



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Shmot 5774

### *Why Moses? Or, What Makes a Leader?*

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December 21, 2013

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What makes a leader? For the Torah, leadership is not primarily about methods or tactics; it's about character. What kind of human being must one be in order to lead on God's behalf? Not surprisingly, the life of Moses offers us some clues.

#### **Noticing, but also Acting**

Exodus 2 recounts three episodes in Moses's life which seem to prepare him to assume the mantle of Israel's leader. First, Moses sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite and intervenes on the latter's behalf. Not content to defend his fellow Israelites, however, he next tries to adjudicate between them.<sup>1</sup> Observing injustice on the one hand, and internecine conflict on the other, Moses is not just disturbed or disappointed; he acts to remedy the situation. How many of us encounter situations of injustice and pretend not to notice—or, just as bad, register the injustice but find a million excuses not to act? And how often do we turn a blind eye to strife which we could ameliorate or even heal, fearing that the burden of getting involved would just be too great to bear? What sets Moses apart is that he does not merely recognize oppression, he also acts unflinchingly to bring it to an end.

#### **Acting Against Injustice Everywhere**

Crucially, the circle of Moses' concern does not end there. The Torah tells us a third story, in which Moses sees a group of shepherds mistreating a group of seven young Midianite women. "Moses rose and saved them," the text tells us, "and he watered their flock."<sup>2</sup> Seeing the women being abused, Moses acts resolutely and rescues them. Why is it so important to the Torah to tell this story? The Torah wants us to know that Moses is not just offended by injustices perpetrated against his own people. Moses also defends foreigners and strangers, and "his passion for justice makes no distinctions between nations."<sup>3</sup> It is not enough for a Jewish leader to display ethnic solidarity—ethnic solidarity is surely necessary, but it is just as surely not sufficient. In order to be worthy of leadership, one must rebel against wrongdoing, no matter who the victim is.

The word the Torah employs to describe Moses' bold action is highly significant: he is described as "saving" the women (*vayoshi'an*). In the next chapter we learn that God, too, is about to be a rescuer.<sup>4</sup> And in summarizing the miraculous events at the sea eleven chapters later, the Torah announces, in words that echo Moses' own actions, that "The Lord saved (*vayosha*) Israel that day from the Egyptians."<sup>5</sup> The word used to describe Moses' actions on behalf of the vulnerable women is the same word used to describe God's actions on behalf of the vulnerable Israelites. To

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 2:11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 2:16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Exodus," in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (2004), comment to Exodus 2:11-22.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:8.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 14:30.

side with the oppressed and act against injustice, the Torah subtly tells us, is to be like God (an instance of what philosophers call *imitatio dei*, Latin for the imitation of God). Just as God rebels against injustice and embraces the stranger, so too must the divinely appointed leader.

Moses' heroism in siding with the Midianite women has a fascinating parallel in American history. Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist and ex-slave, was also an impassioned advocate for women's suffrage. Asked why he, a man, should be so ardently involved in the struggle for women's dignity, Douglass explained: "When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of women, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act." Like Moses millennia before him, Douglass dedicated his life to leading his people out of slavery. And like Moses, he understood that fighting for the groups to which he belonged—blacks, men—was ultimately not enough. The God of Israel is against injustice in all its forms, and not just injustice against this people or that (no matter how beloved). Put somewhat differently: what both Moses and Frederick Douglass intuitively understood is that for all the profound importance of ethnic solidarity, a wider human solidarity is also fundamental. One cannot lead this particular people without a concern for justice for all people(s).

### Indignation and Compassion

Moses is an activist, a person appalled by oppression and persecution. These are, as we've seen, noble qualities—so noble, in fact, that they are associated with God. And yet crusaders against injustice are often consumed by their own indignation; all too often the line between righteousness and self-righteousness all but disappears, and indignation crowds out gentleness, or modesty, or even the capacity for intimacy.<sup>6</sup>

So the Torah tells us something else about Moses: he was a shepherd.<sup>7</sup> To perform his duties properly, a shepherd must combine power on the one hand, with gentle attentiveness on the other. He must have the capacity to control and provide for his sheep, but he must also nurture and care for each one. A *midrash* poignantly evokes Moses' mercy and tenderness:

When Moses our teacher was tending the flock of Jethro in the wilderness, a little kid escaped from him. He ran after it until it reached a shady place. When it reached the shady place,<sup>8</sup> it came across a pool of water and stopped to drink. When Moses approached it, he said: "I didn't realize that you ran away because of thirst; you must be tired." He placed the kid upon his shoulder and walked on. Thereupon God said: "You have mercy in leading a human being's flock; you will assuredly tend my flock Israel."<sup>9</sup>

Not only must a leader take offense at injustice and act accordingly, in other words, but he must also be compassionate and act accordingly. Real compassion is not just an emotion—Moses does not just "feel bad" for the kid; real compassion is a weave of emotion and action. God's appointed leader does not merely feel for others. He acts decisively to alleviate their pain.

This is brought home in another Rabbinic interpretation of Moses' formative years. Exodus tells us that when Moses grew up, "he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens" (*vayar besivlotam*).<sup>10</sup> What, ask the Sages, does it mean that Moses "saw their burdens"? That he identified with them, felt for them, and—pivotaly—acted to lighten their load: "He would see their suffering and weep, saying, 'Woe is me for you; would that I could die for you.' There is no work more strenuous than working with clay. He used to shoulder the burdens and help each one."<sup>11</sup> A modern commentator clarifies the nature of Moses' "seeing" Israel's burdens: "This seeing penetrated his belly, until his compassion for them brought him to tears. And out of his great compassion, he himself assisted them."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Even Moses, one can easily argue, falls short on this last count.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 3:1.

<sup>8</sup> The meaning of the Hebrew word *chasit* is not clear.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus Rabbah 2:2.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 2:11.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:27.

<sup>12</sup> R. Chanokh Zundel ben Joseph (d. 1867), *Etz Yosef* to Exodus Rabbah 1:27.



# DVAR TZEDEK

## A Dose of Self-Doubt

As soon as God gives Moses his world-historical assignment (“Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt”), Moses tries to demur, and protests: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?”<sup>13</sup> God attempts to assuage Moses’ anxieties: “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you.” The second clause is actually somewhat ambiguous; it isn’t clear precisely what God is suggesting will serve as a sign to Moses: is it the fact that God will be with him, or the fact that God just appeared to him in the burning bush? Or might it refer to what immediately follows: “When you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”<sup>14</sup> According to this last possibility, “the sign that it is God Who has sent Moses will be realized [only] when Moses succeeds in the extraordinary undertaking of bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt and leads them all the way to the mountain on which he now stands.”<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman (1897-1946) offers a fanciful but beautiful interpretation of what God means. God gives Moses his monumental assignment, and Moses responds by asking, ‘Who am I?’ God then tells him: the very fact that you ask this question, the very fact that you doubt your ability to carry out this momentous mission is itself the sign that it is I who sent you, since I only choose those who are modest and self-effacing to do my work.<sup>16</sup> As hard as it can be to remember in a culture obsessed with self-promotion, a degree of self-doubt is essential for authentic leadership. Too much self-doubt, and a person ends up paralyzed and fails to step up to the project at hand. Too little, however, and the temptations of arrogance and grandiosity loom large. God tells Moses, in effect: good that you doubt yourself. Now go...

The opening chapters of Exodus paint a portrait of a flesh and blood leader, but they also lay out a template of what kind of human being a leader in the deepest sense should be: one who sees injustice and is compelled to respond; one who is outraged by oppression of any human being, Jewish or not; one who brings together a capacity for indignation with a gentleness of spirit; one who manifests a compassion so deep that he cannot but attempt to aid those in need; and one who remembers to ask, “Really, me?” Those are the signs that it is God who sent him.



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<sup>13</sup> Exodus 3:10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 3:12.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004), comments to Exodus 3:12.

<sup>16</sup> R. Alexander Zusia Friedman, *Ma’ayanah Shel Torah*, vol. 2, p. 18. Attributed to “Avnei Ezel,” which is thought to be R. Friedman’s way of introducing his own insights.

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