

FORUM II

Moses: A Professional Role Model

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We are told, "*Hafakh ba, vahaphakh ba, dekolah ba*—roll the Torah, roll it, for everything is in it" (Ben Bag Bag, *Pirke Avot*, 5:25). This is especially important for the Jewish communal professional.

In-depth study of the sections of the Torah dealing with the life of Moses can provide useful guidance into many of the issues faced daily by communal leadership: administration, interpersonal relations, assertiveness techniques, accountability, small and large group communications, the role of humor, negotiating methods, staff training, and much more. This article focuses on the earliest period of Moses' life. This period, which is well known but generally misunderstood, is analyzed from the perspective of what it can say to and for the Jewish communal professional. It can also serve as the foundation for understanding other episodes of Moshe's later life.

BACKGROUND: AN APPROACH TO TORAH ANALYSIS

Much of the following analysis is based on a position accepted by social historians: spoken language had a different impact before the development of the printing press and, most especially, television. Because the majority of people were illiterate, oral communication was the only form of communication and sound the primary medium. This gave the spoken word added texture, weight, meaning, and linkage (Livo & Reitz, 1986).

This sense contributed to the special feel that the rabbis had for the relationship of individual words to the potential meanings of biblical texts. They regarded superfluous words, repetitions, juxtapositions, parallelisms, or symmetries in the Bible as clues to intended lessons. Many commentaries, including the midrashim, based their interpretations on this word texture.

It will be useful to the readers to follow the flow of this paper with a *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) in hand. The entire appropriate section should be read first, and then the individual verses referred to in the analysis should be reviewed.

The thrust of this discussion is based on one point and one question.

The point: At first glance we know a great deal from the text about Moshe's activities, but little about Moshe the Man.

The question: If Moshe appeared today in our offices, would we hire him?

I posit that we would not.

If a resume, such as found in Appendix A, would cross our desk, it would quickly find its way to the wastepaper basket. The responses from the references would damn any prospective employee. Who would gamble on a person with the incredible combination of extreme age, limited Jewish and secular background, out-of-faith marriage, a violent temper, no applicable employment experience, and outstanding arrest warrants?

We would not hire this person. Why did God? What did God see? And what should we be looking for?

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE

Answers to these questions can be found in the second chapter of *Exodus*. Certain

Part of a Learning Session presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, June 4, 1990, Philadelphia.

words and idioms are repeated that address the issue of Moses' leadership capacity and other professional concerns. The word texture suggests a complex and interrelated answer.

Capacity to Grow

The word *vayigdal*, referring to growth, appears twice in succeeding verses, 2:10, "the child grew," and 2:11 "Moses grew."

The capacity to grow would appear to be important, but to grow in what way? The first verse appears to be physical growth only, but the second verse evidences a certain kind of maturity and specific values. "And it came to pass in those days that Moses grew and he went out to his brothers and he saw their burdens and he saw an Egyptian man hitting a Hebrew man, one of his brothers" (Exodus, 2:11).

When Moses' identity begins to form, he feels compelled to search out his community, despite all the luxuries and privileges accorded to someone of Pharaoh's household. Not only does he go out to observe the condition of his people, but he also understands their pain. This sharing of the burden compels him to act. He slays the Egyptian (Exodus 2:12).

Compassion

Hinted to in Exodus 2 and expanded on by many commentaries¹ is a major aspect of Moses' personality. He was an extremely compassionate person. His compassion attracted God.

¹See *Exodus Rabba* for commentary on these verses. See also *Taanit* 11a: "A man should share in the distress of the community, for so we find that Moses, our teacher, shared in the distress of the community. It is to underscore these points that the Midrash relates that only after Moses demonstrated great compassion for his sheep, in one version carrying a thirsty lamb and in another offering his own flesh to an eagle to save his sheep, did God choose him to lead the Jews: 'Thou hast compassion with a flock belonging to a man of flesh and blood! As thou livest, thou shalt pasture Israel, My flock.'"

His compassion, however, is a double edged sword. It is the obverse side of his passion and impatience that led him to quick and intemperate acts. Achieving balance and moderation in world view and response is a theme in one of the most interesting of the later midrashim about Moses' life:

A king had trained artists who could capture the true character of a person in their portraits. Having heard of the humble and holy Moses, the king sends an artist for a portrait to add to his collection. The artist returns with the picture of an arrogant degenerate. Suspecting an error, the king sends another artist who returns with a similar picture. The king is confused by the contradiction between Moses' reputation and the work of his specialists. He decides to confront Moses with the problem. Moses says the artists are right. He was born with many evil traits, but had worked hard to overcome them and had succeeded in the struggle. The narrative stresses that despite these handicaps, Moses did succeed in becoming a man of God (Tiferet Yisrael to Kiddushin, end note #77).

Awareness

Exodus 2:11 is one of nine verses in chapters 2 and 3 in which variations of the source word *ra'oh* (to see or observe) are found (see also Exodus 2:5, 6, 12, and 25 and 3:2, 3, 4, and 7).

It is possible to suggest from the context, especially of verses 2:25, 3:3, and 3:7, that this type of seeing is combined with understanding. This suggests the value of **awareness**, of being alert and insightful. An individual should be observant and be able to see and understand what is being seen. Ongoing analysis is a necessary skill. What is being said and shown is often less important than what is not being said or shown.

It is interesting to note that in verse 2:13, when Moses first encounters a conflict situation between Jews, the word *vayaar* is not mentioned. This may be a hint that due to the unexpected fact that both par-

ticipants in the fight were Hebrew, which did not fit Moses' idealized version of his Hebrew brethren, Moses could not see, analyze, and respond correctly. He consequently acted precipitously. The Hebrew's response—asking who gave Moses the authority to act as a prince and judge over the Hebrews and accusing Moses of intending to kill him—was shocking and deeply disappointing to Moses. It led him to withdraw from the life he had known.

Nonjudgmental Approach

Moses' problem with this conflict between two Hebrews (2:11-14) may reflect an unconscious attitude. It appears that Moses may have held, at least before this experience, a wonderful though naive view that, since he was sure of his own goodness and the righteousness of his motives, others would automatically follow his lead and views. This led him in this case, for example, to be judgmental without totally ascertaining the facts. He considers one of the participants in the conflict a *Rasha* (an evil person) and asks him, "Why are you hitting your fellow?" (Exodus 2:14). The rabbis assume that Moses took this view because he saw this Jew lifting up his hand against the other. Since physical violence among Jews was deemed unacceptable by the rabbis, this person could be considered to be evil.

Regardless of the correctness of his analysis of the participants in this contretemps, Moses acted judgmentally and negatively. This created a confrontation with many negative long-term results. This incident suggests that a **positive, nonjudgmental approach** is preferable in professional interpersonal relationships.

Willingness to Assume Responsibility

However, we too should not be too quick to judge. Note Exodus 2:12: "And he (Moses) looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no man, he slew the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."

Rashi interprets this verse in two interesting and applicable ways. The first is, *lefi peshuto*, according to the simple meaning. Moses looked around to see if anyone was watching him and finding no one, he acted. The other, more mystical interpretation, suggests that Moses looked into the man's background and future to see if anyone from his family would ever convert (see also *Sifteï Hahamim*).

Another way to interpret this verse is to focus on the use of the phrase, "and he saw there was no *ish* (man)." This is similar to the expression in *Pirke Avot* 2:5, "Where there are no men, try to be a man." Perhaps, Moses looked around to see if anyone else was going to respond and act. Seeing no one else, he felt obligated to act. This suggests another necessary personality trait to search for: **a willingness to take on responsibility, but not the need to exercise power.**

Struggle With Identity

Another theme with far-ranging effects appears in Chapter 2. The traumatic nature of Moses' youth—leaving, coming back, and then leaving again his mother's home and being raised in the palace of Pharaoh, but sensing an apartness—led to an identity crisis.

The concept of being separate and apart is first hinted at when Moshe named his first son Gershom ("stranger in a strange land") in Exodus 2:22. It is also manifested in Moshe's separation from his wife and the concept of *kedushah*, or holiness, which is defined as a separation from the profane. The concept of total separation as a preferred lifestyle, however, is rejected by Judaism. The Nazirite, for example, is required to bring a sin offering at the end of the period of abstinence.

The hint to this identity crisis is the repetition of the word *ish* (man). It appears eight times in the singular and once in the plural in Chapter 2 (2:1, 11-14, 19-21). It is not the repetition alone that is telling, but the use of the word in specific

cases with and without a descriptive form. There is clearly a nagging question of perception, self-identity, and personhood for Moses: Who am I—Egyptian, Hebrew, ME?

Note, for example, the first point of attack by the angered Hebrew: "Who made you an *ish* (man)?" (Exodus 2:14)² He instinctively struck at Moses' sensitive inner turmoil. Moses' response to this attack is also telling. "Surely this thing is known" (2:15). The commentaries discuss what is meant by "this thing." The obvious explanation is that Moses is referring to the fact of his having killed the Egyptian. Others suggest he meant that he now understands why the Jews he may have idealized were enslaved. They carry tales about each other (Rashi, quoting the Midrash) or are divisive and quarrelsome (*Ktav Sofer*).

This concept of searching for a comfortable identity shows up in the clearest terms in verses 2:16–22 where Moses responds most positively. In this episode Moses, having fled from Egypt, finds himself in Midian. He protects the daughters of Re'u'el (one of Jethro's many names) from the other shepherds. This allows them to return home much earlier than usual. Note the use of the word *ish*:

And when they came to Re'u'el their father he said, How come you are home so early today? And they said, An Egyptian man (*ish Mizri*) saved us from the clutches of the shepherds, and he also drew water enough for us and watered the flock. And he said to his daughters, Where is he? Why did you leave the man (*ish*)? Call him that he may eat bread. And Moshe was content to dwell with the man (*ish*) and he gave Moshe Zippora, his daughter, and she bore him a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said, "I have been a stranger in a strange land."

²Exodus 2:14. While some translations combine the word *ish* with *sar* to mean a "prince," the cantillation (trope) would indicate that the words in the accusation were intended to be separate and therefore more pointed: "Who made you into a man? A prince? A judge on us?"

Perhaps because of his clothing, Moses appears to the daughters as an Egyptian. They were interested in externals. Their father, recognizing Moses' decency through his actions of protecting the girls and also watering the flock—thus sensing his inner dimensions—ignores the externals. He calls Moshe *ish* without any adjective. Moses is judged for himself and by no other criteria. He relates to Jethro in the same way: "He is content to dwell with the *ish*." A personal relationship has developed.

This term *ish* reappears in a number of places as a theme in Moshe's life. In Exodus 11:3, it is written: "Moreover, the *ish* (man) Moshe was very great in the land of Egypt in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people." Rabbi Yaakov of Dubno suggests that it is no wonder that Moses was honored after all the miracles he performed. Yet, the addition of the word "man" suggests that Moses was a human being and was respected for his personality and character.

It is also interesting to note that toward the end of his life when Moshe suggests to God the proper trait for his successor he uses the expression "set a man over the congregation" (Numbers 27:14). Finally, in Psalm 90, which according to tradition was written by Moses, he refers to himself as *Ish Elokim*, a "man of God."

Yet, Moshe is not completely comfortable. He still had a sense of being a stranger as reflected in the thoughts that formed his child's name. Was he thinking about Egypt or his current status in Midian? The struggle for an appropriate self-identity is a continuing theme in Moshe's life.

CONCLUSION

The second chapter of Exodus alone contains many hints about the life, attitudes, and future actions of Moses. He is introduced as an individual forced by circumstance to be an outsider. Demonstrating an interest in the group from which he originally stemmed, he is initially willing to do anything for them or the image of

them that he holds. Yet, he and his actions are not received well by those he wishes to save. He meets reality and is put off. Withdrawing to a place and a lifestyle where he is less harassed, Moses is never totally at peace. During a maturing and purifying period in the desert and as a father he maintains and perhaps enhances his innate compassion. Moses reaches a level where he is worthy of being approached by God to do God's work.

The opening chapter in Moses' life suggests a number of values, personality traits, and practical skills for the daily activities of the Jewish communal servant:

- the capacity for growth
- compassion
- the ability to observe and analyze appropriately individuals and situations, and to act on that analysis

- the nature of positive and nonjudgmental relationships
- the willingness to take on responsibility, but not the need to assert power
- a good sense of self and the ability to act appropriately on that sense

This analysis is just a starting point to understand Moshe's life and what lessons can be applied to our daily lives. Furthermore, with this as a foundation other unclear episodes, particularly the discussions with Jethro on delegation and his not being permitted to enter *Eretz Yisrael* (Numbers 20), can become clearer.

REFERENCES

- Livo, Norma J., & Reitz, Sandra A. (1986): *Storytelling: Practice and process*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

APPENDIX A

Resume

MORRIS AMRAMSON RABAINU

Address:

40 Pyramid Lane
Desert City

Personal:

Age: 80
Marital Status: Married
Children: 2

Employment Record

1. *Sheep Herder*—Sheik Wool Products (family business)
2. *Hiatus* (for travel)
3. *Officer/Cadet*—Egyptian Army

Educational Background

1. *Private Tutoring*—with specific focus on Theology, History, Architecture
2. *Audited Courses*—at Pharaoh University at Khartoum—Imperial Military
3. *Life Experience*—in Animal Husbandry

Health

Excellent; occasional speech impediment

Hobbies

Riverboating
Mountain climbing
Stone carving

Publications

none

References

Bithya, Princess of Egypt
Jethro, Priest of Midian

MORRIS AMRAMSON RABAINU

Interview Notes and Reference Comments: Updates on Resume

1. Despite educational background, Rabainu insists he has an M.S.W.—says something about Miracles, Signs, and Wonders.
2. Seems to generate contradictory reactions among his contacts:

bad sign

“The most humble person ever . . . ;”

“Tendency towards violence . . . gets angry at the strangest times—starts throwing things or hitting them with damned walking stick of his . . .”

“ . . . a real prince . . . ”;

“ . . . kind to animals . . . ”;

“You know about him and sheep!”

“You know about him and that kid Joshua!”

“ . . . doesn't eat for extended stretches of time!!”

“He's so bright, he just glows.”

“ . . . sometimes really up—other times bushed.”

Symptoms of a manic-depressive with other latent tendencies?

interesting . . .

3. Allegations that he married out of faith, but may be separated from her.
4. Early arrest record or outstanding warrants?—can't get more information. Everything is buried.
5. Except for one successful, but limited capital funds campaign, he has no real fund-raising background.
6. He talked a lot about going to Israel—don't think he'll ever really make it.

*NO GO!! Couldn't get this guy
by lay leadership even if
we wanted to . . . Thanks*