we would see that some 70-75% of those grabbed by ICE have no criminal history of any kind, with most of the rest having only minor violations, such as a traffic ticket.

If we would "go forth," we would see ICE indiscriminately grabbing citizens and non-citizens alike. The common denominator is race: A UCLA study found that over 90% of those detained are Latino.

If we would "go forth," we would see anguish, hurt, and a sense of alarm all around us and perhaps among our neighbors, our coworkers, and our fellow synagogue members and staff.

And now, seeing the killing of Renée Good by an ICE agent, has shaken us, similar to how seeing the killing of an immigrant Israelite slave shook Moses to his core.

So, now, let us ensure that all who need to be seen are seen, and that we are among the ones seeing.

And then, like Moses, we need to dedicate ourselves to responding. What might we do? We all need to consider what is in our comfort zone, but the things we might do include:

- Having a Town Hall forum, so our congregants can discuss this within a Jewish framework;
- Having information available to our congregations (and staff, and guests and visitors) on what do day/say, or not, if stopped by ICE agents;
- Holding trainings for synagogue boards and lay leaders, so that all are on the same page about our policies and interests, and so they know such things as the difference between administrative and judicial warrants;
- Speaking with other communities with which we share space (with the landlord/s, if that appertains);
- Reaching out to other faith communities in our area, particularly those we know have considerable Latino constituencies to see how we might help/be supportive;
- Offering a mini-course on **גרים**/Migrants and Judaism;
- Signing on to petitions calling for such things as impartial investigations of incidents such as Renée Good's killing, for more transparency, better training for ICE agents, to stop recruitment from among white supremacist extremists;
- Reaching out to friends, families, colleagues, etc. to offer support.

None of us can do everything. But almost all of us can do at least one thing.

We Jews have historically complained about non-Jews not doing enough civil disobedience to protect us, and we have praised and honored those righteous gentiles who have.

Of course, we do not know how many Jews are directly affected by ICE raids. As my child is of Guatemalan birth, I certainly am.

And certainly Jewish values like honesty, decency, compassion, and integrity all indicate that this is indeed a moment that is beyond mere conversation, as helpful as those might be. This is a moment calling on us to live our faith.

*Vayigdal, vayeitsei, vayar.* Moses grew, Moses went forth, Moses saw. And immediately afterward, Moses made a change in lifestyle and priorities to make a difference. We too need the life that is marked by unceasing growth, the life that takes us out of ourselves and into the lives of others, a life that gives us the capacity to see what should be seen, a life in which we assume some piece of responsibility.

There was only one Moses. We may not have his capacities precisely, but within us there reside holy sparks. And Moses represents in heightened form what you and I possess, and what you and I might attain. We cannot be Moses, and we cannot be quite like Moses, but we can achieve something of the Mosaic spirit if we, too, *vanigdal*, *vaneitsei*, *vanir'eh*, if we will grow, go forth, and see.

Let us awaken, and begin.