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"Through Heaven's Eyes:"

The Pedagogical Utility of Artistic Midrash

& "The Prince of Egypt"

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Cantorial Ordination

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Spring 2024

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Acknowledgements

This thesis project would not have been possible without the help of so many people. I am so grateful for the work of my advisor, Rabbi Norman Cohen, Ph.D. for all his wisdom and guidance throughout this process. In addition, the assistance of the HUC-JIR library staff, Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, Cantor Jill Abramson, and Dr. Gordon Dale were invaluable. Finally, the encouragement and accountability from my parents Dana and Andy Snyder, my classmates Gabi Cohn and Rabbi Amanda Katherine Weiss, and my fiance Lindsay Walsh helped me to stay on track and meet my goals. Thank you all so much.

I. Introduction

Background

I have vivid memories of crowding into the basement of my grandparents' house with my cousins to watch *The Prince of Egypt* on Passover. To this day, in my mind's eye, regardless of context, Tzipora appears just as she was depicted in the animated film; the burning bush still burns a cool blue; Yocheved sings with the voice of Ofra Haza, and Yitro, that of Brian Stokes Mitchell. I am well aware that these imaginings are not Torah, traditional, or even necessarily Jewish, but this is how I absorbed the story and how it still holds meaning for me today. The images and understandings are inextricably woven into the fabric of my understanding.

How many others must share a similar tapestry? *The Prince of Egypt*, released in 1998, has raised over a generation of young people (certainly not only Jews) to believe that the Exodus narrative teaches us to "look at [our lives] through Heaven's eyes," and that "there can be miracles when [we] believe." Neither of these quotations was written by a biblical author, but rather, by Stephen Schwartz. And yet, even those of us who followed up on the film's teachings with years of more traditional study still hold these views and values.

I am drawn to the film not only for its aesthetic and aural qualities but for the sense of connection it provides, bringing to life this great and ancient tale of my people. As a teacher and transmitter of Jewish thought, culture, and religion, I aim to expand my understanding of the sense of connection *The Prince of Egypt* delivers, enabling myself and others to bring it to yet another generation of Jewish learners in our long, unbroken, vibrant chain of tradition.

A Brief Overview of "The Prince of Egypt"

There is no story more foundational — historically, culturally, or religiously — to Judaism, the Jewish people, and the Jews than that of the Exodus from Egypt. We have shaped our national identity around the arduous journey from bondage to freedom, from degradation to dignity, and from a narrow place to the "Promised Land." Though this story is grounded in the Jewish tradition, its themes and tenets are universal. Over time, new civilizations and religions adopted and/or adapted our sacred narratives. Moses became a prototypical Jesus or Mohammed, leading the nation to righteousness. Our historical narrative has traversed the globe in countless ages, languages, and cultures. It is no surprise, therefore, that it has also been retold by the talebearers of Hollywood.

In 1923, director and producer Cecil B. DeMille (who was not Jewish, but whose mother was born to German Jews) released *The Ten Commandments*, a silent technicolor film with a 136-minute runtime. Critics gushed over the biblical prologue, though they did not much care for the modern narrative that accompanied it. In 1956, DeMille released a new *Ten Commandments*, excising the contemporary content of the 1923 film. Shot largely on location in Egypt, the epic spectacle follows the main narrative arc of the biblical account but certainly extends, expounds upon, and deviates from certain details and plot points. Beyond the biblical text, the story is based on the 1949 novel "Prince of Egypt" by Dorothy Clarke Wilson, the 1859 novel "Pillar of Fire" by J. H. Ingraham, and the 1937 novel "On Eagle's Wings" by A. E. Southon. DeMille's 1956 film was a raging success, cementing a place as a true classic. The film made an indelible mark on the American

cultural conception of the Exodus, with actor Fraser Heston's portrayal still appearing within the first ten results in a Google Image search for "Moses."

Jeffrey Katzenberg – a producer who had risen through the ranks of the Paramount and Walt Disney production companies over a twenty-year career – had expressed a desire to create an animated adaptation of DeMille's classic, but Disney executive Michael Eisner summarily rejected the idea. Katzenberg departed from Disney in 1994 and, within the same year, co-founded DreamWorks Pictures and implemented his vision, hiring a crew of 350 people across 34 countries to bring his vision to life. *The Prince of Egypt* opened in theaters just in time to become a Christmas blockbuster on December 18, 1998. Critics praised the visuals of the combined traditional and computer-generated animation from the new studio, as well as the score by Hans Zimmer, songs by Steven Schwartz, and voice acting of the A-List cast.

Portrayed on a title card at the start of the film is a statement indicating Katzenberg's consideration of honoring and staying true to the sacred origin of the Exodus narrative. To alleviate religious concerns, Katzenberg consulted with Biblical scholars and theologians who spanned the Abrahamic traditions. These advisors later praised the studio for faithfully receiving and incorporating their feedback into the film.

Statement of Purpose

While *The Prince of Egypt* is a beloved film for many, its educational value is often pigeonholed as a popularized yet limited storytelling mechanism for a loose retelling of the Exodus narrative. In terms of Jewish education – and particularly, Torah and

midrashic education – the film holds massive potential to connect our students and congregants with this central narrative through music, visual media, and cinematic storytelling. *The Prince of Egypt* presents the age-old story, retold in a new yet ultimately familiar fashion. Far beyond the Passover holiday hype aimed at younger viewers, *The Prince of Egypt* has the potential to reach a diverse pool of learners with a deep educational imprint and impact.

The Prince of Egypt is an intricate weaving of cinematic beauty and skill, classical and modern midrash, and traditional and contemporary commentary. That said, aside from its cinematic influence, the traditional aspects of the film and its foundational narrative remain unknown to both its viewers and educators who might otherwise employ the movie as a pedagogical tool. With an appropriate and accessible guide, these commentaries, midrashim, and optics become relevant and resonant, deepening the relationship between the cinematic and the textual tradition for viewers, educators, and learners of all ages.

With this thesis, I hope to contribute to the field of Jewish education – specifically, biblical and midrashic education – by inviting and empowering the reader to integrate artistic midrash (*The Prince of Egypt* being my working example) into an "Introduction to Midrash" adult education class, inviting B'nai Mitzvah students to embrace modern midrash alongside classical commentary, or introducing a new form of storytelling as an integral part of elementary supplemental education curricula. This thesis will both provide a guide to the methods of midrashic storytelling and serve as a veritable source sheet from which an educator could ostensibly draw upon content to expound on or connect to artistic midrash and, in particular, *The Prince of Egypt*.

II. Definitions and Understandings

Defining "Artistic Midrash"

Midrash is generally viewed as a classical compendium of literary works that emerged around the fifth century of the common era and continued through the medieval period. Midrashic content is also present in Talmudic and classical rabbinic literature. Encompassing exegesis and sometimes eisegesis, contemporary clergy often resort to simplifying these interpretations and elaborations as "filling in the gaps" of the biblical source material. Therefore, Midrash is inherently extra-canonical, meaning it is not limited nor finalized, allowing for an expansive definition of the genre.

Based on this preliminary evidence, I propose that, for the purposes of this thesis, the classification of "Midrash" be expanded to encompass works that reverentially seek to illuminate passages from the Biblical corpus, employing homiletic, exegetical, legal, or narrative means. Further, midrash intrinsically must be religiously reverential to the source text, even in those moments wherein the midrash seemingly contradicts the given details or narrative. In other words, the Biblical text must be placed in a higher tier of sacrality than the creator's work.

Surely, this definition will be objectionable to some – who are we to place modern creators alongside the likes of Akiva? And yet, Rabbinic Judaism has always been a tradition of reform. Our esteemed sages both instruct and command us to engage in a continuous process of reading, rethinking, reimagining, and even redefining our literary heritage. Zvi Adar, a scholar of Jewish education, emphasizes the enduring nature of this exercise, stating, "Two thousand five hundred years, or more, have passed since Job was answered by God. Ever since then, each generation has read the Bible with its own eyes.

We who are alive today are commanded to ponder it and to translate it into our own language, to comprehend it as it stands, and by doing so, we will understand ourselves. We are enjoined to go toward it and bring it to ourselves" (translated by Gershon Shaked).[1]

Moving beyond the writings of *Chazal*, we encounter artistic midrashic manifestations. "Since the earliest centuries of the church," writes Wesley Theological Seminary Professor Bruce Birch, "there has been a parallel history of artistic interaction with the biblical text. This has taken place across the spectrum of artistic media: painting, sculpture, music, drama, poetry, literature, dance, and film. These artistic treatments of biblical subjects have had a great cultural impact and have deeply influenced public perceptions and understandings of the Bible."[2] We may recall Michaelangelo's epic paintings that adorn the Sistine Chapel, Marc Chagall's biblical works, George Frideric Handel's biblical oratorios, John Milton's "Paradise Lost," or Anita Diamant's "The Red Tent."

I would add to Birch's understanding that these artistic treatments go back even further, to pre-Christian Judaism. Were we to understand these treatments as expounding not only on Biblical text but on any Divinely-revealed word, we may look within the Torah itself and find Betzalel, a craftsman imbued with a Divine sense of understanding, wisdom, and creative ability. As Exodus 35:31 teaches, "[God] filled him with the Divine spirit – in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manners of craftsmanship." In

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[1] Gershon Shaked, "Modern Midrash: The Biblical Canon and Modern Literature," *AJS Review* 28, no. 1 (April 1, 2004): 43–62, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0364009404000042, 62.

[2] Bruce C. Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 8, no. 2 (March 23, 2005): 114–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2005.00234.x, 114.

Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 55a, Rav Yehuda, quoting Rav, teaches that Betzalel's artistic talents were not merely granted as skill, but also as wisdom and understanding. A connection might also be drawn between this Biblical verse and the first public reading of the Torah (Nehemiah 8); just as Betzalel is endowed with understanding, so too do Ezra's assistants aid the people in understanding the text as it is read.

In the name of Rav, Rav Yehudah expounds that Betzalel possessed the knowledge of combining the letters used by God to create the universe. This unique capability did not make Betzelel a creator akin to God, but rather, a creator who discerns Divine processes. Betzalel's name, "In the Shadow of God," implies this artist's interpretive role; the shadow in itself is not God, but rather a projected silhouette that represents God's form. Citing Rabbi Yonatan, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani praises Betzelel's intuition and interpretive skills, stating that Betzalel could discern God's will despite incomplete instruction from Moses. Akin to Midrash, this discernment – the ability to interpret even the incomplete – enabled Betzalel, along with Ohaliab's assistance, to translate God's directives into tangible worship, facilitating Divine Presence among the people. This, I posit, marks the origin of artistic midrash.

There is, however, a glaring issue: the oft-repeated biblical prohibition of graven images.[3] Ella Shohat contends that Judaism has an inherent aversion to visual media, instead preferring words, either written or spoken. She points to *Brit Milah*, the circumcision rite of passage that would be translated as "covenant of the word;" the Ten Commandments are referred to in Hebrew as "*Aseret Hadibrot*," "the ten utterances;" further, we see an emphasis on listening in the promise "*naaseh v'nishma*," "We will do and we will hear"

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[3] Exodus 20:4; Leviticus 26:1; Deuteronomy 4:16-25, 5:8, 11:29, 27:12-15.

(most often translated as "understand"), or the *Shema*, the veritable *credo* of the Jewish people, with the titular first word meaning "Listen." Words, Shohat contends, are Judaism's focus. And yet, Wendy Zierler points out that in each of these seemingly "image-phobic" examples provided by Shohat, there are visual elements. "Circumcision visualizes the covenant. The *Shema* prayer employs visual markers – the *mezuzot* placed on doorposts, the *totafot* (phylacteries) placed on one's arms and between one's eyes. Although the Bible prohibits the creation of idolatrous graven objects, the tablets of the law themselves happen to be 'idolic,' graven with the words of the Ten Commandments."[4] Zierler proposes that this ambiguity as to the permissibility of visual media is contrasted, and perhaps even overtaken, by "the unqualified premium the Bible places on retelling and reinterpreting."[5]

Midrash can be expressed through a range of media. Musical midrash, in particular, enables the interpretation of text through the distinct language of song. Melody, harmony, rhythm, and every other element of music possess the power to evoke sacred moods and motivations within the listener, even when the lyrics are not fully understood, if indeed present at all.

While musical midrash, as a category, has certainly been discussed and dissected, scholarly analyses have almost exclusively been confined to its liturgical use. In her 2002 Cantorial thesis, Cantor Sally Neff analyzed several pieces of traditional nusach and composed melodies, identifying not only moments of word painting but motifs and ideas that come from the "language" of Jewish music – including traditional Ashkenazi nusach

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[4] Wendy Zierler, "Midrashic Adaptation: The Ever-Growing Torah of Moses," essay, in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch, Oxford Handbooks (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 120.

[5] ibid.

modes and trope systems – that point to a certain interpretation of the given liturgy. This is a form of midrash, argues Neff, one that is integral to our understanding of Jewish music and liturgical practice. This musical, liturgical midrash allows the congregational listener to hear new or non-obvious meanings and ideas within the set liturgy.

The corollary to this framework – wherein contemporary media grants arcane works a sense of comprehensibility or novelty – is that the traditional roots of these modern midrashim grant the new works airs of import, authenticity, or even sacrality. It might also be noted that the very designation of the art as "midrash" gives the art itself an elevated air of import, intrigue, authority, and sacrality.

The theological significance of ancient forms of expression is a captivating phenomenon; associations with ancient symbols evoke sacred sentiments and motivations that differ from those inspired by the contemporary. Though works may be novel, even created in forms of media only recently invented, viewers may still cling to the notion – consciously or otherwise – that the work is a part of or a continuation of the ancient. In doing so, the artist and viewer alike validate and elevate the work in question.

In the Jewish tradition, we find that the largest body of work falling into this phenomenon is found within the corpus of modern Hebrew literature. Gershon Shaked writes, "[The Hebrew Bible] became the Book of Books for the Haskalah movement, and later served as the cultural foundation of the Zionist movement, providing the ultimate proof of the historic independence of the Jewish people and the compelling rationale for its return to the land of Israel."[6] Zionists utilized sacred text to legitimize and sanction their contemporary political claims to the Land. Interestingly, this approach was frequently

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[6] Shaked, 43.

utilized by individuals whom we now consider secular, who may even have self-identified as such. Their arguments, rooted in Scripture, were derived from emotions rather than theology. Early Zionist authors and poets – rarely self-identifying as traditionally religious – would all but universally invoke Biblical writings within their work to evoke sacred moods and motivations. They wished to set apart – sacralize – their writings from those of other peoples or movements, doing so through the core text of the ancestral tradition that tied them to the very land to which they laid claim.

As the Zionist project progressed, Biblical texts were pushed to the center of secular education. "The transition from an assimilating diaspora community, struggling to maintain its national identity after losing its religious one, is closely related to the transformation of the Bible into the canon of the Zionist movement and into the Book of Books for the secular community within Israeli society."[7] The Bible was a common point for vastly disparate diasporic communities, seeking to unite under one new-yet-ancient Israeli identity. By grounding itself in collective historical memory, the newly imagined community found unity and sanction.

This might, of course, throw a proverbial wrench into the working definition we are currently exploring. The "reverence" with which the Zionist authors held the Biblical text was not necessarily one of sacrality (the argument over whether secular Jews have a concept of the sacred would constitute another thesis entirely), but instead, a historical and cultural reverence. That is to say, despite their ambiguous or apathetic feelings toward the Bible's theological significance, the biblical canon was elevated – dare I say, set apart – in their minds for its social and political status. I argue that this reverence,

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[7] Shaked, 44.

despite its lack of theology, still "counts" as reverence; the source text is still placed on a higher plane of significance.

The utilization of sacred text for secular purposes may be viewed by some as improper or even heretical. To this critique, religious/secularist theorist Talal Asad would respond, "The sacred can become the object not only of religious thought, but of secular practice too."[8] That is to say, ancient and classical religious works, venerated by some, are the collective inheritance of a broader group and thus may hold varying and disparate significance across communities and demographics. The significance of Scripture is not predicated on faith or adherence to a specific faith system. We may therefore understand that midrash need not be written by a religious Jew, nor must the creator necessarily be Jewish at all.

Understanding Cinematic Midrash

In a chapter of the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, Rabbi Wendy Zierler notes a paucity of scholarship devoted to the adaptation of Biblical narrative. "Scholars of Religion, Bible, and theology have written much about screening scripture and the nexus between religion and film (see Aichele and Walsh; Forshey; Reinharz; Walsh; Wright.) But apart from essays by Gavriel Moses, Ella Shohat, and Thomas Leitch, this work has had little impact on the field of adaptation studies."[9] Zierler continues, finding it odd that

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[8] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 37.

[9] Zierler, 119.

a field so concerned with the accuracy of adaptation to its source material would ignore "perhaps the most extreme test case of fidelity or betrayal."[10]

Observing discrepancies between DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, Dreamworks's *The Prince of Egypt*, and the Biblical source material, Alicia Ostriker writes, "As with screen adaptations of novels one has loved, it is easy to be shocked, shocked, at omissions and deviations in Biblical epics from the original sacred text." And yet, these omissions and deviations are an inextricable part of the Midrashic tradition.

One may take issue with this characterization of movies and Midrash; movies are a product of the capitalist entertainment industry, created to thrill, excite, and captivate a paying audience – this is certainly not the point of scripture. To these critics, the scrolling text at the start of *The Prince of Egypt* may offer comfort:

> *The motion picture you are about to see is an adaptation of the Exodus story.*
>
> *While artistic and historical license has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide.*

The film itself proclaims that it is not simply entertainment; it recognizes its origins and the sacrality therein and openly admits its creative wanderings.

And yet, the film is massively entertaining. There are jokes, musical numbers, an inspiring story, and visuals that follow in and build upon the tradition of DeMille's biblical epics. The "spectacle" nature of the film does not take away from the sacrality of the story. Alicia Ostricker writes, "The Biblical interpretations of Hollywood epics are

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[10] ibid.

appropriate acts of appropriation that are essentially midrashic. Their intention and effect is to make the stories both awesome and morally meaningful to their audiences, to give the audiences the spiritual spin they need."[11] Ilana Pardes, writing on the spectacle of *The Ten Commandments* writes, "A miracle is a spectacle, a magnificent show that cannot but astonish as it explodes the fixed boundaries between high and low, between dream and reality."[12] Film, a technology unimaginable to the classical midrashists of old, allows us to experience just a fraction of the wonder and awe of the Exodus for the first time since we stood at Sinai.

The Utilization of Artistic Media in Jewish Education

Artistic Midrash can effectively convey biblical or exegetical ideas to learners through universally understood artistic media, surpassing the accessibility of classical texts written in obsolete or obscure language. Birch writes, "Midrash provides the ideal category for understanding artistic interactions with biblical texts. Through Midrash, students can understand artists to be both profound respecters of the power and integrity of biblical texts, while at the same time extending and entering into imaginative encounter with those texts."[13] Artistic Midrash enables an understanding of artistic interpretation while simultaneously inviting the learner's own creative and personal understanding of the biblical text.

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[11] Alicia Ostriker, "Whither Exodus? Movies as Midrash," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 42.1, (Winter 2003): 138–50, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0042, 142.

[12] Ilana Pardes, "Moses Goes Down to Hollywood: Miracles and Special Effects," essay, in *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz*, 74th ed., Semeia (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 15–31.

[13] Birch, 115.

Within the category of Artistic Midrash exists the concept of Musical Midrash. Professor Merri Arian asserts that music has the power to educate and enlighten congregations by offering new or different interpretations, writing, "Musical settings of our liturgy that are artfully composed seek to 'translate' the essence of the text."[14] This perspective aligns with Birch's pedagogical framework which suggests that music, as a familiar medium, can aid in the understanding and the feeling of ownership of complex, foreign, or even incomprehensible concepts.

The value of midrashic elucidation extends beyond conveying specific messages. Rather, the midrashic tradition grants its readers the freedom to question, interpret, and struggle with the text. Midrash provides a framework that empowers the learner to engage in both profound truths and intricate details, all while maintaining a sense of reverence. Through music and other artistic media, this tradition is translated into familiar language, lowering the threshold and fostering a deep connection for those who choose to engage with the material.

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[14] Merri Lovinger Arian, *Leveling the Praying Field: Methods and Melodies to Elevate Congregational Worship* (Schaumburg, IL: Transcontinental Music Pub., 2018), 8.

III. The Exodus Narrative and Artistic Midrash in "The Prince of Egypt"

A. Moses's Identity

The very title of the film, *The Prince of Egypt*, exemplifies Moses's struggle with his own identity. He was born a Hebrew, but adopted into the Egyptian court, raised as the younger brother of Ramses, to whom he would later come to free the Israelites. Their brotherhood is portrayed as a happy one, full of laughs and a playful (though privileged and often destructive) sibling rivalry and competition.

The film opens with a horn playing Yocheved's lullaby theme. This lilting melody, which will return not only within the opening number, but at several climactic moments throughout the film, begins with an ascending major triad, representing hope, but this is immediately followed by a minor 7th and 6th, representing struggle. The prayer is abruptly overtaken by the Deliver Us theme, a work song with a driving rhythmic pulse, with choral parts largely composed of stepwise motion in stark contrast with the leaps of the solo melody in Yocheved's lullaby.

The lullaby returns when Yocheved, Aaron, and Miriam go to the river to set Moses adrift in his basket. According to the Torah, Moses's mother (unnamed in Exodus 2 beyond her clan of Levi, though she will later be identified as Yocheved in Exodus 6:20), placed the infant in a wicker basket coated in pitch. In the film, Yocheved, voiced by Ofra Haza, sings to him, beginning in Hebrew and transitioning to English, telling him to not be afraid, echoing the comfort God will give to him years later at the burning bush (Exodus 3), *al tira* – do not fear. She sings a lullaby as she wades into the water and casts the basket into the river's current.

The Hebrew word used to describe the basket is *teivah*, the same used to describe the vessel built by Noah (i.e., Noah's Ark) in the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9. In stark contrast to Yocheved's gentle release into the river, perhaps foreshadowing the lifetime of struggle Moses will face, the basket takes a tumultuous journey down the river, narrowly avoiding animals, ships, waves, and fishing nets. In a nod to the Noah connection, the animation skews the perspective, often making the basket (ark) appear as large as the massive boats it encounters.

Exodus has Miriam follow the basket along the river until it is safely retrieved by Pharaoh's daughter – an element that is reflected in the film. In the movie, however, this is where Miriam leaves Moses, whereas Torah would have Miriam bring Yocheved to Pharaoh's daughter to nurse the infant. Before leaving, however, the film has Miriam offer a brief prayer, echoing Yocheved's lullaby theme:

Brother, you're safe now, and safe may you stay, for I have a prayer just for you: Grow, baby brother, come back someday; come and deliver us too.

Miriam's prayer serves a few functions here. First, it sets up Moses to be the redeemer of the Israelites. Second, it connects Moses and Miriam, ostensibly making her his last Israelite connection before his adoption. Finally, it characterizes Miriam as a woman of prayer. She will later lead the Israelites in song ("When You Believe" in the film, Exodus 15:21 in Torah). Her praying as a child for redemption foreshadows her eventual praise as an adult.

Just as Miriam sings the end of her prayer, "Come and deliver us, too," an oboe plays the Deliver Us theme. Holding the infant, Pharaoh's wife says to Ramses, "Come, Ramses. We will show Pharaoh your new baby brother: Moses." As soon as she says his name, the

choir returns with the Deliver Us theme, leading the audience to hear, "Moses: Deliver us." The choir finishes the theme, but the orchestra returns to the lullaby theme, with Ofra Haza (Yocheved) crying out, "Deliver us" over the final notes.

In both the Torah and the film, it is Moses's adopted mother (Pharaoh's daughter in Exodus, his wife in the movie) who names him. In the film, she says to her son Ramses, who appears to be a toddler, that this is his new baby brother. Moses is not only adopted by Bitya bat Paroh but also accepted by Pharaoh. Whereas, however, in the film, it is implied that Pharaoh knows of Moses's true origins, some midrash even asserts that Bitya faked a pregnancy to trick Pharaoh into believing that Moses was her son by birth.[15]

This is the opening of Moses's narrative across tellings: Moses's identity is uncertain, being a child of the Hebrews, a member of the tribe of Levi, and, in Exodus, even seemingly being raised (or at least cared for) by his own Israelite mother. All the while, he is a (titular) prince of Egypt, named and growing up in the Egyptian court.

Neither the film nor the Torah give any detail on his childhood, jumping from his rescue as an infant to his young adulthood. Whereas Torah skips all the way to Moses's killing of an Egyptian taskmaster, the film explores his youthful antics with Ramses, racing chariots through the streets, inadvertently and carelessly destroying monuments and buildings; Moses plays pranks on the priests, exemplifying an innate sacrilege toward the Egyptian cult. These antics serve to portray Moses as immature, or perhaps even spoiled by his life in the court. Arguably, they also allow for Moses to be a truly righteous Israelite – Surely, nobody who reveres or worships the Egyptian pantheon would be chosen as a prophet of the Israelite God.

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[15] Philo *Vita Mosis*, 1.3; Ezekiel the Tragedian, 458b.

That said, within *The Prince of Egypt*, Moses has clearly either forgotten or repressed his Israelite identity – though he does retain a certain core memory of his provenance. When Moses, by chance, encounters his estranged birth siblings Miriam and Aaron, Miriam offends the "Prince," assuming he remembers his Israelite identity. Moses rejects her, pushing her to the ground and turning his back. As he leaves, Miriam sings the lullaby their mother sang as she set Moses adrift in the Nile, triggering a full crisis of identity in Moses, fabulously shown through intertwining musical motifs and a unique visual style of exaggerated and animated Egyptian carvings that does not appear elsewhere in the film. In a dream sequence, Moses enters his personal history through the hieroglyphics on the palace walls. Before falling asleep, Moses sings that he is, "A son of the proud history that's shown, etched on every wall."

This epiphany has echoes of classical Midrash. According to Sefer Yashar Shemot, Moses travels to Goshen, the dwelling place of the Israelites, and sees their suffering for the first time.[16] In the Midrash, he is deeply touched by this revelation, saying, "Woe unto me for your anguish – I would die rather than see you suffer."[17] This line does not appear in the film, nor does his subsequent use of his power and influence within the Egyptian court to lighten their burdens, as is told in Shir HaShirim Rabbah I.28. According to Philo, he did all he could to lighten their burdens, addressing them and encouraging them. The film omitting his advocacy for the Israelites at this point grants his later advocacy a higher significance as it is entirely unprecedented with the Pharaoh.

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[16] Sefer Yashar Shemot 132b-133a.
[17] Sh'mot Rabbah 1.27; Midrash Tanhuma 9; Vayikra Rabbah 37.2.

Regardless of Moses's actions (or lack thereof) to mitigate the Israelites' suffering, through the epiphanies, it is clear that he has not attempted to turn to see these histories, either intentionally or through ignorance, unable to open himself to the truth.

The question of intentionality here extends far beyond Moses. In the beginning of the Torah's Exodus narrative, we are told, "A new king rose up over Egypt who did not know Joseph."[18] In B.T. Sotah 11a, we are presented with two possibilities as to what this means; either this is truly a new king who never knew Joseph, or, as the text never explicitly states that the old king died, this is the same Pharaoh with a new perspective. Like Moses, Pharaoh did not open himself to see the truth.

It is in the episode of Moses's killing of the Egyptian taskmaster in Exodus chapter 2, the text first has Moses turn, literally and figuratively:

> "So it was, in those days, Moses grew and went out to his kinsfolk, and he saw their burdens; he saw an Egyptian man striking an Israelite man, his kinsman. He turned this way and that, but he saw no man; he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."[19]

The language of verse 11 is confusing – what days are these? Are Moses's kinsfolk the Israelites or the Egyptians? Whose burdens are we discussing? Why articulate *ish mitzri/ish ivri* (Egyptian man/Israelite man) when simply *mitzri/ivri* would have been grammatically coherent? Why does the text clearly have Moses see two men and only then say he saw no man? And did Moses even intend to kill the Egyptian? Unclear antecedents, unnecessary words, and seeming contradiction open this passage to a wide

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[18] Exodus 1:8.
[19] Exodus 2:11-12.

range of midrashic commentary. One might imagine that, by indicating he saw no person, the text means that there was nobody with the moral courage to act – to be a complete human being is to intervene in the face of injustice.

In the film, Moses appears visibly shocked at the death of the Egyptian, catching himself from falling from the scaffolding off of which he pushed the taskmaster. The Hebrew verb in the original text is *vayach*, a conjugation of *l'hakot*, meaning "to strike" – the same verb that will be used to describe Aaron's using his staff to turn the Nile to blood and drawing swarms from the earth,[20] the plague of hailstones raining upon the earth,[21] as well as Moses's hitting of the rock to draw out water in Meribah,[22] and Balak's repeated beating of his donkey.[23] In each of these other instances, the striking is intentional, usually with deadly force. It is therefore reasonable to read the episode of Moses's killing of the Egyptian as intentional. The Midrash would agree, as in Shemot Rabbah, where Moses, upon seeing the Egyptian beating the Israelite, decides that it is just for the Egyptian to die.[24]

While the Moses of the film does not attempt to conceal the killing, Exodus has Moses bury the corpse in the sand. In the film, Moses's flight from Egypt is not portrayed as a flight from responsibility or justice. This allows Moses to continue as the ambiguously righteous hero. To conceal the killing would call his honor as a character into question. When Ramses confronts Moses, expecting him to readily accept the offer to absolve Moses of any responsibility by royal decree, Moses rejects the offer, revealing his

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[20] Exodus 7:20ff, 8:12ff.
[21] Exodus 9:25.
[22] Numbers 20:11.
[23] Numbers 22:23ff.
[24] Sh'mot Rabbah 1:28.

non-Egyptian identity to his adopted brother. He echoes Miriam's words that had spurred his own epiphany, "Ask the man I once called 'Father.'"

Moses flees to Midian, trekking across varying terrain. He falls to his knees in a sand dune, casting off his Egyptian garb. He stops, however, at the ring given to him by his brother, showing that while he is ready to cast off his Egyptian identity, he is not willing to completely forget his relationship with his brother. Though he has made his decision to leave Egypt and reveal his Israelite status to Ramses, the internal identity conflict is not yet settled. He bows his head and a sandstorm buries him.

This burial in the film is not found in the Torah. Perhaps this is the film's addition in light of the omission of Moses's burial of the Egyptian. In this way, an Egyptian has still died and is buried, but the figure is transposed on the Egyptian facet of Moses's identity. With his fleeing from his childhood home, he has killed this part of himself, and the burial formalizes his transition.

He is pulled out of the sand by a wandering camel. He grabs onto a sack the camel is carrying and gets dragged to a well. Here, we rejoin the Torah narrative.

B. Yitro and Tzippora

While Moses was sitting by the well, seven young women came to draw water. These are the daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian. The women were being harassed by shepherds. Moses, seeing the women struggling, got up and helped them draw water. The women were grateful to Moses for his help, and they invited him to their father's house.

The film slightly modifies this scene, reducing the number of daughters to three and having Moses get rid of the shepherds rather comedically. He then falls into the well, needing to be rescued himself by the daughters. This may simply be for comedic value, but it does humanize Moses, literally bringing him into a low and narrow place from which he must be rescued out of the water. In a way, this might even be considered (another) rebirth of Moses. Additionally, it both harkens to his rescue as an infant from the Nile and foreshadows the redemption of the Israelites at the Sea. In the film, Moses also has a prior relationship with Tzippora. She had been taken captive and given to Moses for his "pleasure" back in Egypt. Moses embarrassed her at a party, though he later allowed and even aided in her escape. Tzippora immediately recognizes Moses in the well, allowing him to fall back in, prompting her sister to remark, "That's why papa says she'll never get married."

Once out of the well, Moses is taken to Yitro's encampment. He is bathed and clothed, embraced by Yitro, who calls Moses his honored guest. Moses responds negatively, saying, "I have done nothing in my life worth honoring" – a powerful though self-deprecating reflection on Moses's part.

Yitro encourages Moses to change his perception. While this kind of mentorship does not come from Yitro at this point in Exodus, Moses's father-in-law will prove an invaluable counselor and advisor later in the Torah's telling.[25] In the *Prince of Egypt*, Yitro's song, "Through Heaven's Eyes" accompanies a montage, with Moses gaining confidence, becoming a part of the Midianite community, and, of course, marrying Tzippora. The main melodic motif of the song, found both in the orchestration and sung by the choir on

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[25] See *Parashat Yitro*, Exodus 18-20.

"yai dai dai" lyrics, is both communal and joyful, exuding energy. This is contrasted with a more expansive melody and harmonic backing on Yitro's solo verses. It might also be noted that it is through the act of turning or lifting up his eyes that Moses changes his perspective elsewhere in the story, such as the episode of killing the Egyptian ("he turned and saw no person") or, later, when he turns to see the burning bush. "Through Heaven's Eyes" names this phenomenon.

C. The Voice of God

In Exodus 3:1, we are told that, while he was shepherding his father-in-law's herd by Mount Horeb, a messenger of God appeared to Moses through a non-consuming fire. The film adds a story of one lost sheep leading Moses to the burning bush, a seemingly direct adaptation of *Sh'mot Rabbah* 2:2:[26]

> "Our teachers have said: Once, while Moses, our Teacher, was shepherding Yitro's sheep in the wilderness, one of the sheep broke off and ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a shaded place. The lamb came across a pool of water and stopped to drink. When Moses reached the lamb, he said, 'I did not know you ran away out of thirst. You are so exhausted!' He put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said, 'Since you tend the sheep of human

[26] While this parallel is clear from a Jewish lens, a Christian viewer (or a viewer more familiar with the New Testament than with classical rabbinic commentary) would likely see it as an allusion to the Parable of the Lost Sheep, as found in Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7. This overlap between classical rabbinic commentary and early Christian writings is neither coincidental nor necessarily surprising, as both are coming from markedly similar time periods, knowledge bases, and cultural milieus.

> beings with such overwhelming love – by your life, I swear you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, Israel.'"[27]

In the film, Moses follows a baby lamb into a cave and turns aside (turning aside is a recurring motif for Moses, both in the film and the textual tradition) when he notices what first appears to be a glowing pool of rippling water (a powerful visual, with water symbolizing redemption), where he sees and quizzically examines the burning bush. The scene is underscored with a choir, beginning with an ascending octave leap, down to five through major seven. This "Miracle Theme" will return, most notably in the orchestration of "When You Believe," indicating something miraculous.[28] Then, he hears the voice of God for the first time.

The filmmakers faced a quandary here: What does God's voice sound like? Surely any casting choice made could alienate or even offend some viewers. In *Sh'mot Rabbah* 3:1, Rabbi Yehoshuah Ha-Cohen bar Nehemiah writes that God speaks here in the voice of Moses's father, not wanting to frighten Moses. That answer did not satisfy the producers, however, as Moses's father, Amram, is entirely absent from the film.

Instead, Val Kilmer is credited as the voice of God – the same actor who voices Moses – though the voice is clearly digitally enhanced to add a certain ethereal, reverberant quality. Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a Conservative rabbi and scholar, was consulted by the production team on this choice:

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[27] Sh'mot Rabbah 2:2.

[28] It is no coincidence that this same cadence was reused by composer Stephen Schwartz on the word "Unlimited" in Wicked's "Defying Gravity" – it symbolizes both power and resolve.

> "The producers had originally wanted to have God speak in a blend of voices to indicate that we hear God in many different ways. This would have fit nicely with the Midrash that states that at Sinai each person there heard God according to his or her own ability (Exodus Rabbah 5:9; 29:1). Technically, though, that made it impossible to understand the voice of God. The producers were immediately thinking of someone like James Earl Jones to be the voice of God - a rich, deep bass to symbolize awe. To get them thinking beyond the obvious, I suggested, in response, Barbara Streisand or Julie Andrews (the British really know how to give class to the language!). Ultimately they decided that it should be the same actor who played Moses who speaks the voice of God because, according to a Midrash they quoted that I have not been able to locate, we hear God in our own voice. That would make the voice of God even more familiar and inviting than if God spoke in the voice of one's father, and it would say that God is our higher self speaking to us - or, in Freudian terms, our superego speaking to our ego."[29]

Perhaps the producers were relying on Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi's commentary on Exodus 19:19, "Moses spoke and God answered with a voice."[30] Rabbi Shimon comments, "What do we learn from the addition of, 'With a voice?' By the voice of Moses."[31, 32] Additionally, they may have looked to *Sh'mot Rabbah* 5:9, wherein,

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[29] Elliot Dorff, "The Voice of God," American Jewish University, January 17, 2009, https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/voice-god.

[30] Exodus 19:19.

[31] B.T. *Berakhot* 45a.

[32] In context, Rabbi Shimon was not commenting on the timbre or tonality of the voice, but the dynamic, utilizing the Exodus quote as a prooftext for a dictum that the *meturgeman* ([arcane] ritual translator of Torah into Aramaic) should not speak louder than the *baal koreh* (ritual Torah reader).

based on the plural "voices" found in Exodus 20:15, God's voice is translated into 70 different human languages, "so as it would be heard by all peoples; so that each individual nation heard it in their own people's tongue."[33] Noting that God's voice is only heard by Moses within the film, the choice to cast the same voice actor, the same tongue, to play both God and Moses has solid rabbinic footing.

The rest of the scene is an almost-verbatim translation of the dialogue from Exodus, beginning with God's call to Moses, repeating, "Moses, Moses!" to which Moses responds, "Here I am,"[34] echoing the affirmation found across Tanakh. God then commands Moses, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground."[35] Moses asks, "Who are you?"

This deviates from the original text, wherein God immediately begins an introduction without prompting. The film does use Torah to answer, however, with God responding, "I am that I am," an imperfect though familiar translation of God's self-descriptor found in Exodus 3:14, "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.*"[36]

With Moses still confused, the film jumps back to the dialogue's original order with God expounding, "I am the God of your ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[37] With this statement, and the echo of Miriam's identification of Moses as her brother ringing in his ears, Moses removes his sandals. Terrified, he asks, "What do you want with me?" God responds, now slightly paraphrasing, though still largely faithful to the text, "I have seen the oppression of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry. So I have come down to

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[33] Sh'mot Rabbah 5:9.
[34] Exodus 3:4.
[35] Exodus 3:5.
[36] Exodus 3:14.
[37] Exodus 3:6.

deliver them out of slavery and bring them to a good land; a land flowing with milk and honey. And so, unto Pharaoh, I shall send you."[38]

Throughout the scene, we get flashes of dialogue from previous scenes, such as Moses's killing of the Egyptian and Miriam's cry, "You are our brother!" Moses reacts in such a manner as to indicate that these flashbacks are not simply a cinematic device, reminding the audience of previous events, but are a part of the theophanic experience in that God has the power to transcend time and space within revelation.

Upon God declaring, "I will teach you what to say," Moses also hears himself say, "Let my people go," which has not happened yet at this point in the story. It is clear that the film intends this moment to transcend linear time, clearly bringing us into a space of Divinity and supernatural power. This is a common Midrashic trope across major theophanic experiences, such as Abraham's vision in Genesis 13:14ff.

Moses still has his doubts, however, and argues with God. The film's central focus on Moses's identity crisis climaxes at this moment, with Moses saying that God has chosen the wrong messenger, "Who am I to speak to these people?" God responds with a voice and light so loud and bright that Moses is knocked off of his feet, underscored by the brass section playing the Miracle Theme: "Who made man's mouth? Who made the deaf, the mute, the seeing, or the blind? Did not I? Now go!"[39]

Moses cowers in the fetal position, terrified of God's outburst. The flames of the bush seemingly lift him up, his robe flowing as he floats in the air. God now speaks in a gentler, almost paternal tone (perhaps in reference to the aforementioned Midrash of

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[38] Exodus 3:7-8, 10.
[39] Exodus 4:11.

Sh'mot Rabbah 3:1, that God spoke in the voice of Moses's father): "Oh, Moses. I shall be with you when you go to the king of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not listen, so I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with all my wonders."[40]

God concludes, "Take the staff in your hand, Moses. With it, you shall do My wonders. I shall be with you, Moses." This command will be echoed at several points in the film, though it is unclear if Moses is actually hearing God speak again or if he is simply remembering the statement and trying to hold onto it in moments of crisis and power.

D. Approaching Pharaoh

Moses enters Pharaoh's court with the fanfare of music and dancers. The music underscoring this section (part of the score by Hans Zimmer) includes a motif from the Ladino folk song, *Kuando el Rey Nimrod.* The lyrics are not included, but the allusion to this song invokes a midrash of Nimrod and Abraham that very much parallels the story of Pharaoh and Moses, with the second verse telling of Nimrod's edict to kill male infants:

> *Luego a las komadres enkomendava / Ke toda mujer ke prenyada kedara / si paria un ijo, al punto la matara / Ke avia de naser Avraham Avinu.*
>
> Then he told the midwives / that any woman who was still pregnant / if she gave birth to a son, he will be killed at that moment / for Abraham, our father, was about to be born.

The song continues for sixteen verses, explicating Abraham's merit and victory over the king. While this narrative of Nimrod's mass infanticide along the same lines as that of

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[40] Exodus 3:20.

Pharaoh is not found in Torah, it is found in the key Islamic text, *Al Tabari*, a 10th century text with many Rabbinic parallels.[41] For the film to allude to this understanding through the underscoring reiterates Moses's position: he is an inheritor of the tradition of Abraham, cast opposite Pharaoh in a battle of the fate of the Israelites.

Upon entering the court, Moses is surprised to find not his former adopted father Pharaoh Seti on the throne, but his adopted brother Ramses in his place. This heightens the emotional stakes for the characters, treating Moses and (the new) Pharaoh as seeming equals. The power dynamic at play simply would not be as potent were Seti to be Moses's adversary as Seti has always been in a higher position of power above Moses. To put Ramses, Moses's brother and boyhood friend as the adversary levels the playing field, as will be exemplified by images of Moses and Pharaoh face-to-face in the Plagues song.

In their first encounter, Ramses is excited to see Moses, embracing him and poking fun at his Midianite garb. Moses, however, has moved beyond their childhood relationship and attempts to get to business, imploring the Pharaoh to release the Israelites, faithful to the Biblical account.

Pharaoh calls upon the Egyptian priests Huy and Hotep (the same Moses and Ramses had tormented in their youth) to refute Moses's God. As instructed, Moses places his staff before Pharaoh and it turns into a snake. Huy and Hotep are able to replicate the trick, though we are shown (in shadow) Moses's snake devouring theirs. This is directly taken from the biblical narrative, though it is dramatized in the film and Aaron is removed, with his role instead taken by Moses.[42] Huy and Hotep sing a comedic number, enumerating

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[41] Muhammad ibn Jarir ibn Yazid (al-Tabari), *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. William M Brinner, vol. II (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1985).

[42] Exodus 7:10-13.

the gods of Egypt, repeating that Moses is "playing with the big boys now." The number speaks to the Egyptian dismissal of the Israelite God's power as well as the Israelites' underdog status.

Upon being rejected by Pharaoh, Moses leaves behind the signet ring Ramses had gifted him years earlier, signifying his final break from Egyptian identity and allegiance. He goes and sees the Israelites who, similarly, reject him, as they do in Exodus.

Moses, however, does not give up and approaches Pharaoh as his boat sails down the Nile. With God's instruction, Moses places his staff into the river, turning it to blood. Though this is rightfully distressing to the Egyptians, Huy and Hotep are once again seemingly able to approximate the magic trick, leading Pharaoh to again refuse Moses's demands.

At this point, the film goes into a musical montage of the remaining plagues. A choir repeats, "Thus saith the Lord," employing Jamesian biblical language. The choir begins in a harsh staccato, monotonically repeating their lyrics, alluding to the unrelenting wrath of God's plagues. Moses sings of his regret that these things are to befall his former home and family, though he remains steadfast in his commitment. Ramses, for his part, sings of his anger toward Moses. Whereas Moses's line, echoing a theme from his earlier number, "All I Ever Wanted," is flowing and legato, floating above the harshly metered choir and orchestra, Ramses's is rather simple and metric, punching every downbeat, exemplifying his hardened heart.

Upon the death of his son, however, Pharaoh finally relents and sets the Israelites free, casting away Moses.

E. "When You Believe"

Having permission to leave, Moses returns to the Israelites. Miriam and Tzippora sing to Moses, seemingly comforting him. This flips the order of biblical events, with Miriam singing before they leave Egypt, much less reach the Sea.

Despite not yet witnessing the miracle of the splitting of the sea, they sing, "There can be miracles when you believe. Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill. Who knows what miracles you can achieve? When you believe, somehow you will – you will when you believe." The emphasis on faith here is not found elsewhere in the film.

As the Israelites begin their journey, the song becomes more boisterous and cheerful, as we would expect from *Shirat ha-Yam*. A child's voice interrupts and sings, eventually joined by a choir, "*Ashira ladonai ki gao gaa. Mi chamocha baeilim Adonai? Mi kamocha nedar bakodesh? Nachita b'chasd'cha am zu gaalta!*"[43] These words, directly quoted from the biblical Song of the Sea, are not translated, presented seemingly as a part of the same spontaneous celebration as the rest of the song. The child's voice being the first may stem from a literal understanding of Exodus 15:1: "Moses and the children of Israel sang…" More than that, however, it speaks to the role of the child as a symbol of hope and redemption, as were Moses in the basket and Miriam at the riverbank.

[43] Exodus 15:1, 11, 13.

F. At the Sea

Moses and the Israelites find themselves at the shore of the vast Sea of Reeds. Suddenly, a *shofar* is sounded, signaling the approaching Egyptian army. As in the text, a pillar of fire descends from the heavens, walling off the Israelites from the Egyptians. Moses, hearing an echo of God's instruction, wades into the sea and strikes his staff down into the water, causing the sea to split in a magnificent display of power. The Israelites rush through, with walls of water towering above them. Flashes of lightning illuminate the dark water as the Israelites pass through, showing fish and a massive sea creature.

When the Israelites are almost through to the other side, the pillar of fire recedes into the sky, revealing the miracle to Pharaoh. He orders the army to charge forward, but the walls of water crash down upon them, ostensibly drowning the Egyptians and leaving Pharaoh on a rock in the middle of the sea shouting, "Moses! Moses!" This end to Pharaoh's story is echoed in Midrash – Pharaoh was not drowned with the rest of the Egyptian army.[44] Moses quietly responds, facing the sea: "Goodbye, brother."

[44] Mechilta Beshalach 6; Midrash Tehilim 106, 455.

IV. Religious Educational Value of "The Prince of Egypt"

Educational Themes and Messages

While one may primarily turn to *The Prince of Egypt* to teach the narrative of the Exodus, this utilization is both limited and limiting. While many elements cohere with the Pentateuchal text and later Midrashic tradition, there is also deviation and dramatization with no clear definition between source material. Were the film to be the only teaching given to students, they would not have a clear understanding of what the Torah actually says about Moses's life.

That being said, the film can be used to teach themes, messages, and values through its Midrashic adaptation. I have compiled here a list of *middot* that can be taught through the film, each of which would be readily applicable to any contemporary religious school curriculum. This list is by no means exhaustive, but should serve as a clear indicator of the film's educational potential.

In the context of Mussar, "*middot*" refers to ethical or moral qualities or attributes that individuals are encouraged to cultivate within themselves. These qualities serve as guiding principles for ethical behavior and personal growth. Mussar teachings emphasize the development of these qualities to achieve greater spiritual and moral refinement. It should be noted, however, that Mussar calls for a balance within each *middah* – one should not have too much or too little of a given trait.

Ometz Lev – Courage

At the core of the narrative is Moses, the reluctant hero thrust into a destiny that demands unparalleled courage. The film paints a vivid picture of Moses' internal struggles, emphasizing his fear, uncertainty, and ultimately his courageous journey **(towards)** embracing his calling. The courage depicted is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. Moses confronts his own doubts and insecurities, mirroring a relatable and resonant human experience.

It should also be noted that Moses's courage does not simply come from within, as many cinematic heroes seemingly muster, but rather from the support of God and both his biological and chosen family.

The fraternal relationship between Moses and Ramses serves as a canvas for exploring courage amidst familial and political complexities. Ramses, driven by the weight of tradition and power, must summon the courage to confront the evolving reality that challenges his understanding of justice and loyalty. The film delicately navigates the emotional landscape between the two brothers, showcasing the courage needed to question established norms and choose a divergent path. Ultimately, we see that it is Moses who triumphs, not because he is stronger than Ramses, but because he is able to rely on others. Whereas Ramses's story ends on a rock in the middle of the ocean, Moses is surrounded by community. Miriam and Aaron, though their characters are not nearly as deeply explored, also embody a spectrum of courage, with Aaron seemingly resigned to his fate and Miriam, conversely, speaking out and actively hoping for a better future.

The narrative as a whole does not shy away from addressing the courage required to challenge authority, even when that authority is considered divine. Moses, once an adopted prince of Egypt, defies the might of Pharaoh (who calls himself "The Morning and Evening Star"), embarking on a mission that questions the oppressive system. This theme resonates with a universal call for individuals to challenge unjust authority and systems, showcasing the enduring relevance of the Exodus story.

The film's musical score – most notably in the song "When You Believe" – becomes a powerful vehicle for expressing emotional courage. The lyrics and melodies convey the transformative power of belief and hope, illustrating that courage is not merely a physical act, but a profound emotional and spiritual journey.

Emunah – Faith

Moses's journey epitomizes the evolution of faith. From his early years as an adopted prince of Egypt, wherein he is disrespectful toward the Egyptian faith system, to the moment of his divine calling at the burning bush, Moses undergoes a profound transformation. His initial lack of faith in his ability to lead the Hebrew people is contrasted with the growing conviction that stems from his encounters with God. The film portrays faith not as a static certainty, but as a dynamic, evolving relationship with the Divine.

The Hebrew people, enduring the harshness of slavery, exemplify a collective faith that persists despite the trials they face. Their resilience and hope, depicted in the poignant opening number, "Deliver Us," speak to a faith that endures even in the darkest moments:

"*Elohim*, God on high, can You hear Your people cry? Help us now, **in** this dark hour – Deliver us!" The film suggests that faith, when tested by adversity, has the potential to become a beacon of light, guiding individuals and communities through the most challenging circumstances. Indeed, as the film's most famous song declares, "There can be miracles when you believe."

Miracles, a recurring theme in the Exodus narrative, are portrayed as catalysts for faith. The burning bush, the plagues, and the parting of the Red Sea serve not only as narrative devices but also as visual metaphors for the transformative power of faith. The film suggests that belief in the miraculous is a cornerstone of faith, inviting viewers to contemplate the relationship between the extraordinary and the divine.

This is not to say that belief must be absolute. *The Prince of Egypt* does not shy away from depicting the struggles of faith. Moses' internal conflicts, Ramses' questioning of Divine authority, and the Hebrew people's wavering hope all contribute to a nuanced portrayal of faith as a dynamic and sometimes tumultuous journey. This exploration of doubt and questioning adds layers of authenticity to the characters' faith experiences, making their eventual convictions more resonant.

The film juxtaposes personal faith journeys with the broader collective faith of the Israelite people. Moses' personal struggles are mirrored in the doubts and fears of the community he leads. This duality highlights that faith is not only an individual experience, but also a communal endeavor, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal beliefs within a broader spiritual faith system.

The film's musical score highlights expressions of faith, with songs like "Through Heaven's Eyes" and "When You Believe" capturing the emotional and spiritual

dimensions of the characters' journeys. The lyrics convey the transformative power of faith, emphasizing that belief has the capacity to reshape perspectives and lead to profound personal and societal change.

Faith becomes intertwined with themes of redemption in the narrative. Characters find not only freedom from physical bondage but also spiritual liberation through their faith. Moses' journey from a place of doubt to a place of profound faith represents a redemptive arc that transcends his personal narrative and influences the destiny of an entire people.

Tzedek – Justice

The obvious injustice in the film is the Israelites' enslavement. The narrative powerfully conveys the injustice they endure through epic visuals of their labor and abuse, emphasizing the urgent need for redress. The cry for justice echoes through scenes depicting the harsh conditions of slavery, setting the stage for a narrative that grapples with the ethical imperative of addressing systemic injustice.

Moses emerges as the central figure in the pursuit of justice. His initial ignorance of the plight of the Hebrews is transformed into a fierce advocacy for their freedom. The film paints Moses as a reluctant, yet compelling champion of justice, propelled by a moral awakening that transcends his royal upbringing. His journey becomes a testament to the transformative power of recognizing and confronting injustice.

The plagues and miraculous events at the sea serve as manifestations of Divine justice. Each plague, while awe-inspiring in its visual representation, carries a moral weight, challenging the oppressors to reckon with the consequences of their actions. The film

suggests that justice, in this context, is not solely a human endeavor, but a force with Divine agency, holding oppressors accountable for their deeds.

Ramses, the Egyptian prince and Moses' adoptive brother, embodies the tragic consequences of injustice. His stubborn refusal to acknowledge the moral imperative of justice leads to the tragic loss of his own son. The narrative underscores that injustice not only harms the oppressed, but also places a heavy toll on those who perpetrate it, reinforcing the moral dimensions of the justice theme.

The film explores the tension between legal decrees and moral justice. While the Egyptians adhere to the legal ownership of slaves, the narrative challenges the moral bankruptcy of such laws. Moses, driven by a higher sense of justice, questions the legitimacy of oppressive legal structures, highlighting a broader philosophical conversation about the intersection of law and morality.

As the Hebrews embark on their journey to freedom, the narrative hints at the concept of restorative justice. The restoration of a dispossessed people to their homeland becomes a form of justice that goes beyond mere retribution. The film suggests that true justice involves not only the cessation of oppression, but the restoration of dignity, identity, and autonomy to the oppressed.

"The Prince of Egypt" invites viewers to contemplate justice from multiple cultural perspectives. The Egyptian worldview, rooted in tradition and hierarchy, clashes with the emergent Hebrew ethos that seeks justice through liberation. The film thus becomes a canvas for exploring the clash of different moral frameworks and the evolving understanding of justice in the face of cultural and societal shifts.

Anavah – Humility

"The Prince of Egypt" intricately explores the themes of humility and identity against the backdrop of the biblical epic. The narrative unfolds a compelling journey of self-discovery, transformation, and the profound humility required to navigate the complex terrain of identity.

At the onset, Moses is portrayed as a prince of Egypt, a position that bestows him with privilege and power. However, his true identity as a Hebrew becomes a catalyst for a profound journey of humility. The film charts his transformation from a proud and entitled prince to a humble, yet confident, self-aware leader. Moses' humility emerges not from weakness, but from a deep acknowledgment of his own fallibility and a growing connection with his true heritage.

Moses' discovery of his Israelite identity triggers an identity crisis. The film poignantly portrays his struggle to reconcile the disparate facets of his identity — the princely life he has known and the oppressed people to whom he truly belongs. His journey toward humility is marked by a willingness to confront the discomfort of uncertainty and the humility to acknowledge the limitations of his understanding.

The narrative emphasizes the perils of pride and the necessity of humility. Ramses embodies the arrogance of unchecked power. His refusal to heed warnings and humble himself before the Divine leads to tragic consequences. The film suggests that pride obstructs true understanding of oneself and the world, and only through humility can one navigate the complexities of identity.

As Moses takes on the mantle of leadership, his humility becomes a defining trait. He seeks guidance, listens to the counsel of others, and acknowledges the Divine hand guiding his actions. The film challenges traditional notions of leadership tied to authority and dominance (exemplified by the Pharaoh's claim, "I am the morning and evening star"), presenting humility as a source of strength and wisdom in the face of immense responsibility.

The film visually captures moments of Divine encounter with a sense of awe and humility. The burning bush, the pillar of fire, and other manifestations of the divine serve as humbling reminders of a power beyond human comprehension. Moses' humility grows in tandem with his understanding of the vastness and mystery of the Divine, illustrating a connection between humility and spiritual awareness. Indeed, humility leads us to our higher self.

The film suggests that the journey of discovering one's true identity is inherently a journey of humility. In the song "Through Heaven's Eyes," Yitro teaches Moses a powerful lesson in humility: one must consider their life not simply through their own experiences, but through a higher lens. Whether for Moses, Ramses, or the Israelites as a whole, embracing one's identity involves a willingness to let go of preconceptions, acknowledge vulnerability, and humbly accept the truths that define who they are. Identity, the film posits, is not a fixed destination, but a dynamic process woven with humility.

The film underscores the idea that humility fosters unity. As Moses leads the Israelites toward freedom, humility becomes a unifying force that transcends differences and fosters a sense of collective identity. The humility to recognize the shared humanity

among diverse individuals emerges as a key element in forging a community on the journey to freedom.

Zerizut – Alacrity

The theme of *Zerizut* (alacrity) emerges as a moral value that underscores the importance of swift and enthusiastic action in the pursuit of justice, freedom, and personal transformation. Throughout the narrative, characters demonstrate alacrity in various forms, reflecting a sense of urgency, determination, and readiness to embrace their destinies.

Moses, the central protagonist of the story, exemplifies alacrity in his journey from a reluctant prince of Egypt to the liberator of the Hebrew people. Initially hesitant to confront the injustices perpetrated against his own people, Moses experiences a transformative awakening when he witnesses the suffering of the Hebrew slaves firsthand. His encounter with the burning bush serves as a catalyst for his newfound sense of purpose and urgency. With unwavering resolve, Moses accepts the divine call to lead his people out of bondage, demonstrating alacrity in his commitment to their liberation.

The plagues serve as both a narrative and thematic climax. The courage to confront and endure these supernatural events becomes a defining moment for the characters. The Hebrew people, Moses, and even Ramses must find the strength to face unimaginable hardships, testing the limits of their courage and forcing them to act. Ramses's inability to change – his lack of *Zerizut* – ultimately leads to his downfall.

Moreover, the Hebrew people themselves exhibit alacrity as they respond to Moses' call for liberation. Despite their years of enslavement and oppression, they embrace the opportunity for freedom with fervent determination. Their willingness to follow Moses into the unknown, even in the face of uncertainty and danger, reflects their readiness to seize the moment and embrace the promise of a better future.

In addition to the pursuit of freedom, alacrity is also evident in the characters' personal journeys of transformation and self-discovery. Moses' sister, Miriam, embodies this theme as she boldly confronts her own fears and insecurities to support her brother's mission. Her unwavering faith and proactive approach serve as an inspiration to others, demonstrating the power of alacrity in overcoming obstacles and achieving personal growth.

Furthermore, the theme of alacrity resonates beyond individual characters and extends to the collective consciousness of the Hebrew people as they journey toward the promised land. Their steadfast determination, resilience, and readiness to embrace their newfound freedom exemplify the transformative power of alacrity in the face of adversity.

Zerizut drives the characters to act with enthusiasm, determination, and readiness in the pursuit of justice, freedom, and personal transformation. Through the journeys of Moses, the Hebrew people, and other key characters, the film highlights the transformative power of alacrity in overcoming obstacles, seizing opportunities, and embracing the promise of a brighter future.

The Pedagogical Power of Symbolism and Collective Memory in Jewish Education

The aforementioned *middot* (attributes) can – and, in truth, are – taught in myriad methods and media throughout Jewish education. Why, then, should an educator complicate matters by employing a new rhetorical device, namely, artistic media?

In his dissertation, discussing the teaching of Midrash in Conservative day school curricula, Rabbi Alvan Kaunfer writes, "[Midrash's] use of story, parable, imagery, metaphor, and creative expression, suggests that midrashic literature would relate to the young child who's [sic] own thinking is imaginative, creative and concrete in nature."[45] Midrashic literature, with its utilization of narrative, allegory, symbolism, metaphor, and artistic expression, resonates particularly well with young children whose thinking is characterized by imagination, creativity, and yet a concrete understanding of the world around them.

Artistic Midrash employs vehicles such as visual art, music, and storytelling to transmit collective memories effectively. Whereas biblical Hebrew, classical Aramaic, or medieval interpretation across languages can be inaccessible and even push students away – even in translation – Artistic Midrash is accessible to learners of all languages and stages. Ivan G. Marcus writes:

> "It is to penetrate the history of symbolic representations that claim to express a collective memory of an individual leader, local community, region or global Jewish experience. In some ways, the importance and power of the experience being represented requires a near mythic vehicle for it to be remembered and

[45] Alvan Howard Kaunfer, "Teaching Midrash in the Conservative Day School : A Rationale and Curriculum Proposal" (dissertation, 1989).

> transmitted effectively. Not nitty-gritty details... are the stuff of collective memory. Rather, heroic stories of foundings, conquests, rescue, and self-sacrifice are a collective memory, based on a collective forgetting of everything but one considered theme; the spotlight requires a blacked out stage."[46]

Here, Marcus speaks to the power of symbolic representations in conveying collective memory within Jewish education, particularly in the context of Artistic Midrash. Artistic Midrash utilizes symbolic representations, thereby digestibly conveying complex theological and historical narratives within an educational framework. These symbols serve as powerful tools to evoke collective memory, encapsulating the essence of key events, figures, and experiences in Jewish history. Whereas text alone – especially that which is archaic, unknown, or complex – can overwhelm the student, the category of Midrash allows for and even invites an approachable, understandable, and resonant retelling, while remaining reverent to the source material.

In Artistic Midrash, the spotlight shines on key themes and symbolic representations, while other details may be deliberately obscured or omitted. This selective focus enables learners to engage deeply with the core messages and values embedded within Jewish tradition, more readily allowing for more meaningful exploration of specific ideas.

Marcus underscores the importance of symbolic representations and mythic storytelling in conveying collective memory within Jewish education, highlighting the role of Artistic Midrash as a powerful tool for transmitting cultural heritage, values, and identity. Through the use of symbolic language and legend, Artistic Midrash enables learners to

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[46] Ivan G. Marcus, "History, Story, and Collective Memory," *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 258.

engage with complex theological and historical narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of Jewish tradition and identity.

Artistic and Midrashic Education

Historically, Jewish education has emphasized textual analysis, source material, and mimetic learning of behavior and ritual. While these approaches remain central, educators and stakeholders increasingly recognize the need to diversify pedagogical methods. As Ofra Backenroth posits, the ultimate goal of teaching extends beyond knowledge and ritual transmission, encompassing cognitive objectives such as comprehension and affective objectives such as spiritual transformation.[47] In this regard, the creative arts present alternative modalities that can be integrated into curricula. Since the publication of Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, teachers across disciplines have employed art, music, and movement in their classrooms, recognizing that students have varying learning preferences and needs.

However, the benefits of creativity in the classroom are not limited to those with specific intelligence types; all students can benefit. In *Art with the Brain in Mind*, Eric Jensen contends that the arts enhance learning for all students, fostering self-discipline, motivation, aesthetic awareness, and emotional expression. Music, in particular, has a significant impact on memory and recall. According to David Perkins in *Smart Schools*, artistic interpretations of texts promote retention and deeper learning. It is evident that

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[47] Ofra Backenroth, "Incorporating the Arts in Jewish Education," essay, in *What Do We Now Know About Jewish Education: Perspectives on Research for Practice*, ed. Roberta Louis Goodman, Paul A. Flexner, and Linda Dale Bloomberg (Los Angeles, CA: Torah Aura Productions, 2008), 335–41, 335.

arts education serves not only its unique function but also supports other learning objectives.

Bringing this theory into the specific sphere of Jewish education, Shira Epstein explored the effect of participatory drama on students' internalization of biblical and textual complexities by teaching through tableau. "Students' generation of the tableaus within a group enabled reflective thinking and discussion about the meaning of the verses. As students moved between the symbol systems, generating meanings of the text, Jewish literacy was expanded beyond a technical exercise of learning the literal content of the stories."[48]

When teaching biblical narrative, especially to pre-adolescents, a question often arises from a student, either precocious or intentionally difficult: "Is this a true story?" The historical veracity of the Pentateuch and other sacred literature is, undoubtedly, an interesting field of research, with centuries of textual criticism, archeology, and theology to peruse therein. That said, as a teacher of Judaism, I am not particularly concerned with historicity. Rather, I prefer questions of ultimate Truth – What are the ethics, morals, and purposes that guide and drive both the universal and particular? So, when faced with the question from a particular 10-year-old who thinks he "got me" because he learned about evolution and he knows creation really took longer than seven days, or the 12-year-old who is questioning the existence of God, or the adult who insists on facts and evidence, I

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[48] Shira D. Epstein, "Reimagining Literacy Practices: Creating Living 'Midrash' from Ancient Texts through Tableau," *Journal of Jewish Education* 70, no. 1 (April 1, 2004): 60–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/00216240491020306, 71.

quote one of my favorite children's book authors, Patricia Polacco, who is, in turn, quoting her own grandmother: "Of course it's true! But it may not have happened."[49]

When watching a film, especially an animated musical like *The Prince of Egypt*, this question is not posed. Even the youngest children inherently understand and accept the suspension of disbelief. They know the two-dimensional Moses who sings about his internal identity crisis is not a real person who actually exists in front of them and they do not care – they still become invested and intrigued by his story.

The question then becomes how to move from entertainment to education – Why should the students and educators see this as more than a fun movie? How does one present it not only as art for the sake of entertainment but as Midrash? And even supposing we make that change successfully, what are the best practices when teaching Midrash?

Educator, artist, and author Joel Lurie Grishaver discussed these questions and more in a chapter of "The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook." Though Grishaver concedes that Midrash can be difficult to teach, due in no small part to a requisite high knowledge basis of language and text as barriers to entry, he still argues it is worth teaching, not only as a means to biblical narrative education or to instill values, but for its own sake. He has three basic premises:

1. "Every Midrash starts with a question."
2. "Every Midrash has both an answer and a message."

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[49] Marjorie Ingall, "Patricia Polacco's 'The Keeping Quilt' Beguiles a New Generation of Kids," Tablet Magazine, October 3, 2013, https://tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/patricia-polacco-keeping-quilt.

3. "Midrash is 'real' Torah, [in that it is either] part of God's revelation, or the deep collective wisdom of the Jewish people [depending upon] your theology."[50]

When we consider the film, we find many questions, large and small, posed by our veritable Midrash: What was Moses's identity? To whom was he loyal? How did he see himself? Why was Pharaoh's heart hardened? How was he convinced? How did the Israelites experience the miracles of redemption? Simultaneously, there are large, thematic, moral questions we may ask ourselves in light of the film. What is deliverance? How do we achieve redemption? Where does identity begin and end? How do we assess our own loyalties? How should we view ourselves in relation to the world around us?

Its answers and messages range from the subtle, implied themes and motifs, some of which are enumerated above, to the overt, very-loudly-and-obviously-repeated – "There can be miracles when you believe," and "Look at your life through Heaven's eyes" come to mind.

The final point is the most complex, and perhaps the most controversial. "Midrash is 'real' Torah." Can we really teach *The Prince of Egypt* and honestly call it Torah? Should we? Though I struggle with the use of the word "Torah" here, I resonate with the latter of the options given: the film absolutely qualifies as part of "the deep collective wisdom" of our people. If nothing else – as shown in Chapter 3 – the film exists as a collection of wisdom gathered from our interpretive tradition.

By elevating a modern, artistic retelling of our traditional, foundational narrative, we show our students that interpretation is not only acceptable but integral to our

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[50] Joel Lurie Grishaver, "Teaching Midrash and Rashi," essay, in *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, ed. Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz (Milburn, NJ: A.R.E. Pub., 2003), 403–12.

understanding. We give them permission to put their whole selves into the narrative, to make Torah a part of them.

V. Integrating *The Prince of Egypt* into Jewish Education

An in-depth analysis of *The Prince of Egypt* and its educational value requires a focused section on how this film could be utilized in a practical educational application. In an attempt to narrow the scope of this pedagogy, there are four classifications with which a teacher might deepen their learners' relationships with this artistically rich educational resource: storytelling, sourcing the movie's Midrashic material, and aligning middot emphasized and embodied by the movie's main characters. While a comprehensive approach might touch on any or all of these categories, a learner-centered approach explains how one might best endeavor to create a dynamic and engaging framework that speaks to elementary, secondary, and adult learners.

Storytelling

In contrast to Genesis which lays out the universal history of humanity and the particular history of the Jewish people, Exodus engages specifically with the beginning of the story of a united people, the Israelites. One of the most basic educational elements of *The Prince of Egypt* is that of storytelling, of sharing the Exodus in a way that inspires and informs its audience. As explicated in Chapter III, this film is not a verbatim account of the Pentateuchal narrative. Rather, it exists as an adaptation of the original story, an interpretation, and translation that allows for nuance, creativity, and an artist's prerogative for finessing details that make the story richer, even if the story's arc and details are often faithful to the Biblical and midrashic source material. *The Prince of Egypt* acts as an exemplar for aspiring storytelling, weaving a rich tapestry of intricate characters, vivid imagery, and majestic musical numbers.

If learners are to embrace the values and skills of storytelling, *The Prince of Egypt* shows them the power of audience engagement, dramatic transitions, and thought-provoking dilemmas. Students can utilize storytelling through any medium (musical, artistic, spoken word, etc.) to convey complex ideas, support diverse perspectives, and uplift the voices of untold and under-told tales. By engaging specifically in the storytelling techniques displayed in *The Prince of Egypt*, learners can challenge their critical thinking and communication skills while simultaneously deepening their understanding of the story itself.

What might this look like in a classroom setting? For younger learners, especially those who are more kinesthetically inclined, storytelling can and should be introduced through interactive storytelling sessions — scenes in which students can retell the plot of Exodus (or perhaps even create their own musical numbers), or act out scenes from *The Prince of Egypt*. Developing learners can sing songs from the soundtrack, or color pictures of scenes from the film — sharing what they know of the story, the characters, and their relationship to the Exodus as they do so. Teachers can and should emphasize the importance of the *narrative* piece of the Exodus, the significance of characters, settings, plot development, and conflict, all the while encouraging students to express and explore their own narratives based on the themes of the film.

Secondary learners (middle school and high school students) can dig somewhat deeper, identifying and analyzing the storytelling techniques that appear in *The Prince of Egypt*. Introducing plot diagramming, character analysis, and accurately identifying central themes and motifs identification empowers students to have a stronger understanding of both storytelling and how the movie itself applies narrative structure and symbolism to

move the story forward. This pedagogy also results in a deeper appreciation for storytelling as an art form and for the Exodus story in itself.

Adult learners are developmentally able to engage in more advanced and nuanced discussions on the cultural significance of storytelling through *The Prince of Egypt* and how it may relate to and be relevant to contemporary issues. These learners may be able to understand the movie's deeper meanings and find ways to apply it to and through their ethical lenses, fostering a deeper connection to the narrative. Group discussions, however, as well as communal critiques, and even creative writing assignments based on the film or the Exodus narrative can encourage adults to question and reflect on their own experiences and values and to learn from and with each other in the process.

Emphasizing storytelling as a central element of both *The Prince of Egypt* and of educational practice challenges the classroom standbys of rote memorization—which perhaps allowed students to engage with the material, but not to relate to it. With a focus on storytelling—how a story is told, how a story is heard, how a story is shared—teachers may encourage students to actively interact with the content and context of the material, promoting a heightened awareness of and appreciation for *The Prince of Egypt*, its ability to share our story, and how it may apply to their lives.

Midrash as Source Material and Text Study

The Prince of Egypt is a beautiful exercise in multilayered modern Midrash. Through the artistic and musical representation of classical narrative Midrash, the film adds depth and complexity to its characters and enriches the biblical events portrayed. This empowers

the film's audience to connect to a millennia-old tradition in a modern yet meaningful way. Ironically, the film is so successful in connecting with its audience, that many viewers might be completely oblivious to the fact that the movie is based on actual Midrashic textual sources.

By introducing and utilizing Midrash as source material and as a foundation for deeper text study, teachers may cultivate and foster a deeper understanding of the written biblical narratives, while exploring the artistic interpretation, cultural milieu, and historical context of the texts. Students may immerse themselves in Midrash as a way to partake in a dynamic and evolving tradition that might resonate with a contemporary audience—the same complexities of faith, identity, and human nature that challenged ancient rabbis are the ones that this audience grapples with now.

Though the category of Midrash may, on its face, be too complex to introduce to elementary-aged children, young learners can be introduced to Midrash in developmentally appropriate ways. PJ Library, a publisher of many picture books and stories based in classical Midrash, provides a simple and approachable definition of Midrash: "The practice of writing stories about biblical figures is called midrash. Traditionally midrash has been used to interpret a story in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), fill in narrative gaps, or help fill in a backstory. Midrash creates backstories for biblical characters, fills in logical gaps in the plotline, and explains unlikely turns of events."[51] Introducing students to Midrashic stories and legends through simplified retellings (such as those available from PJ Library) and interactive activities such as storyboarding or role-playing. Teachers can use stories, visuals, and gameplay to

[51] "What Is Midrash?," The PJ Library Blog, November 9, 2022, https://pjlibrary.org/beyond-books/pjblog/november-2022/what-is-midrash.

illustrate key concepts and themes, encouraging students to expand their imaginations, and experience the Exodus "as if they had lived it." *The Prince of Egypt* is one such example of a digestible medium through which a teacher may introduce Midrash and storytelling.

Teen learners can engage in more direct Midrashic exploration, looking at stories that directly speak to their own experiences that include peer conflict, social transitions, and leadership challenges. Group discussions, close reading exercises, and creative projects (perhaps even creating their own modern Midrash based on the traditional sources they're introduced to) enable students to learn with and from each other in the process. Teachers may introduce cultural and historical milieus which helped shape diverse commentaries and interpretations on specific passages from the Exodus story, sharing how these texts were amalgamated as a compilation of sources that then transformed into the artistic and modern Midrash of *The Prince of Egypt.* With practice and guidance, these students might be able to incorporate contemporary issues, personal reflections, and social enigmas into their Midrashic interpretations of the text. What might their *Prince of Egypt* look like?

Adult learners might engage with more complex texts (perhaps even in their original languages) and might read scholarly discussions and textual analyses of Midrashic literature. With time, learners might be able to explore and expand on the theological, ethical, and literary dimensions of Midrash and how it informs a modern understanding of the text—and how Midrash might even impact how Judaism is perceived and practiced.

While remaining reverential to traditional source material, Midrash acts as a liaison to learners who are interested in exploring how the texts might be applied to contemporary life. This study takes students far beyond the literal meaning of the text and encourages students to take ownership of the text in a meaningful way, perhaps even rewriting or extending pieces of the story – perhaps musically, in the right group. Midrash is latent with creative potential that may help promote critical thinking, empathy, Jewish literacy, and leadership.

Values/Middot

Explored in detail in Chapter IV, *The Prince of Egypt* serves as a font for a myriad of *middot* (values), drawing direct inspiration from the wealth of texts in the *Mussar* tradition (see Chapter IV). The film's audience is offered a profound glimpse at the aspirational attempts of its main characters to achieve a more balanced life. *Middot* are strategically embedded throughout the film, encouraging its audience to actively identify with these foundational principles.

As a pedagogical tool, the film prompts reflection, sparking conversations about how these *middot* play out, not only on the silver screen but also in contemporary life. This type of education is strongest when students are encouraged and empowered to apply these *middot* to their own relationships, ethical dilemmas, and lived experiences. By doing so, students are able to articulate how the middot appear in The Prince of Egypt while also cultivating these same values as guiding principles in their own lives.

Values-based education can be tailored to suit the developmental needs of primary learners, especially as young learners often best learn through a multifaceted approach.

Storytelling, as mentioned above, allows for narrative and relatable characters to grasp and grapple with foundational principles, with moral lessons woven seamlessly into the conclusion of a fairly loved fable or fairytale. Role-playing and imaginative play allow students to portray their favorite biblical characters, imaginatively acting out Miriam's waiting by the water as Moses raced through the rushes in his basket or dancing around in a circle with timbrels and tambourines in celebration. Arts-based education can also enable students to highlight key values, depict acts of compassion, express values, and aim to understand how our main characters embody values like kindness, humility, empathy, and cooperation.

While secondary school students can also learn from the same interplay as their primary counterparts, the use of reflective journaling, debates, more nuanced role-playing, and even service-learning can build stronger ties to both *middot* and the movie itself. These students, constantly in flux as their bodies and brains fluctuate and grow, face a volatile and uncertain world that mirrors in some ways the moral dilemmas faced by the characters in *The Prince of Egypt.* This parallel permits students to engage in critical discussions about leadership, relationships, ethical decision-making, social justice, and the consequences of their actions.

Adult learners can build on everything that has been discussed thus far and additionally engage more deeply in the *Mussar* texts themselves that might best relate to *The Prince of Egypt.* Adult learners might be encouraged to begin a *Va'ad*—a committee or group that focuses on studying and practicing Mussar principles and holding each other accountable to abiding by one's commitments and values. Learners might examine the intersection of religious textual traditions and contemporary ethical issues, aiming to

match *The Prince of Egypt's* main characters to the *middot* they best represent (or even by the ones they most need to work on) and doing the same with their local or national government leaders.

Through the integration of values-based education into a curriculum, educators aim to inspire and transform themselves and their students, empowering everyone to cultivate core virtues that resonate most actively. A deliberate practice of including moral and ethical teachings (even in the form of a movie), rouses learners to pursue a more balanced and ethical life. This equips students with essential life skills, connecting them to a moral compass that holds them accountable to themselves and their community. This type of education can be character-building, contributing to the formation of community members who are strong, ethical, and purpose-driven.

VI. Conclusion

The Prince of Egypt has the potential to be a powerful tool in the contemporary Jewish educator's toolbox. Beyond its high entertainment value, the film functions as a cinematic masterwork of artistic midrash, weaving a tapestry of biblical, classical, and contemporary source material into a new and engaging interpretation of the Exodus narrative through the media of storytelling, animation, and music.

In the classroom, teachers of learners across ages and stages can utilize this movie to great effect in teaching Exodus, Jewish values, midrash, and more. Through introductions and follow-up activities, learners come to see the story from a new perspective and feel greater ownership over our narrative tradition.

Implications

The Prince of Egypt, being a popularized animated feature, may be objectionable as curricular material to those who prefer to see the sacred texts in a purely reverential light. Moreover, the film does contain some ideas that come from outside of the Jewish tradition, and to use other peoples' interpretations in teaching our texts could be considered similarly problematic. Both of these challenges, which would likely be raised in the cases of other artistic midrash being utilized in the classroom, can be mitigated by providing students with an appropriate context for the film and by discussing the different ways in which midrash can be used to interpret the Torah and other biblical texts, and by demonstrating the core Jewish values alike in the midrashic rendering of the movie.

The benefits, however, clearly overshadow these concerns. These works have the potential to engage and excite students in the study of bible and midrash without daunting prerequisites of biblical Hebrew or Aramaic fluency.

In the interest of reaching students with a range of learning styles and needs, artistic midrash provides a valuable category to transmit and engage with our textual tradition. *The Prince of Egypt*, while fantastic, is only one example of this utility. Classes or courses could be taught utilizing musicals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* or Stephen Schwartz and John Caird's *Children of Eden*; visual art by artists such as Marc Chagall or Jacques Lipchitz; music by Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, or Regina Spektor (limiting the examples here to contemporary non-liturgical musicians); novels such as "The Red Tent" by Anita Diamant or "The Secret Chord" by Geraldine Brooks. All of these examples are undeniably interpretive works of art based off of a biblical source text, created for a popular – that is, non-ritualistic – audience and purpose. More research could include in-depth midrashic analyses on any of these works or corpuses.

This thesis, though grounded in pedagogical frameworks, is purely theoretical. A qualitative study could explore the experiences and perceptions of students and educators regarding the incorporation of artistic midrash in real educational settings. Researchers could conduct interviews, focus groups, or observational studies to gather data on how artistic midrash influences students' understanding, critical thinking skills, and emotional engagement with traditional texts. This qualitative research might uncover nuances and complexities in students' experiences that may not have been explored in this thesis, offering valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers.

An analogous quantitative study might utilize assessment scores, grades, and retention rates, before and after the integration of artistic midrash in curricula. Researchers could conduct pre- and post-tests to compare the academic performance of students who engage with artistic midrash to those who do not. Additionally, surveys or questionnaires could be administered to gather data on both faculty and students' attitudes, motivation, and engagement with the material.

Final Thoughts

Proverbs 22:6 states, "Teach a child according to their own path." Every person has their own inclinations, styles, and dispositions. To fulfill the mandate of this verse, it is incumbent upon modern Jewish educators to use all of the tools at our disposal to best reach, motivate, and engage our students. Artistic midrash, with its limitless forms, has great potential to this end. *The Prince of Egypt*, while phenomenal on so many levels, is just the tip of the iceberg.

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