

Parsha Ponders

Shemos | January 8, 2021 | 24 Teves 5781

What it takes to be a leader¹

ויאמר אנכי אלקי אביך אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב ויסתר משה פניו כי ירא מהביט אל-האלקים [Hashem] said: "I am the G-d of your forefathers, the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaakov." Moshe then hid his face, as he feared to stare at the Divine²

ויען משה ויאמר והן לא יאמינו-לי ולא ישמעו בקלי כי יאמרו לא-נראה אליך יקוק: והיה אם-לא יאמינו לך ולא ישמעו לקל האת הראשון והאמינו לקל האת האחרון: והיה אם-לא יאמינו גם לשני האתות האלה ולא ישמעו לקלך ולקחת ממימי היאר ושפכת היבשה והיו המים אשר תקח מן-היאר והיו לדם ביבשת

Moshe answered and said: "But they won't believe me! They won't listen to me and they'll say that Hashem didn't appear to you"..."If it will be³ that they don't believe in you and don't believe the first sign, they will believe the second sign. And if it will be that they don't believe these two signs, and won't listen to you, take from the water of the Nile and pour it on the ground. It will be that the water that you took from the Nile will turn to blood on the dry land⁴

Hashem's first dialogue at the burning bush with Moshe is very interesting. Moshe didn't realize that this conversation would pave the way for him becoming the leader and savior of the Jewish people. There's a lot of back and forth, as Moshe was initially not willing to take the position. He had all sorts of excuses. We can learn a lot from this episode, but the following is just a couple of lessons that we can glean. The first lesson comes from Moshe's initial demeanor during this discussion, and the second comes from Hashem's response to Moshe's concern that the Jews won't believe him.

The Torah tells us that Moshe turned away when he realized Whom he was speaking with. When he realized that He was speaking with Hashem, he didn't want to stare at the Divine presence, so-to-speak. This would seemingly be praiseworthy behavior. Moshe had the proper values of honor and awe. He was also not yet on the spiritual level to gaze directly at the Divine⁵. Indeed, some say⁶ that Moshe was rewarded for this behavior. However, others⁷ say that Moshe acted improperly. In fact, they say that later, when Moshe was interested in knowing the Divine⁸, Hashem responded that since he originally wasn't interested, he doesn't get to see. This not only seems unfair, but seems almost patronizing. What's going on?

¹ Based on a couple of *shiurim* on leadership, heard from [Rav Zev Leff](#) of Moshav Matityahu in 5781

² [Exodus](#) 3:6

³ This sounds like Hashem wasn't sure if they would believe the signs. See [Ri ibn Caspi ad. loc.](#), who explains Hashem was just speaking in the language of Man

⁴ [Ibid](#) 4:1,8,9

⁵ [Ramban](#) to [Ibid](#) 3:5 seems to say that Moshe wasn't yet on a high enough level. [Malbim](#) to [Numbers](#) 30:2 also seems to hold this way. The [Meshech Chochmah](#) to [Exodus](#) 16:9 infers from the [Rambam](#) in [Mishneh Torah Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah](#) 7:6 that Moshe only attained his prophetic stature after the giving of the Torah. See however [Tzeidah LaDerech](#) to [Ibid](#) 3:6, who says that right before Moshe turned away from the vision, Hashem gave Moshe the ability to prophesize at the level of המאירה, the crystal-clear vision which he retained throughout his leadership. It seems then that he was on a very high level. It's unclear then if he would agree with this interpretation of why he turned away. Perhaps it was solely out of Hashem's honor and awe of Him

⁶ Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yonasan in [Berachos](#) 7a; Rabbi Yehoshua of Sichnin in the name of Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Hoshiya in [Shemos Rabbah](#) 3:1. See more sources in [Torah Sheleimah ad. loc.](#) § 109

⁷ Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha in [Berachos loc. cit.](#) and [Shemos Rabbah loc. cit.](#)

⁸ [Exodus](#) 33:18

It's true, Moshe wasn't on the spiritual level to gaze directly at the Divine. However, the exact language of this *Midrash* is לא רצית, you didn't **want** to stare. Not that he felt it was inappropriate, but that he wasn't interested. Meaning, at that point he didn't desire to be on that level. If he did, he could have gotten there. The only way to attain the proper spiritual heights is to have ambition. Hashem later told Moshe that since he lacked that ambition, he failed to grow to the level where he could properly know the Divine. If he wanted to, he could have been even greater.

Towards the end of their debate if Moshe was worthy of being the leader of the Jewish people, Moshe claimed that the Jewish people wouldn't believe him. He was supposed to go to the people and say that G-d spoke to him, and they would just accept that as fact? Now, if we were Hashem, who is Omnipotent and knows the future, what would we have said? We probably would have said that "I'm G-d, I know everything. I see that they will accept you, so don't worry". However, Hashem didn't say that. Instead, he provided Moshe with three signs, or miracles, to show the people. With those three signs, for sure they will listen. What was the need for the signs? Hashem told Moshe to lead the people, so obviously Hashem knew that Moshe would be accepted as the leader. If so, why not simply tell Moshe that they'll believe him?

Some say⁹ that Hashem knew that the people wouldn't believe Moshe. When Hashem told Moshe to lead the people, it was with the intent to tell him to perform the three miracles. Then they would believe in him. However, Moshe cut off Hashem in the middle of His sentence. Before Hashem had the chance to tell him about the miracles he was to perform, Moshe asked how they would believe in him. Hashem then finished His sentence as He intended. However, perhaps a different explanation can be offered.

What we see from here is that a leader who doesn't believe in their people will fail at having the people believe in them. Hashem was telling Moshe that if he believed in the people, he wouldn't have needed any signs. Because Moshe doubted that the Jews would believe in him, it showed a lack of confidence in their judgement. They were suffering from a bitter enslavement in Egypt, and were desperate for salvation. Who says they wouldn't believe Moshe? If he was coming with a promise of redemption, perhaps they would listen. Moshe's lack of confidence in the people made the signs necessary. Now they definitely wouldn't believe in him, without the assistance of miracles.

Good Shabbos

⁹ Perhaps [Rav Zev Leff](#) had in mind the explanation of [Ibn Ezra](#) and [Chizkuni](#) *ad. loc.*