

A Task for a “Master of Humility”?

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Parashat Shemot, 5766

In Parshat Shemot, Moshe is Commanded by God to confront the powerful Egyptian ruler Pharaoh in a manner that fundamentally differs from the Biblical figures preceding him.

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were forced at various times to ask the leaders of Egypt and Gerar for temporary sanctuary as the result of famines that plagued Canaan, and Yosef was appointed by the Pharaoh of his era to become part of the government to guide Egypt through a period of famine affecting the entire Middle East. In contrast to the protagonists of the book of Beraishit, Moshe, a fugitive from Egyptian justice,^{1[1]} must return to the scene of his crime and demand from Pharaoh that he release the Jewish people whose enslavement he had engineered.^{2[2]}

Both Avraham and Yitzchak had impressed Avimelech sufficiently by their material successes and apparent spiritual connections that the Kings^{3[3]} not only allow them to take up residence in their countries, but also come to each of them requesting that they agree to non-aggression covenants between their respective descendents.^{4[4]} Yosef in particular endeared himself to the Egyptian monarch with whom he interacted by demonstrating by means of his understanding of Pharaoh’s dreams,^{5[5]} his sophisticated proposal for what needed to be done so that Egypt will be able to withstand the oncoming years of famine,^{6[6]} and finally the manner in which he actually carried out his responsibilities.^{7[7]} It is likely that the special place that Yosef won for himself in Pharaoh’s heart resulted in his being able to gain for his family the land of Goshen^{8[8]} as well as permission to bury his father Yaakov in Canaan.^{9[9]} Moshe, on the other hand, had made himself persona non grata by

1[1] See Shemot 2:15.

2[2] See Shemot 1:9 ff.

3[3] While it is possible that both Avraham and Yitzchak are interacting with the same monarch, it is also likely that “Avimelech” (lit. my father, king) was the title of the kings of Gerar and therefore different individuals are involved with each of the first two Jewish forefathers. If we are referring to the same individual, it would make sense why he was circumspect with regard to Yitzchak’s claim that Rivka was his wife; however, it is possible that what had transpired with regard to Avraham and Sara had been recorded, and any visitors from Canaan with similar stories were treated with suspicion regardless of the particular regime in power. The fact that in each of the instances when Avimelech goes first to Avraham and then to Yitzchak, the military general that accompanies the king is named “Fichol” (see Beraishit 21:22 and 26:26), a name that is not overtly given to suggesting a title or role as is “Avimelech”, nevertheless even if the general is the same, the king might not be. Then again, “Avimelech” would appear to be a translation into Hebrew of a term that was used by the Gerarites. Perhaps only “Avimelech” was translated, while “Fichol” was not. For a discussion regarding the issue of the nature of names used in the Tora which appear to be Hebrew, or at least given Hebrew interpretations, see www.kmsynagogue.org/Miketz1.html fn. 19.

4[4] See Beraishit 21:22 ff. and 26:26 ff.

5[5] See Beraishit 41:25-32.

6[6] See Beraishit 41:33-36.

7[7] See Beraishit 41:48-49, 51-57; 47:12-26.

8[8] See www.kmsynagogue.org/VaYiqash2.html

9[9] See www.kmsynagogue.org/VaYechi1.html Although the essay includes a Midrash that suggests that Pharaoh was threatened by Yosef, this is not apparent from a simple reading of the Biblical verses.

killing an Egyptian taskmaster,10[10] however morally justified he may have been in defending the taskmaster's intended Jewish victim. He had run for his life to Midian11[11] and essentially abandoned his own family and people to start afresh as the son-in-law of a Midianite priest.12[12] For HaShem to suddenly Ask him to not only go back to Egypt,13[13] but also to demand of the Pharaoh who had nefariously plotted against the Jews, to now free them under threat of Divine Punishment14[14] is a role that hitherto had no precedent in Biblical history. Consequently, Moshe has no paradigm to emulate15[15] with regard to the task ahead, and is faced with having to fend for himself.

Moshe's profound insecurity arising from the intimidating Divine Charge that he is given—he makes no less than five different attempts to refuse the assignment in Shemot 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13—is likely compounded by the specific nature of his personality. Humility and self-effacement16[16] are the key characteristics associated with Moshe, explicitly and objectively17[17] attested to by the Tora itself in BaMidbar 12:3. Although HaShem repeatedly Assures His Prophet that He will Accompany and Support Moshe wherever he goes and whenever he speaks in an official capacity,18[18] Moshe's refusal ultimately leads HaShem to "Concede"19[19] and at least Remove one area of Moshe's concern by Arranging that his brother Aharon will assume all public speaking roles.20[20] It seems counterintuitive that an individual who holds himself in such low esteem should be Chosen to confront Pharaoh, present him with a series of harsh ultimatums and be successfully to achieve his objectives.

10[10] See Shemot 2:11-12.

11[11] See Shemot 2:15.

12[12] See Shemot 2:21-22.

13[13] See Shemot 3:10.

14[14] See Shemot 4:22-23.

15[15] Ironically, in spite of the principle "Ma'asei Avot Siman LaBanim" (the deeds of the Forefathers prefigure what will happen to their descendants) being invoked frequently by Rabbinic commentators when analyzing the events of Beraishit, it would appear that this theme applies to what will happen to the Jewish people in general, e.g., just as Avraham and Sara will go down to Egypt, Sara's welfare will be threatened, God will miraculously Save her and afterwards they will leave much enriched, similar things happen to the Jewish people during their Egyptian exile, rather than to how Jewish leaders are to deal with their counterparts of other nations.

16[16] For an essay focusing exclusively on Moshe's humility, see <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Shemot0.html>

17[17] Since the description of Moshe as "the most humble of men" is not part of a conversational interchange between characters, but rather stated independently in the Tora text, it is assumed that this is God's Evaluation of His "most faithful servant" (BaMidbar 12:7).

One can only wonder how the humble Moshe "felt" when he recorded verses attesting to his extraordinary humility. Bava Batra 15a records an argument between either R. Yehuda or R. Nechemia and R. Shimon as to who wrote down the last 8 verses of the Tora (Devarim 34:5-12). The former contends that since Moshe could not write down untruths, Yehoshua must have written the verses describing Moshe's death and burial since Moshe himself could never write such things while he was still alive. R. Shimon contends that if Yehoshua wrote these verses, it would be a Tora that lacked the holiness of one written by Moshe himself, and therefore Moshe wrote these as well, but with his "tears", without understanding what he was writing. Would Moshe have any less trouble with verses that sing his praises to such an extreme?

18[18] See Shemot 3:12; 4:12.

19[19] I am assuming that Moshe was endowed with free choice, and could have fulfilled HaShem's Commandment without Aharon's assistance, had he been willing to do so. Therefore, Aharon's involvement constituted a Divine "Plan B". Another approach would maintain that Moshe's humility was so obvious and predictable that in effect Moshe did not have free choice in the matter of proceeding by himself, and Aharon's enlistment was inevitable from the outset.

20[20] See Shemot 4:14-16, 30.

Then again, could one possible approach for understanding why HaShem Chooses Moshe assume that God Intended that it be clear to all that He Alone was Orchestrating the Exodus? Since by definition, due to his extreme humility, Moshe is the least likely candidate for planning and carrying out obtaining the Jewish slaves' release—in fact virtually every time Moshe attempts to get Pharaoh to agree to his demands, Pharaoh invariably goes back on his word—it is quite evident the Egyptian King's eventual capitulation is due to supernatural rather than human interventions. Such a point of view might underlie the numerous Rabbinic associations between humility and Godliness, i.e., human spiritual attitudes and behaviors are inversely proportional to the intensity and centrality of one's ego:

Shemot Rabba 2:5

...R. Eliezer says: Just as the **bush** (Shemot 3:2-4) is the most lowly of all of the trees in the world, so too was **Israel** lowly and suppressed in Egypt. For this very reason, the Holy One Blessed Be He Revealed Himself to them and Redeemed them, as it is said, (Shemot 3:8) "...And I will **Go down** and Save them from Egypt."

Bamidbar Rabba 13:3 on Mishlei 29:23 "A man's pride shall bring him low, but the humble in spirit shall attain honor."

...This is **Avraham** who made his spirit low and said (Beraishit 18:27) "I am dust and ashes." Therefore the Holy One Blessed Be He Referred to him as (Yehoshua 14:15) "The man who was great among the giants and the land had rest from war"...

This is **Moshe** (Shemot 8:5) "When should I pray on your behalf (that the frogs should be removed)? And he said, (Shemot 9:29) "When I leave the city, I will spread out my palms (and pray on your behalf)"... Another interpretation: "A man's pride shall bring him low"—this is Tavor and Karmel that came from the end of the earth prideful, saying, "We are high, and upon us the Holy One Blessed Be He will Give the Tora." "But the humble in spirit shall attain honor"—this is **Sinai** who lowered himself and said, "I am lowly." And for this reason God Rested His Glory upon him and Gave the Tora upon him, and merited all of this honor, as it is stated, (Shemot 19:20) "And HaShem Descended upon Mt. Sinai."

Shir HaShirim Rabba 1:19

...Another interpretation: The **words of Tora** are compared to **water**... Just as water forsakes a higher elevation and travels to a lower place, so too Tora forsakes someone who is haughty and clings to someone who is humble...

The converse of HaShem's Wanting to be given full credit for the Exodus is the assurance that a humble individual will maintain his own proper perspective regarding the role that he is playing. Perhaps God's Utilization of the "most humble of men" to head the Exodus is a means of guaranteeing that once the Jews successfully leave Egypt, Moshe will not take any personal credit for what has taken place and therefore not attempt to obtain for himself undo power. Despite Moshe's deliberately self-deprecating style, we note that the Jewish people nevertheless attribute to him magical if not Divine powers,^{21[21]} and as soon as it appears that

^{21[21]} Although the Biblical text is clear that HaShem Planned and Caused the various plagues to occur—see Shemot 7:17, 27; 8:12,17; 9:3, 8, 9, 15; 10:4, 21; 11:4, 5—nevertheless the fact that 7 of them

he will not be returning to them following his 40 day stay on Mt. Sinai, the Jewish people set out to construct an idolatrous substitute.²²[22] It is easy to imagine that someone even only slightly more taken with himself than Moshe could easily have allowed such delusions of personal grandeur resulting from the people's perceptions of his actions and powers, to go to his head.

A third possible consideration for HaShem's Choosing someone with Moshe's extremely humble qualities to engage Pharaoh during the course of Exodus, was Moshe's unflappability in the face of the Egyptian ruler's obstinacy, dishonest negotiations and disrespect.²³[23] A lesser individual might have been drawn into

("Arov" [wild animals], "Dever" [a form of bubonic plague] and "Makat Bechorot" [plague of the Firstborn] begin without any human action) were initiated by some finite act on the part of first Aharon and then Moshe—Shemot 7:19,20; 8:1-2, 13; 9:10, 23; 10:12, 22 —certainly contributed to speculation that they were magicians or perhaps even deities in their own right and therefore deserving of reverence and worship. Such an impression was only deepened with the miracle of the Splitting of the Sea:

Shemot 14:16

Lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the Children of Israel shall go on dry land through the midst of the sea.

Shemot 14:27

And Moshe stretched his hand over the sea and the sea returned to its strength towards morning, and the Egyptians fled towards it and HaShem Shook the Egyptians into the sea.

Once the Jews cross the Sea of Reeds, they approach Moshe as if it was within his exclusive control to provide them water and food and that it was his willful actions that caused them to leave Egypt —

a) **Shemot 15:24-25**

And the people complained **to Moshe** saying what will we drink?

And he (Moshe) cried out to HaShem and He Showed him a tree/piece of wood...

b) **Shemot 16:2-3**

And there complained the entire congregation of Israel **to Moshe and Aharon** in the desert. And the Children of Israel said to them: If only HaShem would have Allowed us to die in Egypt while we were sitting upon the fleshpots when we were eating bread to the point of satiation, but rather **you (Moshe and Aharon) took us out** to this desert to kill this entire congregation by starvation.

(In this verse in particular, the language of the people suggests that Moshe and Aharon took them out of Egypt **against** HaShem's Wishes, as it were!!)

c) **Shemot 17:2-3**

And the people strove with **Moshe** and they said: **Give us water** and we will drink. And Moshe said to them: Why are you striving with me and why are you testing God?

And the people thirsted there for water. And the people complained to **Moshe** and said: Why did **you bring us up from Egypt, to kill me, my children and my herds by thirst?**

Moshe's actions during the war with Amalek did little to allay the mystique that had been created around him, when the people saw that their success or failure was a function if Moshe raised or lowered his hands:

Shemot 17:11

And it was **when Moshe raised his hand**, and **Israel** would become **stronger**; and when he would lower his hand, and Amalek would become stronger.

²²[22] See Shemot 32:1—"And the people saw that Moshe was delaying in descending from the mountain. And the people gathered around Aharon and they said to him: Come make for us an "**Elohim**" that will go before us, for this **man Moshe** who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." The juxtaposition of the word "Elohim" with Moshe suggests that equivalence exists between the two.

²³[23] **Shemot 8:4, 11**

And Pharaoh called to Moshe and Aharon, and said: Pray to God that He may Take away the **frogs** from me and my people. And I will let the people go that they may sacrifice to the Lord.

And when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not listen to them...

Shemot 8:21-28

And Pharaoh called for Moshe and Aharon, and said: Go sacrifice to your God in the land (of Egypt.)

And Moshe said: It is not proper to do so, for we will sacrifice the abomination of Egypt to the Lord our God (Egypt worshipped sheep and would consider the sacrifice of sheep to be

unproductive and even destructive clashes of wills,²⁴[24] resulting in even greater penalties born by the Jewish slaves. Moshe, however, maintains a calm demeanor and responds remarkably civilly to Pharaoh's repeated disingenuousness and insulting words and decisions. A Midrashic interpretation of an oblique verse found in Shemot 6 states that HaShem specifically Directed Moshe and Aharon to act patiently

sacrilege. Consequently, it would have to take place at some remove from the Egyptian population centers.) Will they not stone us?

We shall go three days journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God, as He Commanded us.

And Pharaoh said: I will let you go so that you will sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness; only you shall not go very far away. Pray for me.

And Moshe said: Behold I will go out from before you and pray to the Lord that the swarm of **gnats** will depart from Pharaoh, his servants, and from his people tomorrow. But let Pharaoh not deal deceitfully any more in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.

And Moshe went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord.

And the Lord Did in accordance with Moshe's prayer. And He removed the swarm of gnats from Pharaoh, his servants and from his people. There did not remain a single one.

And Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also and would not let the people go.

Shemot 9:27-28, 34-35

And Pharaoh called for Moshe and Aharon, and said to them: I have sinned this time. The Lord is righteous and I and my people are wicked.

Pray to the Lord that there be no more **thunder and hail**, and I will let you go and you will stay no longer...

And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.

And the heart of Pharaoh was hard, and he would not let the Children of Israel go...

Shemot 10:8-12, 16-20

And Moshe and Aharon were brought back to Pharaoh. And he said to them: Go serve the Lord your God. But who are they that shall go?

And Moshe said: We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go, for we must hold a feast to the Lord.

And he said: Let the Lord be so with you, for I will let you go. But to your young ones you shall look because evil is before their faces.

It will not be so. Go now the men and serve the Lord, because that is what you have requested.

And they were driven from before Pharaoh...

And then Pharaoh called to Moshe and Aharon in haste, and he said: I have sinned before the Lord your God, and against you.

Now therefore forgive I pray you my sin only this once and entreat the Lord your God that He may Take away from me this death alone.

And he went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord.

And the Lord Turned a very strong west wind that took away the **locusts**, and threw them into the Sea of Reeds. There did not remain a single locust in all of Egypt.

But the Lord Hardened Pharaoh's heart that he would not let the Children of Israel go.

Shemot 10:24-29

And Pharaoh called to Moshe (following the plague of **darkness**) and said: Go serve the Lord.

Only let your flocks and herds remain behind. Let your little ones also go with you.

And Moshe said to him: You must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.

Our cattle shall also go with us. Not a hoof will be left behind. For of them we must take to serve the Lord our God. And we know not with what we must serve the Lord until we come there.

But the Lord Hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let them go.

And Pharaoh said to him: Get away from me and be careful of yourself. See my face no more for in the day that you see my face you will die.

And Moshe said: You have spoken well. I will not see your face any more.

²⁴[24] Some commentators specifically identify the sin that causes HaShem to Strip Moshe of his leadership position, as his derogatory reference to the Jewish people in BaMidbar 20:10, "...Listen now you **rebels**..." Not only might this have reflected Moshe not being able to control his anger, but that his sense of humility was eroding, and he therefore was belittling those who were critical of him.

towards Pharaoh, no matter how outrageously the King may act towards them and the Jewish people.

Shemot 6:13

And HaShem Spoke to Moshe and Aharon, and He Commanded them concerning the Children of Israel and Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to bring the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

(The phrase, "...and He Commanded them concerning the Children of Israel and Pharaoh" appears to be superfluous and therefore generates Midrashic comment.)

Shemot Rabba 7:3

"And He Commanded them concerning the **Children of Israel**"—The Holy One Blessed Be He Said to them: My Children are stubborn, angry, and troublesome. Therefore you have to be prepared to withstand them when they curse you, when they stone you.

"And **Pharaoh, King of Egypt**, to bring the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt"—The Holy One Blessed Be He Said to them: You will act towards him with respect and you will give honor to the monarchy, even though I Must Judge (and Punish) him.

And Moshe complied, as it is said (with regard to the aftermath of the Plague of the Firstborn), (Shemot 11:8) "And all of these your servants will come down to me", even though he should have said, "You, the king yourself, will come to me", as it is said, (Shemot 12:30) "And Pharaoh rose up in the night".²⁵[25] For this reason (being respectful) Moshe did not publicly predict that Pharaoh himself would come to seek him out, in order to show respect for the kingship.

Unless an individual is already intrinsically respectful and humble, it would seem to be extremely difficult to command him to change his nature, without actually manipulating his mind, as God Does to Pharaoh,²⁶[26] the sons of Eli²⁷[27] and King Saul.²⁸[28] The ability of Moshe and Aharon to comply with the Divine Directives to be patient and respectful to others, no matter how trying they may prove to be, speaks not only about how highly valued a characteristic humility is, but the traits that these two brothers already possessed.

It is interesting to note that the Midrash focuses upon verses at the very end of the interchanges between Moshe and Pharaoh in order to illustrate the deference with which the Jewish leader approached the Egyptian King. Perhaps it is to be expected that even if an individual can control himself at the outset of a difficult negotiation, as the hurts, rejections and insults accumulate over time, recriminations inevitably will burst forth. By Moshe continuing to act in a measured fashion with regard to Pharaoh to the very end, reflects how deeply humble he truly is.²⁹[29] It seems

²⁵[25] When Moshe says in Shemot 10:29, that he will not see Pharaoh's face again, he meant that he would not ask for an audience with the king. However this does not preclude the reverse, i.e., that the king will look for Moshe to beg that the Jews leave Egypt once and for all, as eventually occurs.

²⁶[26] See Shemot 4:21; 9:12; 10:20, 27.

²⁷[27] See I Shmuel 2:25.

²⁸[28] See I Shmuel 16:14; 18:10; 19:9.

²⁹[29] Although sending Aharon to accompany Moshe appears to be a punishment as the result of Moshe's refusal to accept HaShem's Mission upon himself, in the end, being able to hold himself at some

that many more examples could have been cited of Moshe's restraint, all made possible by his personality trait of extreme humility. Consequently, Moshe never takes personally any of Pharaoh's double dealing and lashing out. He understands that what is required in order to win the Jews' release from Egypt has nothing to do with how he is treated during his royal audiences, but rather with HaShem's Timetable and master plan designed to demonstrate to the world His Power, Personal Intervention in the affairs of man ("Hashgacha Pratit") and the inherent limitations of human authority and military might as manifested by what ultimately happens to Pharaoh, his army and his country.

But the above Midrashic comment also illustrates yet another benefit of choosing someone who is humble to be the leader of the Jewish people at this time. Not only will it be necessary to deal respectfully and patiently with a difficult political leader, but also with a "stiff necked" people who have developed a full-blown slave mentality during the course of the 190 years of servitude that they endured in Egypt. Another Midrash suggests that Moshe realizes very early on that the Jewish people are going to pose major challenges to his equanimity and tolerance.

Shemot 2:14

And he (one of two Jews hitting one another whom Moshe tried to break up) said: Who appointed you Minister and Judge over us? Are you threatening to kill me in the same manner that you killed the Egyptian? And Moshe was afraid and he said: Surely the matter is known.

Shemot Rabba 1:30

R. Yehuda b. R. Shalom in the name of R. Chanina HaGadol, and our Rabbis in the name of R. Aleksandri said: Moshe doubted in his heart and wondered: What could Israel possibly have done to deserve being enslaved more than any other nation? But when he heard his (the Jew who Moshe was trying to stop assaulting his fellow Jew) words, he said: There is **gossip** among them. How will they ever be worthy of redemption? For this reason it is said, "...Surely the matter is known," (as opposed to the simple meaning that Moshe realized that his killing of the Egyptian is public knowledge), now I know with respect to what they have incurred enslavement.

Although at first glance, one might think that humility is not only unnecessary, but perhaps even a detriment for the role of leader of the Jewish people at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. But further consideration suggests that it is just the quality for leaders at all times and in all places. While Moshe may not have had someone to emulate when called upon to carry out his most challenging responsibilities, we have his example to inspire us. Moshe Rabbeinu is not only our teacher when it comes to Tora, but also with respect to "Middot" (personal attributes) and leadership style. We must strive to learn his lessons well.

Shabbat Shalom.

remove from the discussions—HaShem would tell him what to say, he in turn would relay this to Aharon who would communicate with Pharaoh, and vice versa—assisted him to stay on a more even keel than he would have been able had he been required to interact directly with the monarch.