

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WHAT IF MOSHEH RABBEINU HAD A REALITY TV SHOW?

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Celebrities have two choices: they can hide their private lives, or they can have no private life. What they can't do is live the same kind of private life as everyone else. It will inevitably be made public.

When an ordinary person becomes a celebrity, even a heroic celebrity, a common result is that their private pasts become public. Their sexuality, integrity, and professional challenges become objects of public interest. Once upon a time there was some recognition among mainstream journalists that this was morally questionable, but even then the outcome was generally full disclosure. The argument is often that previous publications in less circumspect outlets removed any expectation of privacy, or that disclosure in an objective forum would prevent worse and more salacious stories.

So if you're at risk of becoming a celebrity, even for the best of reasons, e.g. for heroically saving people's lives from a murderous terrorist, it makes sense to look preemptively for ways to hide your private life. And in the spirit of repenting the day before one's death, and therefore repenting every day, perhaps we should all be looking for those ways.

There are essentially two ways of hiding a private life. One is by pretending that one has none, and the other is by publicizing a false one. In a certain kind of community, the audience recognizes a moral duty to participate in creating the illusion. (That duty should not extend to covering up harm done to others in the real private life.)

Mosheh Rabbeinu became a celebrity early in life, when his act of killing the Egyptian taskmaster led to Pharaoh seeking his Egyptian. That publicity is probably essential to his later success in being accepted immediately as the Jewish representative to Pharaoh by all sides (even if the Jews often grumble about his work, and Pharaoh tries to drive a wedge between leader and followers). Does he try to preserve a private life? Did G-d grant his wish in his lifetime? Does the Torah grant him any degree of eternal privacy?

Biblical sparseness works both ways on this question. For example: Was Mosheh divorced, from whom, and why? A lot depends on whether the "Kushite woman" that he married, and regarding whom Mosheh and Aharon speak, is Tzipporah, or rather a princess he married while conquering Ethiopia for Pharaoh – see

http://www.torahleadership.org/categories/b_ha_alotkhac_ushit_2.pdf. Or whether, when Shemot 18:2 says that Yitro

brought Tzipporah to Sinai *אָחַר שְׁלוּחֶיהָ*, it means "after her divorce from Mosheh", or "after she had sent messages to Mosheh", or "after Mosheh sent presents to her", all options mentioned by traditional commentators. Perhaps the Torah interposes a veil of ambiguity to protect Mosheh's privacy, at the cost of leaving the field open for wild speculations. Maybe Tzipporah left, or was sent away, because she married Mosheh when he had a private life, and was not ready to live an unrelievedly public life. Maybe this is the symbolic import of Mosheh's grave being unplotable.

I hope I've made clear that "private" is not the same as "secret". In the ordinary way of things, secrecy is not necessary to maintain privacy.

Moreover, privacy is a relative rather than an absolute category. Privacy is a form of intimacy, meaning that things are known, and/or noticed, only by those within the appropriate circle of intimacy. Things can be private to a couple, or to a family, or to a workplace, and almost everyone has and participates in disjoint circles of intimacy. Intimacy can also create rights-to-knowledge. For example, it might be necessary to tell someone that their spouse has lost his or her job, even as telling that to strangers would be a terrible violation, and telling it to potential employers without being asked might be tortious.

Halakhah categorizes these issues under the rubric *gilui sod*, which is itself often classified under the rubric *lashon hora*, and it's important to keep the context in mind. For example, one oft-quoted halakhic statement is that "Anything said in front of three people" cannot be considered *lashon hora*. There's enormous literature about when that is so, and not enough about who those people are. If I share something with my wife and two children, does that make it public and therefore fair game? I doubt it, and I think the same can be said of other contexts. Tzitz Eliezer for example argues that clerical workers are essential to the function of medical offices and so information revealed to them is not counted as public, even if every worker in the office has handled the file. Maybe revealing something to three close friends is radically different halakhically from revealing it to three people with whom one is moderately friendly.

These musings came to me as I examined the Torah's barebones accounts of Mosheh's sons. One thing that struck me was that Mosheh gives Yitro – but not his own sons – a full account of the Exodus, even though the mitzvah in Shemot 13:8

is *והגדת לבנך*, *and you must tell your sons*. That is a private obligation, though, whereas Yitro, somewhat ironically, represents public diplomatic obligation, and public duty takes priority. Maybe Moshe's sons never hear the story from their father.

I wondered to Deborah a few months ago when Yitro and Tziporah found out that Mosheh was Jewish. Yitro's daughters see him as an *איש מצרי*, an Egyptian man. Mosheh asks permission to return "to his brothers who are in Egypt", but "brother" is precisely the term the Torah uses (2:11) to express Mosheh's initial ambivalence about his identity, and being betrayed to Pharaoh by his new Hebrew "brothers" may have sent him back to being Egyptian, at least publicly. Maybe Yitro and Tziporah were utterly shocked to discover what he was actually doing in Egypt. Rav Hirsch forcefully rejects this suggestion.

The Torah here (18:3-4) repeats the name of Gershom (see above 2:22) and adds the name of the second son, Eliezer, to teach us that from the outset Mosheh did not conceal his Hebraism from his father-in-law, nor his closeness to the nation subordinated in Egypt.

These two aspects are revealed in the names that he gave his sons.

But I am not compelled. Why is Eliezer's name only provided now, if it demonstrated Mosheh's identity from the start? Moreover, it's not entirely clear who names Eliezer, and when, or whether Yitro knows and uses these names for his grandsons.

וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֵתָן מִשֵּׁה אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ מִשֵּׁה
אֶחָד שְׁלוֹחֵיהֶּ:
וְאֶת שְׁנֵי בָנָיהָ
אֶשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֶחָד גֶּרְשֹׁם
כִּי אָמַר
גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
וְשֵׁם הָאֶחָד אֱלִיעֶזֶר
כִּי־אֶלֶּהִי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי וַיִּצְלַנִּי מִמַּחֲרֵב פְּרָעֹה:
וַיֵּבֵא יִתְרוֹ חֵתָן מִשֵּׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מִשֵּׁה
אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא חֵגָה שָׁם הָרַחֵץ־לֵהִים:
וַיֵּאמְרוּ אֶל־מִשֵּׁה

אָנִי חֵתָנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלַי וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיךָ עִמָּה:
*Yitro Mosheh's father-in-law took Tziporah
Mosheh's wife
after her sending (?away?)
and her two sons
one of whom was named Gershom
because he said
"I was an alien there"
and on of whom was named Eliezer
because the God of my father was to my aid
and saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.
Yitro Mosheh's father-in-law came, and his
sons and his wife, to Mosheh*

*to the wilderness where he was camping,
Mount Divinity
He said to Mosheh:*

*"I am your father-in-law Yitro come to you
and your wife, and her two sons with her"*

Even if one assumes that Mosheh named Eliezer and gave his reasons for the name publicly from the start, I see no evidence that he explained exactly why Pharaoh was out to kill him. The name Gershom is at least as ambiguous.

In fact, Or HaChayyim builds a contrary case off that ambiguity. He argues that the Torah repeats Gershom's naming here to clarify the meaning of the name, which we might otherwise think was intended to assuage Yitro's concerns (albeit the specific concern he thinks Yitro had is unintelligible to me at present). Gershom's initial naming revealed nothing certain about Mosheh's inner life.

Deborah Klapper argues that "Gershom" and "Eliezer" must also be traditional Levite names (cf. Aharon's son Eliezer and the Levite House of Gershom). So the etymologies given in the Torah might be epiphenomena, explaining names that would have been chosen in any case, or were chosen from among a small pool. But maybe Yitro had no idea of this.

Note also that one reading of the "hotel scene" (4:24-26) is that Eliezer had been born 8 days earlier, in which case his name was not given until after G-d had reconnected with Mosheh and he already on his way back to Egypt. Maybe that was the moment Tziporah found out.

What emerges is that Mosheh had different circles of intimacy – Aharon, for example, knew they were brothers, meaning that he knew Mosheh's whole back story. But Tziporah may have known many things about Mosheh that Aharon did not.

One challenge of leadership is that it often requires an imposed and non-mutual intimacy, intended to serve the led and not the leader, and exposing the leader but not the led. One should be extraordinarily wary of leaders who demand intimacy from followers. But one-way intimacy is often unhealthy, and can become less and less healthy the more one-sided it gets. So it is reasonable and generally necessary for leaders to set boundaries by distinguishing between their public persona and their private person, and to have sharply distinct circles of intimacy, and wise for us to protect both our leaders and ourselves by respecting those boundaries.

At the same time, allowing too great a gap between persona and person is also profoundly dangerous. I don't want to pretend that I have a formula, or that this essay is the kernel of a planned "Seven Intimacy Habits of Effective Leaders" or the like. But I hope this is a useful framework for thinking about the extraordinary challenges Mosheh Rabbeinu navigated as a human being; about the reasons that Torah narratives leave so much space to be filled speculatively; and especially about the the role of intimacy in all forms of communal leadership.

Shabbat Shalom!

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