

Parsha Ponders

Shemos | Jan 5, 2024 | 24 Teves 5784

Everlasting faith¹

ויאמר יקוק אל-משה הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך וגם-בך יאמינו לעולם וגו'
Hashem said to Moshe: "Behold, I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, in order for the people to hear My speaking to You. And they'll also believe in you forever²

Sefer Shemos, the book of Exodus, introduces us to Moshe, our Teacher, the one who gave us the Torah. It behooves us to understand the uniqueness of Moshe, in relation to other prophets throughout our history.

It's clear that Moshe's level of prophecy surpassed all of the other prophets. All the other prophets could only prove themselves through signs or wonders. Even if they got the people to believe in them, there was always room for doubt. Another way for a prophet to gain authority is through the approval of another reputable prophet, like Elisha through Eliyahu. Indeed, the Torah told us³ that this is the proper way for us to accept prophets as legitimate. This is similar to the Torah's command to believe in two witnesses, even though it's always possible for them to testify falsely⁴.

This is all unlike Moshe, our teacher. The entire Jewish people heard Moshe speaking to Hashem, face to face⁵. The whole nation reached a state of prophecy⁶. They could glean how Hashem communicated with Moshe. Because of this, Hashem testified that the Jewish people will forever believe in the prophecy of Moshe. If the Jews believed in Moshe solely because of the miracles he performed in Egypt, he could easily be refuted by opposing miracles. Not now. After witnessing firsthand Moshe's prophecy with G-d, the Jews would no longer have any doubts. Even if a thousand prophets came and performed miracles, claiming Hashem changed Moshe's Torah, they would be ignored.

However, Hashem's assertion⁷ that the Jews will forever believe in Moshe, that he can always be trusted, is difficult. We have a rule that everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of G-d⁸. Hashem gives us absolute free will. As well, even though we don't understand how it works, Hashem's perfect knowledge of the future doesn't negate our free will. Despite Moshe's tremendous level of prophecy, what was to prevent him from going bad? Maybe one day he would alter the Torah that he was given by Hashem? How can we really believe in everything he said that it was truly from Hashem⁹?

We're therefore forced to say that Hashem, surprising as it may be, removed Moshe's free will. He became like an Angel¹⁰, forced to follow Hashem's command. The whole point of creation is for us to

¹ Based on Meshech Chochmah *Hakdama L'Sefer Shemos*, which itself is based heavily on Rambam's Mishneh Torah *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*

² Exodus 19:9

³ Deuteronomy 18:15

⁴ See Mishneh Torah *loc. cit.* 7:7

⁵ Deuteronomy 5:4. See Mishneh Torah *loc. cit.* 8:1

⁶ See Makkos 23b, where Rabbi Simlai teaches that the Jews themselves heard the first two of the Ten Commandments

⁷ The Meshech Chochmah uses the word "command", but this verse seems to be a promise, not a command

⁸ Berachos 33b

⁹ According to the Ibn Ezra to Exodus 19:9, this question doesn't start

¹⁰ Rav Copperman notes that the Meshech Chochmah specifically compared Moshe to an Angel, as we see even Angels can somehow sin, despite not having free will (see Bereishis Rabbah 68:18). This explains how Moshe can later sin in the episode of *Mei Merivah*

exercise our free will. We're to choose good and avoid bad. Without free will, it would have been better for us to have not been created. However, Moshe worked on himself, perfecting himself to the point that he no longer needed to be tempted by worldly distractions. As a result, his free will was removed. That itself is the goal, to become perfect human beings.

However, the rest of the Jewish nation wasn't at that level. They achieved prophecy solely to enable the religion to get started. This way, no one could ever come along and contradict the Torah that Moshe gave us. Their clarity in the reality of Hashem became so clear, that it was as if they had no choice but to accept the Torah. This is the intent of our Sages¹¹ who teach us that Hashem turned the mountain over their heads and coerced them to accept the Torah¹². In the end though, their free will was unaltered. For if not, what was the point for their existence? Furthermore, they would receive no reward for following the Torah, since it wouldn't be by choice. After this momentary existence of absolute clarity, everything returned to normal¹³.

Once we say this about Moshe, we're forced to say the same thing about Yehoshua. For we find many cases where Yehoshua was the one to finalize certain details of the Torah¹⁴. Just like there could be a concern Moshe would alter the Torah, the same concern could be true for Yehoshua. As such, Hashem removed his free will as well. After him, the Torah was complete, and all other prophets simply related Hashem's will to the nation. They would prove themselves through miracles or predictions, and we'd be commanded to believe them. The dangers of their potential deceit weren't as all encompassing, as they wouldn't be believed to alter the Torah anyways¹⁵.

With this proper understanding of who Moshe was, now we'll be properly equipped to learn about his origins as the savior of the Jewish nation from slavery.

Good Shabbos

¹¹ [Shabbos 88a](#)

¹² See [Meshech Chochmah](#) to [Exodus 19:17](#) for more on this

¹³ See [Deuteronomy 5:27](#). This verse wasn't said to Moshe ([Shabbos 87a](#)), a further allusion to this idea

¹⁴ See [Joshua 5:2](#) and [Yevamos 71b](#), [Halachos Gedolos Hilchos Milah](#), [Makkos 11a](#), [Nedarim 22b](#)

¹⁵ See the rest of the piece for more proofs