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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

Was Mosheh Rabbeinu an American Religious Zionist?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

How old was Moshe when he first *went out to his brothers*? Shemot Rabbah appears to root three different positions in the acerbic response he gets from a Jew the next day:

וַיֹּאמֶר:

מי שמך לאיש שר ושפט עלינו

He said:

Who made you

a man

officer

and judge

over us?

Rabbi Yehudah said:

Mosheh was twenty years old at that time;

They said to him:

You are not yet fit to be an officer-and-judge over us, because discernment comes at age forty.

But Rabbi Nechemyah said:

He was forty years old;

They said to him:

Certainly you are an adult, but you are not fit to be an officer-and-judge over us.

But the Rabbis say:

They said to him:

Aren't you the son of Yocheved? Why do they call you 'son of Bityah'?

You seek to be an officer-and-judge over us?! We'll inform about what you did to the Egyptian!

Rabbi Yehudah says that Mosheh was perceived as a hothead youth; maybe someday a leader, but not yet. Other versions of his position make Moshe twelve years old, or twenty-five; the point is the same. The Rabbis argue that Moshe was rejected utterly as a poseur. Rabbi Nechemyah's position seems to be that Mosheh was rejected simpliciter, with no specific reason. (It's not clear to me whether "the Rabbis" convey a separate position or an explanation of Rabbi Nechemiah's. They are cited in Aramaic, the others in Hebrew, but I have not made a serious effort to retrace the redactional process.)

If Rabbi Yehudah is correct, perhaps Moshe can become more effective just by growing older (perhaps even just

appearing older would work). But the Rabbis need some other form of change. (They may also need the blackmail threat to recede, but I don't think that would be sufficient.)

All three positions attribute the rejection to a "they", whereas the Torah puts it in the mouth of a "he", specifically in the mouth of the man whom Mosheh has just called רשע = wicked.

Chazal famously identify the two Jewish combatants as Datan and Aviram, equally wicked, although the text suggests that Mosheh addressed only one of them as *rasha*. So perhaps "they" refers to Datan and Aviram.

But that reading does not compel me. I think the midrash reads the man as speaking for all the Jews when he rejects Moshe. Moshe in turn sees the man as a representative Jew, and concludes that the Jews do not deserve his intervention.

I don't know whether this mutual rejection was "part of the plan". If the Jews had responded to Mosheh's rebuke by repenting, would redemption have happened immediately? If Mosheh had responded to rejection by meditating deeply on the psychology of reproof, would he have been able to win them over?

When G-d calls Mosheh to leadership, he reassures him that *all the people seeking your nefesh* (i.e. *seeking to kill you*) have died. Generational change apparently left Mosheh with name recognition but otherwise an almost blank slate. The question is whether he and/or the Children of Israel and/or other circumstances have changed in ways that will allow him to lead effectively.

Shemot 2:23-25 describes one set of apparent changes:

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם

וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם

וַיִּנְחָזוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִדֹּעַבְדָּה

וַיִּזְעָקוּ

וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִדֹּעַבְדָּה:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם

וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אֲבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב:

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

וַיִּדַע אֱלֹהִים.

It was in those many days
the king of Egypt died;
The Children of Israel groaned from the labor; and they
screamed;
Their plea rose to G-d from the labor;
G-d heard their torment;
G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak,
and with Yaakov;
G-d saw the Children of Israel;
G-d knew.

This paragraph emphasizes the drumbeat of G-d's k'b'yakhol experiences; He hears, remembers, sees, and knows. But it's key that the Children of Israel do not turn to Him – they merely scream, and that scream makes its way up to G-d despite not being directed toward Him. There is no religious revival. The only possibly relevant change in Bnei Yisrael is a deeper experience of oppression.

Moreover, it seems that the action resulting from G-d's experience is His call to Mosheh at the Burning Bush. We are not given any time-relationship between G-d's "knowledge" and that call. It seems plausible that G-d "knows" soon after Moshe flees, but that the call takes place as many as sixty-eight years later. In other words, G-d's response cannot become manifest until Mosheh is ready.

I suggest more radically that G-d "knows" early enough that His initial response is Mosheh *going out to his brothers*. When that fails, redemption must wait until Mosheh is ready to try leading again.

How does Mosheh change in the interim, aside from growing (much) older? He shepherds his father-in-law's sheep. Many commentaries use this as an occasion for paeans to the meditative and religious qualities of pastoral life, along the line of early olim reading Kant while shepherding. We can imagine Mosheh discovering a stable and mature faith in G-d over those years. But this seems likely to be a projected fantasy, like almost all pastoral poetry.

Others contend that Mosheh was hiding from Pharaoh, so he took the kind of menial profession that allows anonymity and where no one would suspect that he was actually an Egyptian aristocrat.

Many rishonim had access to a Chronicles of Mosheh that described his adventures conquering Ethiopia, and marrying an Ethiopian wife. They differ as to whether those adventures came before or after he killed the Egyptian. Those stories seek to provide Mosheh with leadership experience. But it's hard to give these stories plot-significance when the Torah leaves them out.

What the Torah tells us is וישב בארץ מדין וישב על הבאר = *He yashav in the Land of Midyan and yashav next to the well*. Some commentaries read the two *yashavs* as creating a commonality, meaning that *when* he settled in Midyan, it was near the well. Others read it as a pun deliberately creating contrast: he **settled** in the Land, and sometime after, he found occasion to be sitting by a well. The first version is simply prudent behavior in a desert, especially for a stranger to the land. The second, however, suggests that he was looking to marry.

It teaches us much that Mosheh thinks the best way to find a wife is through chivalrous deeds, or alternatively, that he cannot keep to an agenda in the presence of injustice. The latter failing, or virtue, might have created a need to flee again, but a new adoptive father comes along. Note however that Mosheh's intervention may not have positive social justice consequences, any more than his intervention in Egypt did. Yitro's sheep may be forced to more distant wells, and that in turn, or fear of retaliation, may force Mosheh to replace Yitro's daughters as shepherds. So Mosheh may not have learned anything new about leadership. But the intervention certainly gets him a wife.

It is therefore tempting to say that marrying Tziporah is what makes Mosheh fit for leadership. Possibly Mosheh thinks this, which is why he initially takes Tziporah and the children along toward Egypt. Tziporah plays an explicitly crucial role when she circumcises (whichever child she circumcises) at the inn and thereby saves both father and child. Then she disappears from the story, and plausibly she never actually makes it down to Egypt. So that single episode must be what makes Mosheh a viable leader. What does he learn from it?

The easy answer is that no matter how much Mosheh invested himself personally in the Jewish people, he could not be the Jewish leader until he bound his descendants' fate as well. We may not appreciate how hard this decision was for him, to the point that his wife had to make it for him.

In general, it is useful to understand that making a decision for oneself can be much easier than imposing that decision on one's children; and conversely, that people who have made decisions that bind their children have legitimately grounds for resisting *mussar* from people who bind only themselves, no matter how deeply and sincerely. Nonetheless, the Jews in Egypt might have saved themselves a lot of trouble, and formed a much better society, had they responded differently to Mosheh's original critique.

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