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AUTHOR: Matthew A. Reimer

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Dina Lust 1/31/07
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The Five Objections of Moses:

One Man's Journey From Self-Doubt to Israel's Greatest Leader

Matthew A. Reimer

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen

What does it mean to be a leader? How does one become a leader? Refining the questions a bit, what did it mean to Moses to become a leader? How did he become the leader of the Israelites? These are the primary questions that lie at the heart of this thesis. Moses, arguably our tradition's greatest leader, was raised as a prince in Pharaoh's palace. He brought the Israelites up out of Egypt, guided them through the desert, and, after forty years, led them to *Eretz Yisrael*. But he did so reluctantly, with great anxiety and apprehension, and with a genuine sense of humility and modesty. So how did a man who thought so little of himself, who was so convinced that he was the wrong person to lead his brethren, become Israel's greatest leader? Chapters 3 and 4 of the Book of Exodus shed some light on this question.

What do we learn from Moses and the emotions he displayed during his exchange with God, that can help us understand his role – and our own – as a Jewish leader?

I have decided to focus my thesis on Exodus 3 and 4 and the rabbinic texts, along with the later medieval commentaries, associated with those chapters. The thesis is divided into four sections:

- Section I: Introduction
 - Rabbinic Material & Analysis
 - A. Overarching Biblical Themes
 - B. Rabbinic Material and Analysis
- Section II: Thematic Overview
 - A. Moses' Objections and Doubts
 - B. Ingredients Necessary for Leadership
- Section III: Conclusions
 - A. What have we learned from the Bible and the Rabbis?
 - B. Areas for Further Analysis
 - C. What can Exodus 3 and 4 teach us about our own journeys to Jewish leadership?

My goal for this thesis was to show that our model for Jewish leadership was shaped by Moses. We continue to learn from him and the qualities he displayed during his encounter with God at the Burning Bush in order to inform the choices we make for our own Jewish leadership today.

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ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a leader? How does one become a leader? Refining the questions a bit, what did it mean to Moses to become a leader? How did he become the leader of the Israelites? These are the primary questions that lie at the heart of this thesis. Moses, arguably our tradition's greatest leader, was raised as a prince in Pharaoh's palace. He brought the Israelites up out of Egypt, guided them through the desert, and, after forty years, led them to *Eretz Yisrael*. But he did so reluctantly, with great anxiety and apprehension, and with a genuine sense of humility and modesty. So how did a man who thought so little of himself, who was so convinced that he was the wrong person to lead his brethren, become Israel's greatest leader? Chapters 3 and 4 of the Book of Exodus shed some light on this question.

Chapter 3 and the first half of Chapter 4 are a dialogue that takes place between Moses and God at Mount Horeb. Over the course of thirty-nine verses, the reader sees a simple shepherd turn, quite reluctantly, into the shepherd of an entire nation. God gives Moses his mission – to go before Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt – and Moses, at five different times, proceeds to argue, to question and to plead with God that he is the wrong man for the job.

What do we learn from Moses and the emotions he displayed during his exchange with God, that can help us understand his role – and our own – as a Jewish leader?

I have decided to focus my thesis on Exodus 3 and 4 and the rabbinic texts associated with those chapters for three different reasons:

1. The artful and meaningful narrative and conversation between God and Moses: these thirty-nine verses show a wide range of emotion – both on the part of God and Moses.
2. The relationship between the biblical and rabbinic texts: looking at the Midrashim and how they relate to each verse, allows one to gain insight to our tradition's understanding of these biblical texts. How did they view Moses' actions? What did Moses' actions mean to them and how they lived their lives as Jews?
3. Relevance to our lives today: We need not look any further than Moses to find paradigmatic lessons on how to be a leader and the leadership potential that each of us has. How do Moses' doubts, anxieties and great humility speak to our lives today? Does contemporary Jewish leadership have anything to learn from Moses' dialogue with God at Mount Horeb? If so, what?

Moses is the quintessential biblical character from whom we can learn the most. He is at once compassionate and aloof, obstinate and adaptable, humble and haughty. He is at times reluctant and at other times fanatical. Did all of these varying characteristics help or hinder Moses' development into the Israelites' leader?

The thesis is divided into three sections:

- Section I: Rabbinic Material & Analysis
 - A. Overarching Biblical Themes
 - B. Rabbinic Material and Analysis
- Section II: Thematic Overview
 - A. Moses' Objections and Doubts
 - B. Ingredients Necessary for Leadership
- Section III: Conclusions
 - A. What have we learned from the Bible and the Rabbis?
 - B. Areas for Further Analysis
 - C. What can Exodus 3 and 4 teach us about our own journeys to Jewish leadership?

The material in Section I is broken down by biblical verse from Exodus 3:1 to Exodus 4:17. For each verse, the reader will find a selection of rabbinic texts and my analysis of each midrash. The Rabbinic material included in this thesis ranges from the early classical Amoraic midrashim, such as Bereshit Rabbah (400-500 C.E.) and Esther Rabbah (late 6th-early 7th Centuries), to the late Rabbinic midrashim such as Midrash Tehillim (1000-1100 C.E.) and Bamidbar Rabbah (1100-1200 C.E.). Occasionally I cite pieces of classical rabbinic commentary either within the text of my analysis or in the footnotes.


In determining what rabbinic material to include in my analysis, I focused on three areas: 1) Its relevance to the main thesis of Moses as leader; 2) relevant comments about Moses as a person; and 3) its overall relevance to the relationship between Moses

and God. For each midrash that I did include in my analysis, there were as many as five or six that I did not.

Here is a sample of a biblical verse and how the rabbinic material and my analysis on that material will be laid out:

וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶחֱזָאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן
וַיְנַחֵם אֶת־הַצֹּאֵן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר
וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הָר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵב:
Moses was shepherding the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock deep into the wilderness, and he came to (arrived at) Horeb, the Mountain of God.

Exodus 3:1



Midrash

This section is the rabbinic material. It is the direct text drawn from the classical midrashim. The Rabbinic material and my commentary is easily distinguished from one another, because the two sections will be in different fonts and will have different page justifications.

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**ANALYSIS**

My analysis of the rabbinic material will immediately follow each rabbinic source. A third level will involve the later medieval material. At times I will include this material directly within the body of my own analysis, and at other times, it will be included in footnotes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The footnotes will contain medieval commentary that is relevant to either the rabbinic material or my analysis on it.

A number of sources were used for the translation of the relevant verses of Chapters 3 and 4. Much of my own translation/interpretation was shaped with the help of the *JPS Tanakh* (1985), *The New Living Translation* (1996), *The New King James Version* (1982) and *The New International Translation* (1984). The translation of the rabbinic material drawn from Midrash Rabbah is taken entirely from the *Soncino* edition (1951). I used both the hardcopy and the 2003 online Bar-Ilan editions.

# *Section I*

*Exodus 3:1 – 4:17*

*Biblical & Rabbinic Material & Analysis*

## A. Overarching Biblical Themes

Before looking at our verses, it is worthwhile to look at the previous chapter of Exodus for a moment. It is interesting to note that Chapter 2 ends with the current struggles of the Israelites, their plea for help and God's response to them:

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם  
וַיֹּאנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבָדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ  
וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָּם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבָדָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם  
וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב:  
וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים:

*Years passed, and the king of Egypt died,  
but the Israelites still groaned beneath their burden of slavery.  
They cried out for help, and their pleas for deliverance rose up to God. And God heard their groaning,  
and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.  
God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.  
(Exodus 2:23-25)*

The narrative of the Israelites' redemption from Egypt is beginning to unfold, which must lead to God's choice of a leader. That process begins in Chapter 3.

The dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 3 and 4 can be broken down into seven distinct sections:

- I. Introduction – Ex. 3:1-6
- II. The Call – Ex. 3:7-10
- III. a. The First Objection of Moses 3:11  
b. God's response – 3:12
- IV. a. The Second Objection of Moses 3:13  
b. God's response – 3:14-22
- V. a. The Third Objection of Moses 4:1  
b. God's response – 4:2-9
- VI. a. The Fourth Objection of Moses 4:10  
b. God's response – 4:11-12

VII. a. The Fifth Objection of Moses 4:13  
b. God's response – 4:14-17

Exodus 3 begins with Moses tending to his father-in-law, Jethro's, flock of sheep as he leads them deep into the wilderness, eventually ending up at Mount Horeb, the Mountain of God. In the Exodus 3:2, an angel appears to Moses and the dialogue between him and God is about to begin.

The dialogue that takes place between Moses and God allows the reader to learn what type of person Moses is. At times his humility overshadows his potential for leadership. At other times his careful approach to detail prevents him from seeing the bigger picture.

Moses' first objection in Exodus 3:11 can be read in two different ways. It can be understood as one large objection, but it can also be read as being two objections in one. If we read the verse as one long objection, it would read, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh, and who am I to take the Israelites out of Egypt?" But if we break the verse into two separate, but related, objections, we can read it this way: The first half of the verse Moses is addressing his own feelings of inadequacy and lack of capabilities, the second half of the verse focuses on the Israelites themselves. Moses is not sure if he possesses the ability to take on such a task. He is also not sure if the Israelites are ready to be redeemed.

But as we will soon see, when we look at the text closely, Moses' first objection is somewhat confusing. We might expect Moses to say something like, "I am not worthy of such a task," or "I do not have the necessary skills to go before Pharaoh." Instead, we see a man who is questioning his own worthiness by questioning God's choice of emissary. Moses doubts himself and God: "Who am I (מִי אֲנִי) to go to Pharaoh and take the children of Israel out of Egypt," he asks God, as if to say, "You must have chosen the wrong leader."

The first question of any potential leader should be, "Am I capable of serving? Do I think I have the ability to fulfill my mission?" מִי אֲנִי is such a question. Moses is not sure if he even has the ability to go before Pharaoh and tell him – not ask, not threaten, not demand – that he will be taking the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom.

God's response is immediate: "*I will be with you.*" (Ex. 3:12) But we will see that this assurance by God was not enough for Moses. Moses knew that he was witnessing something amazing with the burning bush, but he was not completely (or at all) reassured by knowing that God would be with him during his encounter with Pharaoh.

The Exodus narrative continues with a second objection on Moses' part in Exodus 3:13. "Will the Israelites simply go along, or will they require additional proof of his mission?" Moses wonders. This objection is coupled with the concern of where his standing is

with his own people, the Israelites. Will they believe that he (Moses) was sent by God to free them? What should he do if they ask, "Who sent you? מַה־שְּׁמוֹ (*What is His name?*)" The doubt of Moses and the perceived doubt of the Israelites is the focus of this second objection. Questions of authenticity resonate in this objection. How can a leader feel secure that his/her people will want to follow/trust him/her? How does a leader prove that s/he has the ability to lead? Does the community that is being led have a responsibility to prove its worthiness as well? What happens if a leader doubts his/her own community? If so, what should s/he do?

מַה־שְּׁמוֹ (*What is His name?*) is a continuation of מִי אֲנִי (*Who am I?*). Moses wonders how God will be with him. What does that mean? He claims that it is the Israelites who will demand to know the name of God, but it is Moses himself who really needs to be reassured by knowing God's name. His inner anxiety regarding his own worthiness is extremely high at this point, and not only does he wonder if the Israelites will accept him as their leader, but he also wonders if he will be worthy of this task. God is placing an enormous weight on him with this challenge, and he does not want to let God down.

Once again, God immediately responds to Moses in two different ways. God's first response is meant for Moses alone. "How shall I describe You," asks Moses, "so that my words will honor You?" God's response is simple: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה. *I AM WHO I AM.*

God's second response was meant to address Moses' concern regarding the Israelites.

*"I will be...the God of your forefathers..."* The use of the future tense verb, tied to the allusion to the Patriarchs, guarantees the future. God is guaranteeing Moses' and the Israelites' safety, freedom and survival. Just as God was there for their forbearers, so, too, will God be with them. It should be clear to any Jewish leader that *Y-H-V-H* represents security and a guarantee for the future, in and of itself.

A third objection by Moses follows in Exodus 4:1. This objection, once again, regards Moses' concerns about the Israelites and their anticipated lack of faith, as underscored in Exodus 3:13. "Will they believe that I was approached by God," he wonders. In other words, will the Israelites believe that Moses is to be their leader and, as he promises, bring them out of Egypt? Will they have faith in Moses?

Any successful leader must believe that they, not only, have the capacity to lead but that the community they are leading will embrace that belief. There is a covenantal relationship between any leader and the community s/he leads. God responds reluctantly by showing Moses miracles involving the staff belonging to Moses and a part of Moses' body as well.

Up until this point, Moses' objections have been calculated and strategic in nature.

Although the previous three objections showed Moses' humility and meekness, a fourth objection (4:10) is a plea of desperation that he directs toward God: "*I am not a man of words.*" This objection does not question God's choice of emissary. Nor does it question God's belief that the Israelites are, indeed, worthy of saving. This fourth objection is a simple plea from a man with a speech defect. Moses is a stutterer and desperately wants God to understand how difficult - HOW IMPOSSIBLE! - it will be for him to appear before Pharaoh and do what comes most difficult for him, to articulate God's message. "How can I possibly be the right person to enter Pharaoh's court?" Moses asks God. Even with Moses' initial response of "אני" he lacks the faith, at this point, necessary to understand - TO BELIEVE - that God has chosen the right person to lead Israel. And so, being human, he responds in a very human way: he points out his flaws and why those flaws will not allow him to be successful. God's response in Ex. 4:11 is not quite as compassionate as one might expect, but it is meant to address Moses' concerns. God simply asks Moses, "Who gives man speech?" This question, in a sense, is meant to tell Moses that "You have a speech defect for no other reason than I GAVE IT TO YOU! And if I want you to be able to speak clearly, you will be able to do just that." Bottom line: Moses needs to have faith that God's words in Ex. 3:12 ("*I will be with you.*") are more than just words. They are a commitment by God. God will not let Moses fail.

Moses' final objection, in Exodus 4:13, is a continuation of his plea of Exodus 4:10. He simply wants out of the mission. "Send anyone else but me," Moses begs of God. Finally, after hearing objection after objection, and addressing those objections, God's anger, similar to a parent, bubbles over. However, it is interesting to wonder if God's anger was directed towards Moses for refusing God's request for a fifth time or directed at God's Self for having to "put up with" such refusal.

These five objections, and the responses from God, were fundamentally necessary, and paved the way for Moses to take the reigns of leadership and become Israel's spiritual, political and physical leader. Although Moses responds with *הֲנִנִּי* in Exodus 3:4, unlike Abraham's response of *הֲנִנִּי* (Abraham had a lifetime of relating to God and many tests to go along with that relationship.) in Genesis 22:1, Moses needed God's assurances, God's guidance, and God's promise of partnership in order to truly become the Israelites' leader. These objections, and God's attempts to address these objections, make one thing clear: God needed Moses just as much as Moses needed God. When God called out to Moses from the burning bush, God was, in effect, asking Moses to step into a Covenant with God. This Covenant, felt by both God and Moses, would be the unbreakable support that each of them needed to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into *Eretz Yisrael*.

וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֶנּוּ כִּי־הָיָה מִדְיָן  
וַיִּנְהֲגֵהוּ אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר  
וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵב:

*Moses was shepherding the sheep of his father-in-law,  
Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock deep into  
the wilderness, and he came to (arrived at) Horeb, the  
Mountain of God.*

## *Exodus 3:1*



## B. Rabbinic Material & Analysis

### **Bereshit Rabbah 30:8**

R. Johanan said: Every man of whom it is said that he 'was' (הָיָה) remained unchanged from beginning to end...[Abraham] was destined to lead the whole world to repentance. [Similarly], "Behold, the man was" (Gen. III, 22) means: destined to die. "The serpent was" (Gen. III, 1): destined to punishment. "Cain was" (Gen. IV, 2): predestined to exile; "Job was" (Job I, 1): destined to suffering; "NOAH WAS": destined for a miracle; "Moses was" (Ex. III, 1): destined to be a redeemer; "Mordecai was" (Est. II, 5): destined for redemption.



#### **ANALYSIS**

The Rabbis draw a remarkable conclusion based on the word הָיָה in 3:1. This word implies that Moses had always been picked to be the redeemer of Israel. Although The Call to Moses would come a few verses later, the Rabbis want to make it clear that The Call was always meant for Moses. The simple shepherd הָיָה (is) the shepherd of an entire people. R. Johanan suggests that הָיָה implies predetermination wherever it is used. הָיָה is the hint of one's destiny.

However, what does הָיָה say about free-will? What does הָיָה say about choice? Did Moses have a choice? Was he destined for greatness when he was placed in the basket to float down the Nile? R. Johanan argues that הָיָה means we are who we are. Moses was unchanged from the beginning of his life to the end of it.

וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת-צֹאן

*Moses was tending to the flock...*

The flock in Ex. 3:1 was his father-in-law's sheep. In just a few verses that flock will be an entire nation.



### **Shemot Rabbah 2:2**

NOW MOSES WAS KEEPING THE FLOCK.

And whom does He try? The righteous, as it says: The Lord trieth the righteous (ib.5)...Also Moses was tested by God through sheep. Our Rabbis said that 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, there appeared to view a pool of water and the kid stopped to drink. When Moses approached it, he said: 'I did not know that you ran away because of thirst; you must be weary.' So he placed the kid on his shoulder and walked away. Thereupon God said: 'Because thou hast mercy in leading the flock of a mortal, thou wilt assuredly tend my flock Israel.'



#### ANALYSIS

The shepherd as a leader is not just a metaphor. There is a long history of shepherds in our tradition that date all the way back to Abel, the son of Adam.

וַתִּסֶּף לָלֶדֶת אֶת־אָחִיו אֶת־הָבֶל וַיְהִי־הֶבֶל רֹעֶה צֹאן וְקַיִן הָיָה עֹבֵד אֲדָמָה:  
*Later, she gave birth to his brother, Abel; Abel became a shepherd, and Cain became a farmer.*  
(Genesis 4:2)

Generations later, our first patriarch, Abraham, began, quite serendipitously, the shepherd culture of Israel:

וְלֵאבְרָם הָיָטִיב בְּעִבּוּרָהּ  
וַיְהִי־לּוֹ צֹאן־וּבָקָר וְחֲמֹרִים וְעִבְדִּים וְשִׁפְחֹת וְאִתָּנֹת וְנִמְלִים:  
*And because of her, he treated Avram well; and Avram acquired many sheep, cattle, donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.*  
(Genesis 12:16)

And so began the image of our Patriarchs and leaders as shepherds. And this image persisted through our history. Arguably Israel's greatest military king and Psalmist, David was a gentle shepherd before he became King.

וַיַּעֲבֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁבְעַת בָּנָיו לְפָנָיו שְׁמוּאֵל  
וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־בָחַר יְהוָה בְּאַלְהֵי:  
וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲתִמּוּ הַנְּעָרִים  
וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד שָׂאֵר הַקְּטֹוֹהֶנָּה רֹעֶה בְּצֹאן.

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־יִשִׁי שְׁלַח וְקָחְנוּ כִּי לֹא־נִסָּב עַד־בָּאוּ פֹה:  
וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיְבִיאוּהוּ וְאָדְמוּנִי עַם־יִפֶּה עֵינָיו טוֹב רָאִי  
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה קוּם מִשָּׁחֵהוּ כִּי־זֶה הוּא:

*The Jesse presented seven of his sons before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Are these the only boys you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse replied, "but he is out in the fields tending the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send for him at once; we will not sit down until he arrives." So he sent for him, and he was brought in; he was ruddy and handsome, with pleasant eyes. And the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him, for he is the one."  
(I Samuel 16:10-12)*

Even God is likened to a shepherd of the Israelites in many of our texts. Psalm 23 is, perhaps, the most popular and well-known of the texts that portray God as our shepherd. The powerful image of a vulnerable sheep being protected by a strong, loving shepherd is comforting. This psalm is known as a psalm of comfort that is generally used for people who have suffered a personal loss. It has become a part of our bereavement liturgy. But if we look at it a bit closer, "Psalm 23 could also enjoy a very different reputation as a psalm of empowerment for leaders."<sup>1</sup>

יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחָסֵד: בְּנֵאוֹת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מִי מִנְחוֹתֶינָה לִנִּי:  
נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבָב יִנְחֵנִי בַּמַּעְגָּלִי צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:  
גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי  
שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעֶנְתְּךָ הִפְּהִינֵחַמְנִי:  
תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שִׁלְחֹן נֶגֶד צָרָתִי דִּשְׁנֹת בִּשְׁמֹן רֹאשִׁי כוֹסֵירוּנָה:  
אֵךְ טוֹב וַחֲסֵד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי וּשְׁבַתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me besides peaceful streams.  
He restores my soul; He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for  
You are with me; Your rod and your staff comfort me.  
You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil, and my cup is overflowing.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.  
(Psalm 23 1-6)*

As with most of our patriarchs, God tested Moses to see if he was fit for the task. It comes as no surprise that the test was conducted just as Moses was tending to his father-in-law's flock of sheep. The midrash shows a compassionate and concerned

<sup>1</sup> Blaine McCormick and David Davenport, *Shepherd Leadership: Wisdom for Leaders from Psalm 23* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 2.

shepherd, a shepherd who saw the importance of every sheep he tended, from the alpha sheep to the frailest lamb as portrayed in the midrash cited above. God, watching this scene, said, "A person who shows compassion to a helpless little lamb will surely show compassion upon an entire nation." Moses showed great compassion for this simple little creature. How much more so would he show to one of his fellow Israelites? To the entire Israelite nation?!

Here we see our first prerequisite for leadership: Compassion. A leader must be compassionate about what s/he is doing and who s/he is leading. A leader who is cold and detached from his/her community will be unable to create a sense of *kedusha* and purpose. And that compassion manifests itself in two ways: 1) concern for the welfare of one's community; and 2) compassion for each individual. Moses saw the lamb in distress and immediately responded to its needs.



### **Shemot Rabbah 2:3**

Another interpretation of NOW MOSES WAS KEEPING THE FLOCK: It says: [B]efore God confers greatness on a man, He first tests him by a little thing and then promotes him to greatness...He tested David with sheep, which he led through the wilderness, only in order to keep them from robbing [private fields]...Similarly in the case of Moses it says: "And he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness" – in order to keep them from despoiling [the fields of others]. God took him to tend Israel, as it is said: "Thou didst lead Thy people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and of Aaron" (Ps. LXXVII, 21).



### **ANALYSIS**

The Israelites needed to be led like a flock. They were familiar with and accepting of their slave lifestyle and had a slave mentality. Does this mean that they would have followed anyone who came along, or was it Moses, and only Moses, who could have led them out of Egypt? Regardless of the answer, the midrash is suggesting a very simple idea: Moses had great sensitivity towards others. As was suggested in Shemot Rabbah 2:2, Moses showed great concern for all of God's creatures. This was a man, God decides, who was fit to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.



## Midrash Tehillim 103:10

HE MADE KNOWN HIS WAYS UNTO MOSES, HIS DOINGS UNTO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (Ps. 103:7)...NOW MOSES WAS KEEPING THE FLOCK (Ex. 3:1). When Moses said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the universe, *Show me now Thy ways, that I may know thee* (Ex. 33:13)," the Holy One, blessed be He, answered: Seekest thou to know My ways? As thou livest, I shall make them know to thee. Hence *"He made known His ways unto Moses..."*



### ANALYSIS

In order for God to make known God's ways to him, Moses had to act. Moses needed to take the first step before God revealed God's self to him: He [Moses] sought God out, and he was rewarded for it. A logical first step for any religious leader is to take a "step" towards God. Sforno, in his analysis of this verse, agrees with the midrash, taking it even further. *Moses came to Horeb*, Sforno says, for purposes of prayer and reflection. In other words, Moses planned his interaction with God. He ventured out into the wilderness in order to be alone and connect, privately, with God. As we will soon see, that "step" was not only a figurative one, but a physical one as well.

וַיֵּרָא מֵלֶאךָ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֶּה  
וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֶּה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֶּה אֵינּוּ אֹכֵל:

*An angel of Adonai appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed and was amazed. There was a bush engulfed in flames, yet the bush was not consumed.*

## *Exodus 3:2*



## Shemot Rabbah 2:5

AND THE ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED UNTO HIM (III, 2). Why 'unto him'? To teach that others were with him, yet Moses alone saw, as it is written, of Daniel: "And I Daniel alone saw the vision" (Dan. X, 7).



### ANALYSIS

Not everyone can recognize the sacred in the midst the mundane. Moses understood – perhaps unconsciously – that he was seeing something sacred from within the bush. The midrash offers a unique perspective on Moses' first interaction with God. The midrash suggests that Moses was not alone as he ventured out into the wilderness with his father-in-law's flock. A quick look at Ex. 3:1 will show that nowhere does the text indicate that he is alone. So the midrash above is trying to show that Moses was different.

Was he with one other person? Five? A hundred? It does not matter. Seeing the angel from within the bush is meant to show Moses' uniqueness. He looked at things differently. He heard things differently. The midrash is highlighting the fact that Moses' life as a simple shepherd was in the process of changing.



## Shemot Rabbah 2:5 (continued)

IN A FLAME OF FIRE – to inspire him with courage, so that when he came to Sinai and saw the fires, he should not be afraid of them.



### ANALYSIS

The midrash here portrays God showing preemptive compassion. God anticipates that Moses is going to have anxiety about his task, and wants to give him all the tools he will need in order to go before Pharaoh and lead his people. God knows that one of Moses' biggest hurdles will be his lack of courage. The flame coming out of the bush is a metaphor for the flame that will come forth from Moses as he becomes the leader of a nation both in Egypt, at Sinai, and through the desert. More so, it prepares him for the terrifying experience of Sinai.

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Shemot Rabbah 2:5 (continued)

OUT OF THE MIDST OF THE BUSH. A heathen once asked R. Joshua b. Korchah: Why did God choose a thorn-bush from which to speak to Moses? He replied: Were it a carob tree or a sycamore tree, you would have asked the same question; but to dismiss you without any reply is not right, so I will tell you why. To teach you that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a thorn-bush...AND HE LOOKED, AND, BEHOLD, THE BUSH BURNED WITH FIRE...Why did God show Moses such a symbol? ... Because when God spoke to Moses, the latter was unwilling at first to desist from his work, He therefore showed him this thing, so that he might turn his face to see and speak with Him. Hence you find at first: AND THE ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED UNTO HIM; and yet Moses did not go [to see what it was]. As soon as Moses stopped his work and went to see, straightway God called unto him (III, 4).

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### ANALYSIS

Why did God choose a thornbush engulfed in, but not consumed by, flames? Why did God choose a bush through which to be revealed? R. Joshua b. Korchah draws the simple conclusion: Nothing, not even the lowliest of trees, is devoid of God, and anything can be used as a sign of revelation. "So what," one might ask. Perhaps this is just what Moses needed in order to draw his attention away from his task. The *Midrash* explains that Moses was so wrapped up in his task of tending to his father-in-law's flock that he might not have seen God's revelation, unless it was taking place in something as mundane as the thorn bush. Would he have noticed if God had immediately called out to him? Would he have noticed if God had appeared in a cloud of fire? The obvious answer is OF COURSE! Who wouldn't notice a cloud of fire, no matter how involved we were in what we were doing? So the focus on the thornbush does not seem to be the point of this midrash. It must have been something else.

וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת-אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה  
*An angel appeared to Moses from within the burning bush...*  
(Exodus 3:2)

Moses gazed at it, but he did not stop what he was doing. He merely gazed at it. Undoubtedly he was amazed by what he was seeing, but it took something else to draw him in. This suggests that in order for Moses to see the sacred he needed to STOP what

he was doing and pay full attention – give his entire self – to the miracle he was witnessing. Then, and only then, was he able to connect with God.

What if Exodus 3:1 suggests that Moses actually went deep into the wilderness to seek out God? What if Moses could sense that something (a miracle perhaps?) was going to happen, but he just needed to keep his eyes and ears open, IN THAT ORDER. He saw the burning bush, and that starts the process of getting Moses' attention. What Moses *hears* next is the beginning of The Call.



### **Shemot Rabbah 45:5**

AND HE SAID: SHOW ME, I PRAY THEE, THY GLORY (Ex. 33:18)...R. Judah b. Nehemiah said: Moses, being a novice in prophecy, God said: 'If I reveal Myself unto him with a loud voice, I will frighten him, and if in a low voice, he will think lightly of the prophecy.' So what did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He revealed Himself unto him in the voice of his father...Ultimately, Moses did want to see, as it says here, SHOW ME, I PRAY THEE, THY GLORY...Nevertheless, three times did [God] reveal unto him [His glory] for on account of three things did Moses merit three things. As a reward for, 'And Moses hid his face,' does it say, "And the Lord said unto Moses" (ib. XXXIII, 17). As a reward for, "For he was afraid" (ib. III, 6), does it say 'And they were afraid of approaching him'; and as a reward for [fearing] to look upon God (ib.), we read, "And the similitude of the Lord doth he behold" (Num. XII, 8). R. Hoshayah Rabba said: Moses showed great respect in hiding his face, but Nadav and Abihu uncovered their heads and allowed their eyes to feed on the Shechinah.



### **ANALYSIS**

Again, why a thornbush? R. Judah b. Nehemiah points to the fact that Moses was still a novice in prophesy, so God needed to ease him into revelation. A large, booming call (a cloud of fire, etc.) might have scared Moses off. A quiet voice from the distance may have gone unheard. But a thornbush that was consumed by fire was just the perfect form of revelation to peek Moses' interest.

If we agree with Bereshit Rabbah 30:8, Moses was always meant to be the leader of the Israelites but he was not yet in practice. He had the potential from the beginning, but it would be developed slowly over time.

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Esther Rabbah 7:9

AND WHEN HAMAN SAW THAT MORDECAI BOWED NOT DOWN, NOR PROSTRATED HIMSELF BEFORE HIM (Est. 3:5)...[T]he sight of the righteous gives them enlightenment, because it raises them to the loftiest height, as it says, "And he [Abraham] lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood over against him" (Gen. XVIII, 2); And he looked, and behold a ram (ib. XXII, 13); "And he [Jacob] looked, and behold a well in the field" (ib. XXIX, 2); "And he [Moses] looked, and, behold, the bush," (EX. III, 2)...Therefore they rejoice in the sight of their eyes, as it says, "The upright see, and are glad" (Ps. CVII, 42).

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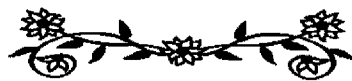
### **ANALYSIS**

There is an idea in our tradition that is hinted at in this midrash: Nothing happens in Torah until it is ready to happen. If we look at the texts that are offered, we can see that concept taking shape. Abraham was not told to leave his father's home to travel to a distant land until he was ready. Nor was he tested with the binding of his son, Isaac, until he was ready. Jacob did not wrestle with the angel until he was ready to become Israel. Joseph was not given the opportunity to interpret Pharaoh's dreams until he was ready to enter into royalty. Likewise, Moses did not receive The Call until he was ready to hear and see revelation. The midrash teaches that "...the sight of the righteous gives them enlightenment, because it raises them to the loftiest height..." Moses lifted his eyes and understood he was seeing a miracle. He was ready to see God in the thornbush, to internalize the meaning of the sight, the moment.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה  
אֲסֶרֶה־נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמֵּרְאָה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה  
מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה:

*Moses said, "I must turn aside and see this amazing sight. Why doesn't the bush burn up?"*

*Exodus 3:3*



## Shemot Rabbah 2:6

AND MOSES SAID: I WILL TURN ASIDE NOW, AND SEE (III, 3). R. Johanan said, Moses took five steps...R. Simeon b. Lakish said: He simply turned his face to see, as it is said: "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see." When God saw this, He said: This man is worthy to tend Israel. R. Isaac said: What is the meaning of: HE TURNED A SIDE TO SEE? God said: This man is downcast and troubled at seeing Israel's affliction in Egypt, he is, accordingly, worthy of being their shepherd.'



### ANALYSIS

What did Moses do upon seeing the thornbush consumed in flames? R. Johanan explains Moses' actions very specifically: he took five steps. R. Simeon b. Lakish is more general: he simply turned his face to get a closer look. Does it matter? Actually, it does. If Moses had, as R. Johanan suggests, taken a few steps to get a closer look, he would have been distracted from his current duties, that of tending to Jethro's flock. R. Simeon picks up on that and explains that Moses did not drop what he was doing but, instead, merely turned in the direction of the thornbush. This indicates two ideas: 1) All it takes to see God is the simple little movement of one's eyes. Seeing God's presence does not take very much at all! And 2) Moses' dedication and devotion to something as simple as tending to a flock of sheep shows his worthiness for the job of shepherd of a different flock. As the midrash explains: "This man is worthy to tend Israel."

But R. Lakish's interpretation highlights something else as well. Sometimes all it takes is a simple turn of the head – a small gesture – to see God. Shemot Rabbah 2:5 showed that God can appear even in the lowliest of things, the thornbush. Likewise, even our most unintentional actions or movements can cause one to see God. Moses' simple glance, conscious or not, was his physical action to declare that he was ready to see—and interact—with the sacred.

Moses turns aside and sees. The text uses two distinct and different verbs to indicate Moses' action in seeing the burning bush. First, he turns aside. Is it a casual glance to suggest simple curiosity in seeing something he has never seen before? And then, when he does turn to the bush, he now sees something that he cannot explain. Or is it something else? Perhaps the סָר does not indicate him turning towards the bush, but rather his turning away from the mundane to see the sacred.<sup>2</sup> This begs the repetition

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<sup>2</sup> Rashi and Ibn Ezra agree in their interpretations of Exodus 3:3 that Moses' turning aside was not something casual. אָסַר does not mean to simply turn. It is something much more profound than a physical movement. It means to leave one's place and go in a new direction.

of an earlier question: Did Moses go deep into the wilderness simply to tend to Jethro's flock, or was there another reason (conscious or not)? Perhaps a part of Moses knew that finding an isolated place, where he could be alone with his thoughts by ending up at Mount Horeb (certainly no coincidence) would be the perfect place for God to be revealed. In other words, perhaps Moses was seeking out God all along. And he knew that there needed to be movement, both emotional and physical, from mundane space to sacred space. So what is required to see the sacred? Does it require an actual movement (physical or otherwise)? We see in this verse that Moses is beginning to turn away from his ordinary life as a shepherd of sheep to the soon-to-be life as a shepherd of an entire nation. And because he has turned, he now has the ability to see—understand—what is in front of him.



### Vayikra Rabbah 11:5

"With the merciful Thou dost show Thyself merciful, with the upright Thou dost show Thyself upright, with the pure Thou dost show Thyself pure, and with the crooked Thou dost show Thyself subtle" (Ps. XVIII, 26). R. Nehemiah expounded the verse as referring to Moses. When he approached God with special courtesy, the Holy One, blessed be He, treated him with special courtesy; when he came to Him with frankness, the Holy One, blessed be He, answered him with frankness; when he approached Him with lack of directness, the Holy One, blessed be He, countered him with lack of directness; when he sought a clear statement regarding his affairs, the Holy One, blessed be He, made clear his affairs for him<sup>3</sup>...On what occasion did he approach Him with frankness? When he said, Why is not the bush burnt away? (ib. III, 3). He answered him: 'Because My glory is present therein.'



### ANALYSIS

Moses, a novice leader, was needy in many ways and God responded to those different needs. In our verse, Exodus 3:3, Moses saw that the thornbush was engulfed in flames, but it was not being consumed. This immediately seemed extraordinary to Moses, and he wanted to know why. Moses took the first step in seeking out God: He asked "Why?"

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This reading is a deeply spiritual one. Moses is at once turning away from his old life as a shepherd of sheep and turning towards his new one as a shepherd of a nation.

<sup>3</sup> Moses' exceeding delicacy and reverence in his approach to God was rewarded by God granting more than Moses had requested: God would make all of God's goodness pass before him.

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת  
וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֹּאמֶר  
מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

*When Adonai saw that he had gone over to look [at the bush], God called to him out of the bush and said,  
"Moses! Moses!" He replied, "Here I am."*

## *Exodus 3:4*



## Shemot Rabbah 1:27

AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THOSE DAYS, WHEN MOSES WAS GROWN UP (II, 11). AND HE LOOKED ON THEIR BURDENS (ib. 11). What is the meaning of AND HE LOOKED? He looked upon their burdens and wept, saying: 'Woe is me for you; would that I could die for you.' There is no labor more strenuous than that of handling clay, and he used to shoulder the burdens and help each one. R. Eleazar, son of R. Jose the Galilean, said: He saw great burdens put upon small people and light burdens upon big people, and a man's burden upon a woman and a woman's burden upon a man, and the burden which an old man could carry on a youth, and of a youth on an old man. So he left his suite and rearranged their burdens, pretending all the time to be helping Pharaoh. God then said to him: 'Thou hast put aside thy work and hast gone to share the sorrow of Israel, behaving to them like a brother; well, I will also leave those on high and below and only speak with thee.' Hence it is written: "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see" (ib. III, 4); because God saw that Moses turned aside from his duties to look upon their burdens, He called unto him out of the midst of the bush.



### ANALYSIS

It is necessary to look at the events in Moses' life that brought him to this moment of the Divine Call. The midrash shows that from the moment he was grown, Moses was a compassionate individual who felt obligated to look at, share in and alleviate the oppression of his brethren. Moses was living the life of a prince, but he took those luxuries and put his life of security on the line. As the midrash suggests, he wanted to lighten the burdens of the Israelites, even going so far as to fool Pharaoh into thinking that what Moses was doing was helping him when, in fact, he was helping his fellow Israelites.

A brief look at the previous chapter in Exodus will help refine the meaning of this midrash.

- **2:10** – *When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."*
  - Moses is thrust into a position of royalty at a very young age but is aware that he is an Israelite living among Egyptians. As he grows up and begins to venture beyond the walls of Pharaoh's place, he begins to discover that his life is quite different than his own people, the Israelite slaves.
- **2:11-12** – *He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. After looking around to make sure no one was watching, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.*

- This is the first example of Moses standing up for his people without thought of what could happen to him. Moses saw one of his brethren in need of help, and he put his own welfare aside in order to save the Israelite. Moses' concern for his own people is beginning to develop.
- **2:13-14** – After seeing two Israelites fighting with each other, Moses intervenes to try and resolve the dispute between them, again, reflecting his leadership qualities. He cares so deeply for his fellow Israelites that he even intercedes to try to end a dispute between them.
- **2:16-17** – *They came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. Some shepherds came and tried to drive them away, but Moses saved them and watered their flock.*
  - Now we are beginning to see a pattern: For the third time, Moses is presented with an opportunity to intercede and help, and for the third time, he does not let the opportunity go by. What is interesting about v.17 is that the text does not say, "But Moses saved them, and then they (the daughters) continued to water their flock." The text clearly shows that after rescuing the daughters he took over the task of watering the flock. Moses' role as shepherd begins to take shape.

All of these experiences set the stage for Moses to become Israel's greatest leader. Moses is empathetic and looks upon the trials and tribulations of his brethren with great pain, as the *midrash* says, "He looked upon their burdens and wept."



### Bereshit Rabbah 55:6

"THAT GOD DID PROVE (NISSAH) ABRAHAM." R. Akiba said: He tested him unequivocally, that people might not say that He confused and perplexed him so that he did not know what to do. AND SAID UNTO HIM: ABRAHAM; AND HE SAID: HERE AM I (ib.). R. Joshua said: On two occasions Moses compared himself to Abraham, and God answered him, "Glorify not thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men" (Prov. XXV, 6). Now Abraham said, HERE AM I—ready for priesthood, ready for kingship, and he attained priesthood and kingship...Moses, too, said, Here am I (Ex. III, 4)—ready for priesthood, ready for kingship—but God answered, "Draw not nigh—*halom* (ib. 5); now 'nigh' refers to priesthood, as in, "And the common man that draweth nigh shall be put to death" (Num. I, 51), while '*halom*' connotes kingship, as in, That Thou hast brought me thus far-*halom* (II Sam. VII, 18).



## ANALYSIS

The verses leading up to Moses' **הִנְנִי** call seem to indicate that Moses was seeking something. He has brought his father-in-law's flock deep into the wilderness, suggesting that he wanted to be alone. He knew that the mountain he had traveled to was typically known as **הַר הָאֱלֹהִים**, the Mountain of God, suggesting that what he was looking for was to experience God, and he was ready for a greater role from the beginning. He recognizes that he is seeing something amazing in the burning thornbush and wants to see/know more, suggesting that he was turning his attention away from the mundane and towards the sacred. Now, in this verse, God calls out to Moses, and Moses immediately responds with **הִנְנִי**, suggesting that he was prepared and may have even been anticipating the Divine Call. "'Here I am' is more than just a response of 'present and accounted for.' It suggests, 'I'm ready to undertake whatever you ask of me.'"<sup>4</sup> Or was he? And was God ready for such an immediate response?

What must have Moses heard? What did God's voice sound like? And not only did he hear his name being called once, but he is called twice! Why? Perhaps the lack of punctuation can give us a clue. What if instead of "Moses, Moses!" the text read, "Moses (somewhat quietly) .... PAUSE ... Moses (much louder)!" Perhaps Moses didn't hear his name the first time. Or perhaps he did hear it and was not quite sure how to respond. All of Moses' insecurities and doubts become clear in this initial call. The second, much louder call compelled him to respond. And how does Moses respond? With a simple **הִנְנִי**. The text shows that Moses was amazed by the burning bush and had to see more, but when confronted with the Divine Call, all he can muster up is a humble **הִנְנִי**.

But perhaps that's just the point. At the burning bush Moses is not sure what he is seeing. He knows it is amazing and wants to see more. Once God calls, Moses' overwhelming humility becomes evident, and he does not want to do anything that would suggest otherwise. And perhaps this is what the midrash is suggesting above. Perhaps God sensed that Moses was not quite ready mentally or emotionally. Perhaps God sensed that Moses' confidence was not at the point where he was ready to take on the role of "priesthood" or "kingship" which is what leads the reader to the following verse.



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<sup>4</sup> Levi Meier, *Moses: The Prince, the Prophet: His Life, Legend and Message for Our Lives* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 32.

## Shemot Rabbah 2:6

AND HE SAID: MOSES, MOSES. You will find that when the text writes "Abraham, Abraham" (Gen. XXII, 11), there is a division between the two names; "Jacob, Jacob" (ib. XLVI, 2), there is a division; "Samuel, Samuel" (I Sam. III, 10), there is a division; but in the case of Moses, there is no division. Why is this? It is like the case of a man who was carrying a heavy burden and called out: 'Here, So-and-so, So-and-so,' come nigh and take off this load from me?'



### ANALYSIS

Why the double-call? Where else have we seen such a call, and can we see any similarities and/or differences between those calls and this one?

- וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מֵלֶאֱדָן יְהוָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבְרָהָם אֲבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי:  
(Genesis 22:11)  
This call comes just before Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, Isaac, showing his complete devotion to God. God tested Abraham's faith, and Abraham proved his worth.
- וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִרְאֵת הַלֵּילָה וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי:  
(Genesis 46:2)  
This call assures Jacob that he will be able to safely travel down to Egypt and die peacefully with his son, Joseph, by his side.
- וַיָּבֹא יְהוָה וַיִּתְּצֵב וַיִּקְרָא כָּפֹעַם־בְּפֹעַם שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי:  
(I Samuel 3:10)  
This first call to Samuel assures him that God will be with him and give him great insight in his future decision-making. Here, Samuel has no idea who is calling!

Any similarities? Any differences? It is certainly clear that the double-call suggests that something important is about to happen to the person who is receiving the call. But the single biggest difference can be seen if we look at the details of the vocalized texts. All three double-calls above contain a *meteg* between the two names. In Exodus 3:4 there is none:

וַיֹּרָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לְרֹאשׁוֹ וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ  
הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי:

Why? The *midrash* suggests that the difference is with God and not the recipient of the double-call. In each example above, God is giving something to the recipient. Abraham

is receiving the Covenant. Jacob is receiving a pledge of God's safety and a peaceful death. Samuel is receiving God's wisdom. In the case of Moses' double-call, God NEEDS Moses. The burden of seeing the suffering of the Israelites is too great for God to bear alone, so God needs Moses to bear some of that burden. God saw Moses' abilities, his compassion and his devotion to the Israelites, so God called out "משה משה" trying to relay a sense of desperation and anxiety. To which Moses immediately replied, "הנני." Moses wants to receive The Call! He understands that the Israelites are suffering at the hands of Pharaoh. He has already seen it!



### **Bamidbar Rabbah 14:2**

THEN HE HEARD THE VOICE SPEAKING UNTO HIM...How do we know that he answered 'Here am I' to every call? Because Scripture states, 'And said: Moses, Moses. And he said: Here am I.' The reading should really not have been 'And he said' but 'And he answered: Here am I'. What then is the purport of the expression 'And he said'? It teaches that he replied 'Here am I' to every call...Another interpretation of the expression 'Moses, Moses'. It is as if to say that he was the same Moses before He had spoken with him and the same after He had spoken.



### **ANALYSIS**

Another interpretation of משה משה addresses Moses' character. The midrash above emphasizes an idea that was brought up in a previous midrash. Bereshit Rabbah 30:8 introduced the idea that Moses was born to be the redeemer of Israel. It was something he grew into, and it was something he learned "on the job." It was not a question of 'if' Moses would receive The Call from God, but 'when'. He had the potential for leadership. This midrash echoes that theme. משה משה suggests that Moses was the same person before and after The Call. His strengths and his weaknesses, his successes and his failures all allowed him to be the same person in any situation, whether it was performing the mundane task of leading his father-in-law's flock or the sacred task of hearing and responding to the Divine Call.

Another idea offered in this midrash comments on Moses' "fitness" for The Call. The midrash indicates that Moses is ever ready to act. He may have doubts, and he may not feel that he is the right person to receive The Call, but whenever he hears God's call Moses is prepared with the answer הנני.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ  
אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב  
וַיִּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יֵרָא מִהַבֵּית אֱלֹהִים:

*And He said, "I am the God of your father, the God of  
Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."*

*And Moses hid his face,  
because he was afraid to look at God.*

*Exodus 3:6*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:1

AND MOSES HID HIS FACE...One said: Moses did not do well in hiding his face, for had he not done so, God would have revealed to him what is above and what is below, what has happened and what will happen. So when Moses later wished to behold [God], as it is said: "Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory" (Ex. XXXIII, 18), God replied: 'I came to show thee, but thou didst hide thy face, now I tell thee that man shall not see Me and live' (ib. 20), for when I wished to do so, thou didst not wish to see. R. Joshua of Siknin in the name of R. Levi said that in spite of this, God did show him. As a reward for AND MOSES HID HIS FACE, "The Lord spoke unto Moses face to face" (ib. 11); as a reward for HE WAS AFRAID, we read: "And they were afraid to come nigh him" (ib. XXXIV, 30), and because he feared TO LOOK, we read: "And the similitude of the Lord doth he look upon" (Num. XII, 8)...But Nadav and Abihu uncovered their heads and fed their eyes on the luster of the Shechinah, as it is said: "And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand; and they beheld God, and did eat and drink" (ib. XXIV, 11). Did they not receive [the death penalty] for what they had done?



### ANALYSIS

Did Moses act properly when he hid his face from God? Exodus Rabbah 3:1 offers contradictory answers. R. Joshua of Siknin explains that Moses acted improperly in hiding his face. Had he not hid his face, God would have revealed more to him. Moses' fear prevented him from a very important ingredient when it comes to leadership: KNOWLEDGE. And knowledge is power. Perhaps R. Joshua believes that if Moses had not hid his face, therefore receiving the knowledge of "what has happened and what will happen," he would have felt more confident accepting the call of going before Pharaoh and being the redeemer of Israel. He would have been God-like, but he is human.

Later in the midrash there is an opposing idea to R. Joshua's approach. The idea offered here suggests that Moses' hiding of his face and showing his fear of God was a good quality for the soon-to-be leader. The proof-text for this idea is Moses' nephews, Nadav and Abihu. They were over-zealous in their desire to become closer to God, and they did not show any fear when making their offer to God:

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִזֶּחֶתוֹ  
וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קֹטֶרֶת

וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:  
וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

*Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered alien fire before the LORD, contrary to his command.*

*And fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.*

*(Leviticus 10:1-2)*

It was Moses' fear that allowed him to begin speaking directly with God. God's revelation and ensuing charge came directly out of Moses' fear and was a response to his humanness!



### Vayikra Rabbah 1:5

You find that when the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to Moses from the midst of the thorn-bush, the latter hid his face from Him, as it is said, "And Moses hid his face," (Ex. III, 6). Because of this, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh" (ib. III, 10). You have proof that this is so, for out of them all the divine word called none but Moses, [as it is written], AND THE LORD CALLED UNTO MOSES.



### ANALYSIS

Moses' humility is what causes God's call and revelation. R. Akiva teaches us, in Leviticus Rabbah 1:5, that a rabbi's default action should be to act with too much humility rather than too little. Hillel echoes this sentiment by saying, "My self-abasement is my exaltation, and my self-exaltation is my abasement." Are R. Akiva and Hillel suggesting that Moses was correct in hiding his face upon hearing God reveal God's self to him?

The question that needs to be asked is, "What was Moses' fear (humility) due to?" Was he afraid that he was about to be harmed? The fact that he initially responded דִּנְנִי to God's call would suggest that he was not. Perhaps he thought he had done something wrong and was about to be punished. This, too, would not make sense, as he took his job of shepherd quite seriously. So what then?

וַיִּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מִהַבֵּית אֱלֹהִים:

Moses hid his face, because he felt that he was undeserving to gaze upon God. This is our textual indication that Moses felt completely humbled before God. Who was he to see God this close? Because Moses was afraid God knew that he was ready to receive the call and face Pharaoh.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים  
מִי אֲנִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה  
וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם:

*But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to  
Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

*Exodus 3:11*



Before we look at Exodus 3:11 we must first look at God's charge to Moses in 3:10. The verse can be broken down into two distinct parts.

- 1) ועתה לך ואשלחך אל־פרעה
- 2) והוצא את־עמי בני־ישראל ממצרים:

Together, they can be read as cause and effect:

*Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh, and you will bring My people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.*

The second clause (the effect) is dependent upon the first clause (the cause). If, and only if, Moses goes before Pharaoh, he will be able to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

But the phrase can also be read as two distinct and independent clauses. They can be read as two separate charges by God. This idea is elaborated upon by many of our commentators. Rashi, Rashbam Nachmanides, and Ibn Ezra look at the first clause of 3:11 as being a simple question of nobility:

- How am I important enough to speak with kings? (Rashi)
- Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, even to bring him an offering or a gift? Am I worthy of entering the kings' court, a foreigner like me? (Rashbam)
- I am the lowest of men, a shepherd, and he is a great king. (Nachmanides)
- I am a shepherd and he is a great king. (Ibn Ezra)

These readings all seem to suggest what Moses was thinking: "I am not worthy to appear before Pharaoh. I am a lowly shepherd, and he is a ruler of an entire nation." But this seems an odd reading considering Moses' upbringing. Abarbanel, in his questions, picks up on that oddity. "Why did Moses," he asks, "a bold, well-educated man, from a prominent tribe and brought up in the palace of the Pharaoh, try to get out of the mission for which God has chosen him for." Not too long ago, Moses was a welcomed member of Pharaoh's court. Now, Moses feels himself as an outsider, and this contributes to his fears and doubts.

The second clause is concerned more with the Israelites themselves. The commentators pick up on that, but they disagree in their interpretations.

- Even if I were important enough, do the Israelites really deserve having such a miracle done for them? (Rashi)
- What could I say to Pharaoh that he would accept? Is Pharaoh foolish enough to listen to me and send a huge people, who are his slaves, away free from his land? (Rashbam)
- Who am I to free such a great people? (Ibn Ezra)

Rashi's reading questions the Israelites' worth. Rashbam's interpretation addresses the practical side of Pharaoh and his presumed refusal to give up his workforce. But Ibn Ezra's reading does, in fact, speak to Moses' humility. Ibn Ezra reads 3:11 in a way that portrays Moses as understanding the unique character of his fellow Israelites. He (Moses) understands that they are a special people with a special covenant. How could he possibly be worthy enough to be their redeemer?



### Shemot Rabbah 3:4

AND MOSES SAID UNTO GOD: WHO AM I? R. Nehorai gives another interpretation. WHO AM I? Moses said to God: 'Thou dost tell me to go and bring out Israel. Where can I give them shelter in summer from the heat and in winter from the cold? Where shall I obtain a sufficiency of food and drink? How many midwives have they; how many pregnant women, how many babes! What food hast Thou prepared for their midwives? What kind of delicacies hast Thou prepared for those pregnant? How many parched grains and nuts hast Thou prepared for the little ones? 'Where is all this stated? In the Song of Songs, where it says: 'Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth' (I, 7). God said to him: 'From the cake which will go forth with them from Egypt' and which will be enough to satisfy them for thirty days, you will know how I will lead them!



### ANALYSIS

#### מִי אֲנִי

This phrase seems to be integral to Moses' evolution from a shepherd of sheep to a shepherd of a nation. What is the point of this question? Is it a challenge to God's knowledge and authority? "You chose the wrong leader. You are looking for someone who is confident, a proven leader. That's not me." Is it an outright refusal? Is it an admission of doubt and anxiety?

R. Nehorai, in Exodus Rabbah 3:4, suggests that it was not Moses' humility at all that prompted his asking God, מִי אֲנִי. Rather, it was a challenge back to God stating the obvious: "How could I possibly manage such a task?" Although Moses deems himself unworthy for such a task, it is the details of the task that concern him. How could he provide shelter from the heat or cold? How would he manage to provide enough food and water for an entire nation? What about the pregnant women? Who will take care

of all the children? These details, according to R. Nehorai, seem to be at the heart of

Moses' anxiety. "God is in the details," said the famous German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, but Moses doesn't see that. The details of such a charge are overwhelming and impossible to overcome.



### Shemot Rabbah 3:4 (continued)

Another explanation of WHO AM I? He said: 'Lord of the Universe! How can I enter a place of robbers and murderers?' This is what he meant by: WHO AM I, THAT I SHOULD GO UNTO PHARAOH, etc. AND SHALL I BRING FORTH THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL? 'What virtue is theirs to enable me to deliver them? God replied: CERTAINLY, I WILL BE WITH THEE' (III, 12), an expression used only to one who is afraid. (Bereshit Rabbah 76:6 on Gen. 32:8) AND THIS SHALL BE THE TOKEN UNTO THEM, THAT I HAVE SENT THEE-by this wilt thou be known as being My messenger, that I will be with thee and will do all thy wishes. WHEN THOU HAST BROUGHT FORTH THE PEOPLE OUT OF EGYPT, YE SHALL SERVE GOD UPON THIS MOUNTAIN. When you ask Me, by what merit shall I bring them out of Egypt? Know it is for the sake of the Torah which they will receive on this mountain from thy hands that they will go forth from here.'



### ANALYSIS

The second part of the verse is entirely different in nature than the first part. Moses seems to be questioning the virtue of the Israelites, which is Rashi's reading of this question. "Do they even deserve to be redeemed?" he asks. Incredulous as it sounds, perhaps Moses is touching upon another important characteristic of any leader: common sense. Moses wants to make sure that he is not embarking on a fool-hearty mission. Is it worth it? This seems like a perfectly valid question in the face of a very difficult task.

However, Moses does not yet understand a very simple point: The relationship that God has with Israel is a sacred one.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רָא אֲנִי רָאִיתִי אֶת־עֲנֵי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם  
וְאֶת־צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נְגִשָּׁיו כִּי יִדְעָתִי אֶת־מַכָּאֲבֵיָו׃

*Adonai continued saying, "I have surely seen the misery (affliction) of My people in Egypt and have heard their outcry because of their slave drivers, and I know their sufferings (pains). (Exodus 3:7)*

The Israelites are God's people. The sacred covenant that was made with Abraham seems to have been forgotten by Moses.

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ  
וְזֶה־לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנִכִּי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ  
בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם  
תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה:

*And God said, "I will surely be with you, and this will serve  
as proof that I have sent you. When you have brought the  
people out of Egypt,  
you will worship God on this mountain."*

*Exodus 3:12*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:4

THEN JACOB WAS GREATLY AFRAID AND WAS DISTRESSED.

JACOB WAS GREATLY AFRAID! From this, however, we learn that the righteous person has no assurance in this world...R. Huna commented further in R. Aha's name: And He said: 'Certainly I will be with thee' (Ex. III, 12), and no evil will harm thee.



### ANALYSIS

The midrash seems to suggest that Moses' initial fear is warranted: "The righteous person has no assurance in this world." But this is not how God wants Moses to feel. In fact, God responds to Moses in such a way in order to give him a sense of strength: "*I will be with you.*" It is interesting to note that the **אֶדְוָיָה** is a foreshadowing of Moses' next request asking for God's name in v.14. Although God's words are meant to ease Moses' concerns, they are unclear. "*This will be a sign for you...*" is a bit vague. Is God's presence the sign or is God's promise that Moses and the Israelites will make their way to *Horeb* in order to worship *Adonai*, the sign? The text is unclear. Perhaps it does not matter. What is important is God's words. God assures Moses that all will be right, an assurance that, nevertheless, does not ease his doubt.<sup>5</sup>

What is Moses looking for? He heads out into the wilderness in search of something. A few verses earlier he sees the thornbush on fire, but it was not being consumed. This miracle amazed him, and he wanted to see more. As previous midrashim point out, these actions suggest that Moses, who was always destined, in theory, to be the redeemer of Israel, is ready to fulfill that destiny. Now that God has given him his initial assignment – to go before Pharaoh and take the Children of Israel out of Egypt – and has told him that there is no need to worry as God will be with him, Moses is more concerned than ever. Perhaps Moses needed to not only see miracles but feel that he had the power to perform them as well. But we will soon see that this, too, does not assuage his doubts.

It is interesting to note that the commentators pick up on something to which the midrash above seems to be alluding. At no point is Moses told that this task is his and his alone. Rashi's reading of 3:12 adds an even stronger element. Rashi writes, "But it is not your assignment, it is Mine as well." Moses feels, at this point, that the task given

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (the Berdichever), in his *Kedushat Levi*, reads Moses' question in Ex. 3:11 as the sign itself. God is, in effect, saying that the question is the answer! "Because you, Moses, are humble enough to ask and truly believe, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?' means that you are precisely the right one for the task."

him is too heavy a burden to carry, and God assures him that the task is not meant for him alone. The redemption from Egypt is God's task, and Moses is simply God's intermediary. This begs the question, Why did Moses assume that the task of bringing the Israelites out of Egypt was his alone? Perhaps Moses, in a rare display of confidence, wanted to remind God of God's responsibility to the Israelites. Perhaps **מִי אֲנִי** is a challenge back to God that Moses would never have been meant to redeem the Israelites on his own.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים  
הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָא אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם  
וְאָמְרוּ-לִי מַה-שְּׁמוֹ מָה אֶמַּר אֲלֵהֶם:

*But Moses continued to protest saying, "If I go to the  
Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors  
has sent me to you,' they will not believe me.  
They will ask, 'What is this god's name?'  
Then what should I tell them?"*

## *Exodus 3:13*



### Shemot Rabbah 3:5

AND MOSES SAID UNTO GOD: BEHOLD WHEN I (*ANOKI*) COME (III, 13). R. Simon of Lud said in the name of R. Simon, who said in the name of R. Levi: Moses said: 'I am destined to become the intermediary between Thee and them when Thou wilt give them the Torah and declare "I am (*anoki*) the Lord, thy God".' THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS HATH SENT ME UNTO YOU. Moses thereupon desired to be enlightened with regard to his future course, being afraid lest they should ask him: What is His name? What shall he then answer them? Moses then sought of God to divulge to him His Great Name.



#### ANALYSIS

Moses wants assurances about his journey. He wants to know that it will be a success, and he wants to know the fate of his people. He wants God to spell it out! Moses cares so deeply for his people that he wants to know that all of his efforts will not be in vain. We also see a man who has more doubts given his experiences in Egypt.

Moses is the level-headed optimist. As the examples in Exodus 2 show, he is extremely devoted to his people and cares deeply for them. He is also aware of their suffering and wants to do everything in his power to end their suffering. But before he takes on this task, he wants to be sure that the Israelites will, in fact, be brought safely out of Egypt. This midrash shows his great concern for his "flock."



### Shemot Rabbah 4:1

AND MOSES WENT AND RETURNED TO JETHER [JETHRO] HIS FATHER-IN-LAW (IV, 18)...Thus it is written, "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart," (Ps. XXIV, 4; Who can ascend into the mountain of the Lord? He who has within him all those virtues. All these were found in Moses...'And pure (*bar*) of heart'...Moses who did not begin his divine mission before he had thoroughly investigated the matter (*nithbarer*), because it says: And they shall say to me: What is His name? (Ex. III, 13).



## ANALYSIS

What is the basis of the question regarding God's name? This sounds much more like a challenge than an objection. Perhaps the question is not meant for the Israelites at all but rather, for Moses himself. Moses is putting the question in the mouths of the Israelites, but it may very well be a question that he wants answered and is simply using the Israelites as an excuse to find out God's name. Where else do we find examples of asking for God's name? Jacob asks the name of his wrestling partner in Gen. 32:30? **מה שמו** indicates a desire for a better understanding of God. It is simple due-diligence. Moses wants more information in order to make an informed decision.

This question also begs another question: Has Moses, or any Israelite for that matter, not heard God's name before this point? Was the God of the Israelites known as **אלהים**? Or perhaps God's name was **אל שדי**. Both of these names are used in the biblical texts, but they are never names that one uses to address God. So what name did any Israelite use when calling out to God? It seems inconceivable that the Israelites would call out to a nameless God (see Exodus 2:23).

**מה שמו** raises additional questions because of what we learn in later verses. If we take this objection at its face – that Moses was concerned that the Israelites would challenge whether or not he actually received the Call from God – then we will, undoubtedly, be troubled with what follows only a chapter later.

וַיֵּאֱמָן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כִּי־פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וְכִי רָאָה אֶת־עֲנָנִים וַיִּקְרֹוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ:

*and the people were convinced. When they heard that the LORD  
had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.  
(Exodus 4:31)*

In Exodus 4:29-31 the Israelites believe Aaron and Moses without question. "[T]he Israelites were not as doubting or inquisitive as Moses had portrayed them. They believed the good news immediately and listened willingly as Moses spoke to them of God's imminent help."<sup>6</sup> This supports the argument that Moses himself placed the question in the Israelites' mouths, because he was afraid to show his own doubt before God.

There are many theories as to the purpose of the question **מה שמו**, but one thing is clear: Moses is anxious about the task at hand, and the adage "Knowledge is power" seems to be behind this second objection. In this case, a more intimate knowledge of

<sup>6</sup> Benno Jacob, *Exodus: The Second Book of the Bible*, trans. Walter Jacob (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1992), 69.

God is the purpose of this question. Moses NEEDS to know God's fundamental nature—God's essence!—in order to feel that he has the authority to act on God's behalf, to act as God's partner. Knowing God's essence will, no doubt, give Moses a sense of purpose and a sense of authenticity that he has not yet felt.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה  
וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
אֲהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

*And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM!  
And this is what you will say to the Israelites:  
'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

## *Exodus 3:14*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:6

AND GOD SAID UNTO MOSES (III, 14)...I AM THAT I AM in virtue of My deeds.' R. Jacob b. Abina in the name of R. Huna of Sepphoris: God said to Moses: 'Tell them that I will be with them in this servitude, and in servitude will they always continue, but I will be with them!' Whereupon Moses said to God: 'Shall I tell them this? Is not sufficient for the hour the evil thereof?' God replied: 'No: THUS SHALT THOU SAY UNTO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: I AM HATH SENT ME UNTO YOU.' To thee only do I reveal this, but not to them.'



### ANALYSIS

**אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה** is one of the most enigmatic phrases in all of Torah. The various translations add to the mystery of this phrase:

- *I AM WHO I AM!* (King James Version, 1769; English Standard Version, 2001)
- *I am the One who always is!* (New Living Translation, 1996)
- *I Shall Be What I Shall Be.* (Rashi, Ramban)
- *I Am.* (Ibn Ezra)

God tried to address Moses' doubt immediately by stressing God's timelessness. "The God of your fathers" only addresses the past. But what about the present and the future? That concern needed to be addressed as well. This phrase, in part, does that.

However we translate this phrase, it is clear that a new God-concept has emerged. At first God wants to assure Moses that the God who is talking to him now is the same God of his father and their Patriarchs:

וַיֹּאמֶר עֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כֹּה־תֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב  
שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם זֶה־שְּׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זְכוֹרִי לְדֹר דָּר:

*And God said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.' This is My name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.*

(Exodus 3:15)

Yet only now does God reveal the significance of God's name. The result of revealing the name **אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה** is twofold: 1) it links the traditions of the past with the realities of the present and future; and 2) it shows "God as Creator of all and controller

of both Nature and History.”<sup>7</sup> “All will be right,” God is saying to Moses.

There is something that is at once comforting and dismissive about God’s words to Moses here. For Moses, the phrase is meant to serve as a comfort, knowing that God will be present now and in the future. At the same time, it is dismissive in that it is meant to move the process along. “HAVE FAITH!” God is saying to Moses. Moses claims that it is the Israelites who will challenge his authority. “Prove that what you are saying is true,” they will demand of him. But one can clearly see that he is projecting his own fears on his people. The *midrash* picks up on that and offers some advice, albeit subtly. In Exodus Rabbah III:6, R. Jacob b. Abina continues the conversation between God and Moses, filling in the gaps by showing what God tells Moses to say to the Israelites. But if we look closely at the text, I wonder if R. Jacob is really highlighting how God wants Moses to feel. These words are meant for Moses and not for the Israelites at all. As I mentioned in my analysis of Shemot Rabbah 4:1, the Israelites showed no signs of doubt and had complete faith in Moses and Aaron (Exodus 4:31). Here’s how Moses most likely heard God’s words:

*‘I will be with YOU in this servitude, and in servitude will YOU always continue,  
but I will be with YOU!’*

Moses needed to know God’s name, as he felt that this would help with his doubt in the charge that he was given in 3:10.

It is interesting to note that God tells Moses to relate this name to the Israelites in its shorter form, ‘I will be.’ Why? Why does God reveal God’s self with one name to Moses and in another name to the Israelites? There is a sense that God is revealing God’s self to Moses with complete detail and richness. Whether or not Moses can comprehend such revelation is another story. Regardless, God is choosing to be fully revealed but only to Moses. We may, again, return to the subject of power and information. Moses must feel comforted in knowing God’s full name. Perhaps this addresses his fear of going before Pharaoh – who is perceived to be a god! – alone and ill-equipped.

However, the Israelites do not need to know all of this information. אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם is sufficient enough for them. Why? Perhaps the age-old adage of ‘too much information can be a bad thing’ rings true here. A few more *midrashim* may shed some light.



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<sup>7</sup> David Daiches, “The Quest for the Historical Moses” (paper presented at the Robert Waley Cohen memorial lecture for The Council of Christians and Jews, London, England, 1974).

## b. Berachot 9b

I AM THAT I AM...The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Go and say to Israel: I was with you in this servitude, and I shall be with you in the servitude of the [other] kingdoms. He said to Him: Lord of the Universe, sufficient is the evil in the time thereof! Thereupon, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Go and tell them: I AM has sent me unto you.



### ANALYSIS

b. Berachot 9b is an extremely powerful proof-text of Moses' deep compassion and emotional dedication to his people. The text indicates that, initially, אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה would be the name revealed to both Moses and the Israelites. This name is meant to imply the timelessness of God and God's presence among the Israelites, past, present and future. "I have been with you throughout these difficult times," says God, "and I will be with you during the difficult times in the future." Moses, who seems to always be thinking on multiple levels, responds immediately to this. "An evil in its own time is enough! Why should You imply to them that there will be future exiles? Is it not enough that they suffer now in Egypt?" God acknowledges this argument and changes the name that Moses will use when coming before the Israelites. God will be referred to as אֱהִיָּה. This name will have the same effect of emphasizing God's timelessness and eternal presence.



### Midrash Tehillim 72:1

R. Jose taught in the name of R. Hanina: When the Holy One, blessed be He, sought to send Moses to Egypt, what did Moses ask? He asked: *Behold, when ... the children of Israel ... shall say to me: What is His name? What shall I say unto them?* (Ex. 3:13). The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: Knowest thou not My name! Come, and I shall tell thee: *I AM that I AM; and He said: Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: I AM hath sent me unto you (ibid. 3:14).* You find I AM written three times, and this means that the Holy One, blessed be He, said: I created My world with compassion, I will guide it with compassion, and I will return to Jerusalem with compassion...



## ANALYSIS

Compassion is the key element here. Moses' primary concern was the well-being of his people.<sup>8</sup> I do not believe that he doubts God's compassion, but it is almost as if he feels he must let God know how much he cares for his people. "God, you have to understand how much my brothers and sisters have suffered. I have to know that that you care for them as much as I do." The midrash explains that אלהים does just that.

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<sup>8</sup> I use the phrase 'his people' knowing full well that he has not officially agreed to accept God's Call, but that is not necessary for the Israelites to be described as 'his people.' Moses cares for them with his entire being and does not want to see their suffering continue for another second. He wants to do anything—EVERYTHING—he can to ease their pain.

וְאֲנִי יֹדַעְתִּי  
כִּי לֹא־יֵתֵן אֶתְכֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהֵלֶךְ  
וְלֹא בִיד חֲזָקָה:

*But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go  
except/even by a mighty hand.*

*Exodus 3:19*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:9

AND I KNOW THAT THE KING OF EGYPT WILL NOT GIVE YOU LEAVE TO GO (III, 19). God foresaw that the wicked Pharaoh would only make the people's burdens heavier from the time Moses would undertake his mission, and in order not to deceive Moses, he told him that Pharaoh would do this and this as soon as he would go on His mission. This was done to prevent Moses reproaching God; yet, despite this, he did utter reproaches against God, whereupon concerning him doth it say: "Surely oppression turneth a wise man into a fool" (Eccl. VII, 7).



### ANALYSIS

Moses' anxiety must have been exacerbated when God told him that Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. Our earlier *midrashim* show that Moses was compassionate, emotional, reluctant, intuitive and concerned. Hearing now that the fruits of his soon-to-be labor would only bring more hardship to his brethren could not have satisfied his desire to feel surer of the task at hand. So why say it at all?

כִּי הָעֶשֶׂק יְהוֹלִיל חֲכָם וַיֵּאֱבֹר אֶת־לֵב מִתְנַה:

*Surely oppression destroys a wise man's reason, And a bribe corrupts the heart.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:7)*

There are multiples levels at play here. By telling Moses that his initial attempts to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites will be futile, God is challenging Moses' faith. Will Moses, knowing the result of his efforts, accept God's task and take up the charge? Or, knowing the results, will he simply say, "What's the point? Find someone else to be your messenger." On a different level, God wants Moses to understand that this is a process and God lays out the fact they will leave Egypt! Although it will seem to Moses that his appearance before Pharaoh was all for naught, God has a plan. If Moses was not told of his initial attempt, he, as Ecclesiastes suggests, would think of himself (and God) as a failure. Once again, the theme of HAVE FAITH is stressed in this verse.

It is difficult to translate Ex. 3:19 correctly. The verse can be translated in various ways, each with completely opposite meanings. In order to translate this verse, the translator must make a choice about the outcome. Here are just a few translations:

- *But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand.* (English Standard Version, 2001)
- *And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand.* (King James Version, 1769)

- *Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might. (JPS Tanakh, 1985)*

And our commentators do not help out much more. Rashi, Nachmanides, Ibn Ezra and Rashbam read the verse as "*EXCEPT by a mighty hand*," whereas Ramban looks at the verse as "*EVEN by a mighty hand*." This is a prime example of where translation can be directly linked to one's perception of Moses' state of mind. The "EXCEPT" translation would allow Moses to feel confident that, no matter what, God needed to be with him, because only God would be able to compel Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. This might lift some of the burden that Moses was beginning to feel. If, however, we agree with Ramban's interpretation, then we can assume that this would only add to Moses' anxiety of going before Pharaoh. "Not even my God will be able to convince Pharaoh to let my people go? How can this possibly end well for us?"

In addition to the problem of translation, God's response to Moses seems to obviate a potential further objection by Moses. Whereas the first section of this response addresses Moses' concerns about the Israelites, this response concerns the potential objection of Moses going before Pharaoh. If we accept the King James (and Ramban's) reading, then we know that Moses' concern about going before Pharaoh is a justified one. If we accept JPS (and Rashi's), then we know that Moses was still not convinced even with God's promise of "influencing" Pharaoh.

Either way, Moses' anxiety will not be dissipated because he does not yet understand that AT NO POINT will he be alone!

וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר  
וְהֵן לֹא־יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי  
כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא־נִרְאָה אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה:

*But Moses responded by saying, "Look! They will not believe me, and they will not do what I tell them. They will say, 'Adonai never appeared to you!'"*

## *Exodus 4:1*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:12

AND MOSES ANSWERED AND SAID: BUT, BEHOLD, THEY WILL NOT BELIEVE ME (IV, 1). Moses then spoke not befittingly; for God had said to him: 'And they shall hearken to thy voice' (III, 18), and he said: BUT, BEHOLD, THEY WILL NOT BELIEVE ME.



### ANALYSIS

Moses is still not convinced, which seems odd as the midrash points out. Just five verses earlier, God assures Moses that the Israelites will, indeed, listen to him. So why does he continue to doubt his effectiveness and God's promise(s)? Even though God explained that the Israelites would be brought out of Egypt safely<sup>9</sup> (Ex. 3:20-22), Moses still felt that the Israelites would have doubts about God appearing to him. "Here we have the perennial problem facing any messenger of God; he needs assurance that the people would believe he had been given a divine mission."<sup>10</sup> How could Moses prove that God had, in fact, appeared before him? What would be his proof? It's almost as if Moses is pushing God to show him more and more and more. One could argue that Moses' second objection had nothing to do with the Israelites at all, but rather, had more to do with Moses needing more information. The objection in Exodus 4:1 can be seen along the same lines. The reader can pick up a sense of impatience on the part of Moses. He wants every one of his doubts to be addressed and removed, and he continues to doubt EVEN in the face of God's affirmations and guarantees. In this case, he needed tangible evidence of God's presence in this task. Only those concrete signs would help build up Moses' trust in his own leadership skills.

It is interesting to attempt to figure out where Moses' doubt comes from. Is it a doubt in God or a doubt in himself? The first would suggest that he is just not convinced that all the things that God is saying and promising will come true. The second would reflect Moses' extreme humility as he had such difficulty believing that God would appear before him. If he told anyone, would anyone believe him? Having sought God out in the wilderness, and having answered God's Call, the doubt must have come from within. Moses is so sure that he is not the right person for the job that promise after promise only seem to add to Moses' fears and not ease his anxieties.



<sup>9</sup> In fact, God assures Moses that they would not be leaving empty handed just a few verses earlier! (Ex. 3:21)

<sup>10</sup> Jacob, *Exodus*, 83.

## **Bamidbar Rabbah 7:5**

This was the case with Moses. When God told him to go to Israel, he said to Him: "But, my Lord, they surely will not believe me!" as it says, "But, behold, they will not believe me," (Ex. IV, 1). Said God to him: 'Ha, Moses! Do you know beforehand that they will not believe you? They are believers, sons of believers! Since you said to Me, "But, behold, they will not believe Me, put now thy hand into thy bosom,"' (ib. 6), and as soon as He took it out, behold, "his hand was leprous, as white as snow" (ib.).



### **ANALYSIS**

This midrash makes a very important point regarding Moses' doubt of his own people. "Do you know beforehand that they will not believe you? They are believers, sons of believers!" Why is Moses being so pessimistic? He is certainly a realist, and, in some cases, he is even an idealist. But a pessimist? The last thing one wants to get from one's leader (spiritual, political, religious, etc.) is a sense of pessimism. So where does the pessimism come from? Perhaps it is Moses' own history that feeds his pessimism. Growing up in a life of privilege, only to learn as he got older that he was surrounded by the servitude of his own people, must have caused him to look negatively on the world. Here he was, the surrogate son of Pharaoh—a prince!—, and his brethren are living a life in servitude with no sign of it ending any time soon while accepting Pharaoh's perceived power.

We return back to our original picture of Moses. He is a man who has sought out solitude, realized that he was seeing something sacred in the burning bush and responded to God's call. But at the same time, he is so doubtful of his own abilities. His meekness and humility, two traits that are generally good, are preventing him from seeing his potential, and that of his people, and seeing the respect that others have for him, particularly God. God has sought Moses out just as much (perhaps more) as Moses has sought God out. It is time for Moses to begin to accept his role as leader of his people. God believes in him. The Israelites believe in him. The only thing missing is Moses' faith in himself and in God.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה (מִזֶּה) [מִה־זֶּה] בְּיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מִטָּה:  
וַיֹּאמֶר הִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ אֶרְצָה  
וַיִּשְׁלִיכֵהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיְהִי לְנָחָשׁ וַיָּנֶס מֹשֶׁה מִפָּנָיו:  
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה שְׁלַח יָדְךָ וְאַחֲזוּ בְזָנְבוֹ  
וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיַּחֲזֶק בּוֹ וַיְהִי לְמִטָּה בְּכַפּוֹ:

*And Adonai said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he replied, "A staff." God said, "Throw it down on the ground." So Moses threw it down to the ground, and it turned into a snake, and Moses ran from it. Then Adonai said to Moses, "Grab its tail." So he reached out and grabbed it, and it turned back into a staff in his hand.*

## Exodus 4:2-4



## Shemot Rabbah 3:12

AND MOSES ANSWERED AND SAID: BUT, BEHOLD, THEY WILL NOT BELIEVE ME (IV, 1).

Whereupon God answered him on his own lines and gave him signs according to his words. See what it says after this: AND THE LORD SAID UNTO HIM: WHAT IS (MAZEH) THAT IN THY HAND? AND HE SAID: A ROD (IV, 2), that is to say: 'Thou art worthy of being smitten with that (*mizzeh*) which is in thy hand, for thou didst speak slanderously of my children who are believers and the sons of believers.' They are believers, as it says: "And the people believed" (Ex. XIV, 31); and the sons of believers, as it says: "And he believed in the Lord" (Gen. XV, 6).<sup>4</sup> Moses had followed the example of the serpent who had spoken slanderously of his Creator, as it is said: "For God doth know" (ib. III, 5); so just as the serpent was punished, so will he be punished. See what is written: AND HE SAID: CAST IT ON THE GROUND. AND HE CAST IT ON THE GROUND AND IT BECAME A SERPENT (IV, 3). Because he had copied the example of the serpent, God showed him the serpent, as if to say: 'Thou didst do the thing that this serpent did.' AND MOSES FLED FROM BEFORE IT.

AND THE LORD SAID UNTO MOSES: PUT FORTH THY HAND, AND TAKE IT BY THE TAIL (IV, 4). We have already explained what the serpent implied for Moses; but what did this sign signify for Israel? R. Eleazar opined that the rod was converted into a serpent as symbolic of Pharaoh who was called "a serpent," as it says: "Behold, I am against thee, Pharaoh King of Egypt, the great-dragon" (Ezek. XXIX, 3). He is also referred to as the Leviathan, the slant serpent (Isa. XXVII, 1), because he hit Israel. God said to him [Moses]: 'Dost thou see Pharaoh who is like a serpent? Well, thou wilt smite him with the rod and in the end he will become like wood; and just as the rod cannot bite, so he will no longer bite'; hence: PUT FORTH THY HAND AND TAKE IT BY THE TAIL. THAT THEY MAY BELIEVE THAT THE LORD, THE GOD OF THEIR FATHERS... HATH APPEARED UNTO THEE (IV, 5). Go and perform before them this miracle that they should believe that I appeared unto thee.



### ANALYSIS

Still Moses has doubts, and his doubts continue to revolve around the people he has been charged with leading. "What if they do not believe that You appeared to me, by way of an amazing miracle," he asks. Moses wants to be assured that any challenge he receives from the Israelites can be easily addressed. If they ask for a name, he wants to be able to provide it. If they doubt his story of the burning bush, he wants to be able to show them some sort of miracle. Moses wants tangible proof that God revealed God's

self to him for the purpose of Moses' duty to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. "All leaders need concrete signs of their authority, and God provides Moses with" them,<sup>11</sup> and the מטה alludes to their pragmatic concerns and addresses them.

God asks a simple question: מזה (What is [in your hand]?), as if to say, "Look no further than yourself to see that YOU CAN DO THIS!" God is asking Moses to look at the power he already possesses. Moses responds in an equally simple fashion: מטה (Rod).<sup>12</sup> It is clear that he is not sure why the question is asked and why the answer would make him feel any more secure. But, in fact, the rod in his hand is exactly the proof that God wants to show Moses. God is saying, "This rod, the arm it extends from, and the person who is attached to that arm is the source of power that you will need – and already have – to lead your people." It is a part of Moses. The rod is God's proof that Moses will never be alone. God will be with him when he goes before the Elders. God will be with him when he goes before Pharaoh. And God will be with him when he is leading the Israelites through the desert (foreshadowing of things to come). If Moses can see that he does, indeed, have the power to lead, then he can take that מטה in his hand and use it effectively and successfully.

However, all of that is in theory. How will Moses be convinced that the rod will serve as a source of power for him? God instructs him to cast it on the ground, and the rod immediately turns into a snake. Moses recoils in fear. Is he afraid that the snake may bite him? Perhaps, if he believes, as God wants him to, that the rod is an extension of his own power, he is afraid of his own abilities (NOT inabilities). The miracle of the rod turning into a snake is meant to show Moses that God is, and will continue to be, with him. But now Moses is not sure that the power that God is entrusting in him is something he is prepared for. The questions that Moses was asking himself must have been numerous:

- Do I have what it takes?
- Will I use this power effectively?
- What if I try to use my power (my מטה) and it does not work?
- Will I even know how to use it?
- What if I use my power incorrectly?
- Will my power be enough to overcome Pharaoh, the snake?!

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<sup>11</sup> Norman Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leaders* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), 24.

<sup>12</sup> The sound play between מזה and מטה is not coincidental in Ex. 4:2. It is almost as if the text is suggesting that any time Moses has a doubt in his own abilities he simply should look at himself – look in his own hands! – to see that he does, in fact, have the ability, the vehicle – the מטה – to fulfill God's request.

God, anticipating all of these questions, reassures Moses in the very next verse. "Do not be afraid of the snake," God seems to be saying. "Grab the snake by its tail, for it will be the source of strength that you are looking for." And the Hebrew offers an interesting play on words that is important to point out. God tells Moses to grab the snake by its tail, and the Hebrew describes Moses' actions as **וַיִּחַזֵּק בּוֹ**. In this *hiphil* form is the root **חִזַּק**, which means 'strong'. The narrative is clear in its intentions: The rod will give Moses the strength he needs. By making sure that the rod is with him (and we will see God's reminder of that in v. 17), he can feel secure in God's presence and in himself.

"The rod is a sign of the relationship between the people and God, the covenant, which is his source of power, the essence of his leadership."<sup>13</sup> Every religious leader needs to feel secure in him/herself. In Moses' case, he needed something he could hold on to, quite literally. God's presence, if not manifested in the power of the rod itself, would only be a comfort to Moses in theory. He needed to feel secure in that partnership – that covenant – in practice as well.<sup>14</sup>

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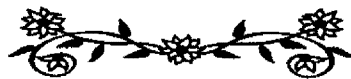
<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Moses*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Nachmanides, Rashi and Ibn Ezra offer interesting commentary on the rod turning into a snake, but it does not quite fit into my analysis, so I have not included it.

וְהָיָה אִם-לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לָךְ  
וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקֹל הָאֵת הָרִאשׁוֹן  
וְהֵאֱמִינוּ לְקֹל הָאֵת הָאַחֲרוֹן:

*"And if they do not believe the first sign,  
they will believe the second."*

*Exodus 4:8*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:13

AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS, IF THEY WILL NOT BELIEVE EVEN THESE TWO SIGNS, etc. (IV, 9). Why did God perform these signs? To correspond with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



### ANALYSIS

Belief in something (or someone) requires a partnership of sorts – a covenant. It is a necessary element on the part of any leader, and it is a necessary element for any community. To believe in something is to have faith in it. It seems that Moses does not have much faith in the Israelites. If that is true, why should they have faith in him? His doubts would only naturally cause doubts amongst the Israelites.

Why does God turn to miracles in order to persuade? Here we see three miracles: the staff turning to a snake, Moses' hand becoming leprous, and water turning into blood. All of these miracles are meant to prove God's might. But does not God's appearance and promise of redemption constitute might itself? It begs the question of any Jewish leader: What does one need to convince him/herself that s/he is doing the right thing? In other words, do we, like Moses, need to see miracles to be convinced that we are doing is right and being efficacious?

God responds by showing Moses miracles involving an object belonging to Moses and a part of Moses' body as well. Perhaps God did not want Moses' faith to be enhanced by miracles. Faith, alone, should have been enough for Moses. BUT IS THAT TRUE? Would we believe (in anything?) more if we saw some concrete indication that proved something to us?

Faith is the core for any covenantal relationship. There are many examples that show that the Israelites have the faith that is required for a covenantal relationship:

- Exodus 4:31 – *and the people were convinced.*
- Exodus 14:31 – *And when Israel saw the wondrous power which Adonai did against the Egyptians, the people feared Adonai; they had faith in Adonai and His servant Moses.*
- Exodus 19:9 – *And Adonai said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people will hear when I speak with you and will trust you from that point on."*

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי  
 לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִכִּי גַם מִתְּמוֹל  
 גַּם מִשְׁלָשִׁם גַּם מֵאִזְ דְּבָרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ  
 כִּי כְבֹּד־פֶּה וְכְבֹד לָשׁוֹן אֲנִכִּי:

*But Moses said to Adonai, "Please my Lord, I am not a man  
 of words, not since yesterday or the day before that,  
 nor since You began to speak to me, Your servant.  
 I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."*

## *Exodus 4:10*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:14

AND MOSES SAID UNTO THE LORD: OH LORD (IV, 10). Moses said to God: 'Thou art Lord of the Universe, and dost Thou wish that I should be Thy messenger? SURELY, I AM NOT A MAN OF WORDS. The Sages say: Seven whole days previously did God urge Moses to go on his mission, but he refused to go till the incident of the thorn-bush. This is what is meant by the words: I AM NOT A MAN OF WORDS-which he said on the first day; *MITEMOL* indicates the second day; *GAM* the third day; *MISHILSHOM* the fourth day; *GAM* the fifth day; *ME' AZ* the sixth day; *DIBERCHA* the seventh day. R. Phinehas, the priest, said that Moses argued: 'I am not a man of words, and moreover, I see no place for words here. For the man to whom I am to go is a slave (Gen. 9:25) and will not accept reproof, as it says: "A servant will not be corrected by words" (Prov. XXIX, 19). I will only go if I can chastise him with suffering. Hence we read: "And the Lord said that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go." (IV, 21).



### ANALYSIS

Now we begin to hear panic in Moses' voice.<sup>15</sup> Whereas before his objections were calculated and strategic in nature, this one is a plea of desperation. His objections, and God's assurances and promises, all regarded external forces: What if they want to know Your name? Will they believe that You called out to me? What if they want proof? This objection addresses Moses' personal limitations. It seems curious that Moses would not have started here, but, perhaps, in addition to being humble and modest, he was also embarrassed to show his deficiencies, even to God.

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<sup>15</sup> Most of the commentators are in agreement that Moses' plea of בִּי is meant to show just how panicked he was. However, there are two commentators who offer a very different reading. Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to Ex. 4:10, understands בִּי in its literal sense: "mine," and he uses as his proof-text the verse from I Samuel 25:24:

בִּי־אֲנִי אֲדֹנֵי הָעֹץ  
*Let the blame be mine, my lord...*

Moses is so convinced that he is incapable of taking on such great a task that he is telling God to punish him – DO ANYTHING GOD WANTS TO HIM! –, but just as long as God leaves Moses alone and sends someone else in his place. Abarbanel takes a very different approach both from Halevi and the majority of the medieval commentators. He reads בִּי as a simple request to have the speech impediment cured.

This Midrash suggests that the conversation between God and Moses began long before the revelation at the burning bush. Seven days prior, God had begun The Call, and for seven days Moses refused. It was not until Moses saw something – SOMETHING AMAZING – that he began to wonder if he was destined for something greater than shepherding sheep.

How strong must Moses' hesitation have been to refuse to accept God's call for SEVEN WHOLE DAYS? But it would seem that his convictions would create an oxymoron of sorts when coupled with his extreme humility. It begs the question: Could Moses have been so humble to believe that he was not worthy of the task, but at the same time, so strong with his convictions to turn down God for an entire week? But perhaps these were not convictions at all. Perhaps Moses' self-doubt and fears are still paramount to his objections.

The midrash offers another explanation of Moses' plea. R. Phinehas points out that the task to go before Pharaoh was not a task that required words at all. The midrash likens Pharaoh to a slave using Gen. 9:25 as its prooftext. This verse links us back to the previous chapter in Exodus 3:19. Proverbs 29:19 is meant to prove that a slave can never be corrected through words. But perhaps there is a word missing here. Perhaps the midrash should read, "a slave can never be corrected through words ALONE." It seems that R. Phinehas, intentionally or not, is suggesting that only through words AND deeds (action) will Israel's redemption come about.

Moses, although deficient in speech, will have the proper tools with him when he goes before Pharaoh.



### Devarim Rabbah 1:1

THESE ARE THE WORDS.

R. Levi said: Why learn this from an extraneous passage? Let us rather learn it from the context. For see, of Moses before he was privileged to receive the Torah, Scripture writes, "I am not a man of words" (Ex. IV, 10); but after he had proved himself worthy of the Torah, his tongue became cured and he began to speak words. Whence do we know this? From what we have read in the passage under comment, THESE ARE THE WORDS WHICH MOSES SPOKE.

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל-כל-ישראל

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ANALYSIS

If we move the narrative forward a bit, it seems like only yesterday that Moses was pleading to God that he was unfit to be the voice of the Israelites. A man with a speech impediment, he felt, would be the wrong choice to go before Pharaoh to demand the Israelites' freedom.

But sometimes our biggest deficiencies can be our greatest gifts. Moses believed that he did not have the verbal skills to accept God's charge. His great sense of humility proved that he was worthy to receive Torah, and, as the midrash says, "His tongue became cured and he began to speak words." And not just any words. The last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, is almost entirely a long and eloquent speech delivered by Moses. The once humble speaker is now a passionate and energetic orator.

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### *Otzer Midrashim, "Divrei Ha Yamim l'Moshe Rabbeinu"*

When Moses was an infant, he was brought to the royal palace. He "began to dazzle the king and his court with his intelligence. He became the most spoiled of children. And also the most precocious: at three years of age he displayed the gifts of a healer. And of a prophet. And since he was an exceptionally handsome child, people showered him with love. Batya, his adoptive mother, was constantly cajoling him. he was given all the advantages of the best education available; he studied with teachers from afar, stunning them with his industry and understanding. In hardly any time at all, he mastered several languages and the exact sciences. Pharaoh himself could not keep from covering the boy with signs of affection and often took him on his lap to play with him – an intimacy not without danger. One day, when the child playfully took the crown from the royal head and placed it on his own, the Pharaoh's counselors were dismayed; they called it high treason and the priests declared it a bad omen. All agreed that the child should be put to death before it was too late. Fortunately, one advisor – an angel in disguise – suggested a less radical solution. Set two plates before the child, one piled high with gold and precious stones, the other with burning coals: should the child reach for the gold, it would bear out that he indeed harbored suspicious intentions and that he had to be killed, but if instead he reached for the hot coals, then it would simply mean that he was attracted to shiny objects. This was done, and Moses indeed stretched out his hand to touch the gold and precious stones, but the angel Gabriel pushed

him so hard that his hand seized a hot coal and brought it to his mouth. Thus Moses was saved — but his tongue was burned, and from then on he stuttered.”<sup>16</sup>



### ANALYSIS

This beautiful minor midrash indicates Moses' propensity and desire, even as a young child, for leadership. But that desire came at a cost. Now, years later, Moses still suffers from a fear of being hurt. I do not mean to suggest that Moses thinks God will hurt him if he does stand up and accept God's charge. But, as this midrash points out, there seems to be a great amount of residual anxiety from the experiences of his childhood.

There is something else going on in this midrash as well. It is interesting to note that, according to this midrash, it was the angel Gabriel who caused Moses to burn his mouth. Perhaps God, with Gabriel as God's aide, felt it best to make Israel's future leader flawed, at least physically. This would remove any doubt in God's absolute sovereignty over all of mankind. Because of God's concern and power, even someone with a speech defect was able to go before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites from slavery.

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<sup>16</sup> The midrash is quoted by Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 183-184.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לָאָדָם  
 אוֹ מִי־יָשׁוּם אֵלִים אוֹ חֵרֶשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶח אוֹ עִוֵּר  
 הֲלֹא אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה:  
 וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ  
 וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר:

*To which Adonai responded, "Who gives man speech? Who makes man dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, Adonai? Now go, and I will be with you and will instruct you what to say."*

## *Exodus 4:11-12*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:15

AND THE LORD SAID UNTO HIM: WHO HATH MADE MAN'S MOUTH (IV, 11)? He said unto him: 'Do not fear even if thou art not a man of words. Have I not created all the mouths in the world? I have made dumb him whom I wished, and deaf and blind, and have endowed others with the faculties of seeing and hearing; and had I desired that thou shouldst be a man of words, thou wouldst be so, only I wish to perform a miracle with thee when thou art actually speaking, that thy words may be appropriate, because I will be with thy mouth'-hence AND I WILL BE WITH THY MOUTH (IV, 12). What is the meaning of AND I WILL TEACH THEE (HOREITIKHA) WHAT THOU SHALT SPEAK? R. Abahu said: I will throw (*moreh*) My words into thy mouth as with an arrow, as it says: "or shot through-*yaroh*" (ib. XIX, 13). R. Simeon said: I will create thee into a new being, as it is said: 'And the woman conceived-*watahar*' (ib. II, 2).



### ANALYSIS

I believe that through his journey deep into the wilderness with Jethro's sheep, Moses sought out God. He recognized the miracle of the burning bush. He heard God's voice and answered it. He gained comfort in knowing God's name and its significance. He asked for proof beyond God's name and was shown miracles that only God could perform. And yet, still, Moses tried to point out to God his speech defect, as if God may not have been aware of it.

The reader can begin to get a sense that God's patience is wearing thin. Moses still does not recognize God's power. "Who puts words into one's mouth? Who puts sounds into one's ears?" God is reminding Moses of the obvious: God is the Creator of all life. Why does this simple fact escape Moses? The answer is clear: his doubt and ego. It does not matter to Moses that God causes man to have sight or to be blind, have the ability to hear or to be deaf. God gives man wisdom or foolishness, strength or weakness, the ability to lead or the ability to follow. But all of that does not matter. When we have doubts in our abilities or when we know we have certain weaknesses, regardless of the support we may be receiving, it does not matter. That is what we focus on. God has assured him a number of times that he would not be alone, but all Moses can focus on is his inability to speak. He is blind to everything else.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibn Ezra picks up on a point made by Abarbanel in the previous verse. Ibn Ezra's words speak directly to the heart of Moses' great sense of doubt:

Notice that He does not say He will cure his speech impediment, as Moses expected—merely that He will give him words to say that don't contain the sounds he finds difficult to pronounce.

As for ego, this is a common pitfall for any leader. **ואנכי אהיה עם־פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ**  
: **אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר** is God's reminder that a leader can never function alone. "I will help you speak," is exactly what any religious leader needs to hear at his/her most doubtful moments. Moses needs to understand that "You can lean on Me," is the message delivered by God. But it takes a humble person to be able to say, "I cannot do this alone. I need help." Perhaps Moses was afraid to ask for help.

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The compassion of God highlighted here, like that of a parent or teacher, it is plentiful and never-ending.

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי שְׁלַח-נָא בְיַד-תְּשַׁלַּח:

*But he said, "Oh my Lord, please send someone else."*

*Exodus 4:13*



## Shemot Rabbah 3:16

AND HE SAID: OH LORD, SEND, I PRAY THEE, BY THE HAND OF HIM WHOM THOU WILT SEND (IV, 13). R. Hiyya, the Great, said that Moses pleaded: 'Lord of the Universe! Thou desirest me to redeem the children of Abraham who proclaimed Thee Lord over all the creatures?' "Send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send." Which is dearer to a man, his nephew or his grandchild? Of course, the grandchild. When Thou didst seek to save Lot, the son of Abraham's brother, Thou didst send angels to deliver him, and now Thou dost send me to deliver the six hundred thousand children of Abraham? Send, therefore, Thy angels, whom Thou dost usually send.'



### ANALYSIS

Moses is determined to turn down the call. He will do anything and everything to convince God that he is not the right choice. This quiet, humble shepherd is so convinced that he is unable to take on God's charge that he uses his own people's history as proof that he is unqualified. The midrash from Exodus Rabbah shows Moses' plea with God. "To save one person you sent angels, but to save six hundred thousand – an entire nation! – you send me? Why? This is not a task for a human, especially a human as meek and flawed as I." Moses feels that this task is simply too large for him.

This midrash points out something that is unique to Moses' objections. Nowhere in the previous four objections does Moses refuse outright to accept God's charge:

1. Who am I? I am not worthy to take on such a task.
2. What am I to say to the Israelites if they ask, "Who sent you on this mission?"
3. What should I do if they demand to be shown the miracles that I have seen?  
How will I do that?
4. I have a speech impediment and am simply unable to do what you ask.

In fact, each objection, and subsequent dialogue with God, brings Moses closer to the mission. It was only when Moses began to approach "the actual execution of the mission, he became anxious about himself."<sup>18</sup> This seems to be the crux of this last objection: "Please God, send someone else. Anyone else other than me!" Moses is showing such great desperation and pleading to God to send someone else.

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<sup>18</sup> Jacob, *Exodus*, 90.

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Shemot Rabbah 3:16 (cont.)

The Rabbis say that one must not think that Moses refused to go, he only wished to pay respect to Aaron; for Moses said: "Before I arose, my brother Aaron prophesied to them in Egypt for eighty years," as it is written: "I made Myself known unto them in the land of Egypt" (Ezek. XX, 5). Whence do we know that it was Aaron who prophesied? For so it says: "And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him: Thus saith the Lord: Did I reveal Myself unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egyptian bondage to Pharaoh's house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest?" (I Sam. II, 27, 28). Moses thought: 'If I now trespass upon the domain of my brother, he will be vexed.' On this account, he was reluctant to go. Immediately was THE ANGER OF THE LORD KINDLED AGAINST MOSES (IV, 14).

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### ANALYSIS

Another idea offered in the midrash underscores Moses' deep humility, but in a different way. Here we see a person who is overcome with respect for his older brother, Aaron. Who is he that he should be chosen for this task over his older brother, Aaron. It is almost as if his first objection of **מִי אֲנֹכִי** and this last one of **שְׁלַח־נָא** : **בִּיד־תְּשַׁלַּח** are addressing the same point. "You have the wrong guy. It is my brother you ought to be talking to." In fact, as the midrash shows, Aaron had been prophesying for eighty years before Moses was even born. He has the necessary experience, and he has been the Israelites' leader the entire time in Egypt. Here, Moses is showing his humility in another way. His deference is not directed towards God but, rather, towards his brother.

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Shemot Rabbah 7:2

It says: "Lo, all these things doth God work, twice, yea, thrice, with a man" (Job XXXIII, 29). Three times doth He wait for man; if he repents then all is well; but if not, He visits upon him even his first iniquities. So you find, too, in the case of Moses: when God first said to him: 'Go, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh,' he first said: 'Behold, they will not believe me,' then he added: 'I am not a man of

words,' and finally: ' Send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send'-three excuses; seeing that still he did not retract his words but even added: 'Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me,' the Divine word was communicated to Aaron too, as it says: AND THE LORD SPOKE UNTO MOSES AND UNTO AARON.



ANALYSIS

Why communicate to Aaron as well? Did God finally accept the fact that Moses felt that he simply could not do it alone? Or perhaps God realized that Moses could not do it alone. Or perhaps there is even a more important message being offered here. Perhaps it was never intended for Moses to go before Pharaoh alone. Although it was not made explicitly clear to Moses, Shemot Rabbah 7:2 seems to be suggesting that Moses needed not just a partner with God but a partner with his brother, Aaron, as well.



Bamidbar Rabbah 21:15

LET THE LORD... SET A MAN (XXVII, 16)...R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: For seven days the Holy One, blessed be He, tried to persuade Moses to go on His mission and the latter replied: "Send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send (Ex. IV, 13), I am not a man of words, neither was I yesterday, nor the day before" (ib. 10). This makes a total of seven days. After a time the Holy One, blessed be He, persuaded him and he went on His mission, and through him He performed all those well-known miracles. In the end He said to him: Ye shall not bring this assembly into the land (Num. XX, 12). Moses said to Him: 'Sovereign of the Universe! I did not ask to be allowed to go!



ANALYSIS

There is something equally poignant and upsetting about the story of Moses that is pointed out in this midrash. Moses so desperately did not feel that he was the right person to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He pleaded his case in a number of ways: showing God that he was not worthy, explaining that the Israelites would question his authority, reminding God that he was unskilled and even unable to do some of the things God asked of him. But, as this midrash suggests, I wonder if he did not want to set himself up for disappointment. In other words, even though God has promised that

he would not be alone, what if he wondered to himself, "What if I fail? What will God think of me? What will God do to me?" Perhaps he did not want to be placed in a situation in which he would not succeed. This is the crucial point of his final objection. For him, the (potential) risk outweighed the (potential) reward, and he tried to get out of God's charge to lead his people.

At the heart of any successful leader is the ability/desire to take a risk. There are no guarantees that the mission will be fulfilled and that he will be rewarded. Becoming and acting as a leader, particularly a religious one, is a risky endeavor. What if they see you as being inauthentic? What if your authority is challenged? What if you make the wrong decisions? What if the people you are leading let you down? The worries can go on and on with a crippling affect. But a leader needs to put those concerns aside and be willing to "step off the cliff." At times a leader must make him/herself vulnerable to the potential for failure. At times a leader must be willing to separate him/herself from his/her flock in order to prove a point or set an example.

וְאַתְּ־הַמִּטָּה הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ
אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה־בּוֹ אֶת־הָאֵתוֹת:

*"But take this staff in your hands so that you can
perform miraculous signs."*

Exodus 4:17



Shemot Rabbah 8:3

'Go and exact a penalty of him.' He said to him: 'How shall I bring upon him the ten plagues?' The reply was: 'And thou shalt take in thy hand this rod' (IV, 17). R. Judah said: The rod weighed forty *se'ah* and was of sapphire and the ten plagues were engraved thereon in an abbreviated form.



ANALYSIS

How much clearer can it get? God tells Moses to take the staff with him at all times. The **מטה** would be the vehicle to exact punishment (i.e., the plagues), but at the same time the **מטה** is a SIGN of the covenant—God's constant presence with Israel, which is recognizable when Moses acts.

And once again, as was the case in Exodus 4:2, we have a sound play in the text:

המטה הזה
(*ha-mateh ha-zeh*)

How will Moses summon his strength? The power was in his hands! As long as he had the staff in his hands, he had the potential to succeed.

Section II

Thematic Overview

A. Moses' Objections & Doubts

We learn very early on that Moses is an emotional man. He is at once both curious (Ex. 3:3) and frightened (Ex. 3:6). It may seem counterintuitive, but it seems that these are two qualities that one should want and look for in a leader. A leader who questions his or her own capabilities to lead is essential to the community that s/he is serving. "What do I have to offer?" should be the question that is asked. One should show trepidation and hesitation to take the reigns of leadership. And Moses seems to exhibit both of those emotions here when he approaches the burning bush. "With a twist of his neck to open himself to God's presence, Moses reorients his entire being. He is now ready to witness God's presence."¹⁹ He sees something that he has never seen before and wants to know more, but at the same time, when it is revealed to him that God is causing the bush to remain unconsumed, he turns away in fear. He is not so sure he wants, or is worthy enough, to know more.

And just like that, Moses receives The Call. A simple sheep-herder is thrust into a position of shepherding an entire people. The Israelites have suffered long enough, and the time of their redemption has come. God has entrusted Moses with that responsibility, and it is now time for Moses to act. Although Moses does not receive The Call until later in life, our midrashim suggest that he was always ready for and capable of The Call.

¹⁹ Norman Cohen, *Hineini in Our Lives* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 72-73.

Bereshit Rabbah 30:8 suggests, based on the simple phrase **וְיֵהְיֶה** in Exodus 3:1, that Moses was destined, from the very beginning of his life, to be the redeemer of Israel. It was not a question of "If?" but rather of "When" Moses would receive The Call. This says something both about God and Moses. For the Rabbis, it only adds to their belief that God is all-knowing and every decision God makes happens at the exact time it is meant to. It was equally comforting for them to know that Moses, no matter how he may object or whatever deficiencies he may have, was going to redeem the Israelites and bring them into *Eretz Yisrael*. For our modern sensibilities, this may lead one to ask, "Is there no Free Will?" And these may be appropriate questions, but the ideas offered in Bereshit Rabbah 30:8, and elsewhere, suggest something very important about the way we see ourselves and the way God sees us. The tradition reads **וְיֵהְיֶה** not necessarily as 'was' or 'was always,' but rather as 'had the potential'. Moses **וְיֵהְיֶה** – had the potential – to lead! But he was not yet a leader. This required further steps, further guidance and further assurances. When Moses receives the specifics of The Call in Exodus 3:10 he does not jump into action. He responds—quite humanly—with a simple **מִי אֲנִי** (*Who am I?*). What proceeds from here is a dialogue between he and God.

I wonder why God's mere voice from the burning bush wasn't enough for Moses. What do leaders need in order to know/believe they are leaders and to be able to act on those beliefs? Short of actually being shown the future, how does a leader know that s/he is

leading effectively and successfully? William Shakespeare wrote in *Twelfth Night*, "Some are born leaders, others achieve leadership, and still others have leadership thrust upon them." There is a sense that Moses feels that this job has been thrust upon him, and he was not quite prepared for such a task. It begs the question, What does any leader need to do to prepare him/herself for leadership? Are there necessary steps that ought to be taken that Moses simply was not able to take, or is it simply a matter of "You either have it or you don't?" Throughout my research, the latter seemed to be the more popular opinion. Along with Bereshit Rabbah 30:8, I believe that the Rabbis teach us, in Shemot Rabbah 2:5, Shemot Rabbah 2:6, *Otzer Midrashim* and other places as well, that Moses, no matter what excuse he came up with and however much he pleaded with God, was destined to be Israel's leader. God saw something in Moses, just as God saw something in Abraham, Noah, David and others. As Shemot Rabbah 2:2 teaches us: "God trieth the righteous." If God felt that this was not something Moses was capable of, the episode at the burning bush would never have taken place.

God's response addresses both of Moses' doubts: **כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ** "*I will be with you.*"

This is the assurance that God wants to give to Moses: I will be with you [not just during your confrontation with Pharaoh, but throughout your people's journey as well.] As for the Israelites, God assuages that doubt as well: "*You will serve God on this very mountain.*"

With this promise God is pointing out a necessary element that any leader needs to have in order to be confident in his/her leadership: potential. Moses' claim of the

inadequacy of the Israelites is due to his inability (in the moment) to see his people's potential. God does not have that problem. God sees their capacity for growth and their potential to evolve into a nation of holy priests. Jewish leaders need to believe in the potential of the communities they are serving.

"The tradition of [Moses'] reluctance to obey the Divine command to intervene with Pharaoh for the liberation of his people, and the recurring reference to his meekness, seem to suggest a tension between the private visionary and the public leader that emerges from the biblical text as a clue to Moses' character and behavior."²⁰ The objections and doubts that Moses displays in Exodus 3 and 4 speak to the traits – the ingredients – we look for in our Jewish leaders. I would like to devote the next part to looking at what some of those ingredients are.

²⁰ David Daiches, "The Quest for the Historical Moses," 1974.

B. Ingredients Necessary for Leadership

What did God see in Moses at the burning bush? "What particular character traits emerge from the biblical narrative that account for Moses' selection as leader?"²¹ What character traits did the Israelites look for in a leader? What do we look for in our own leaders? Are there lessons to be learned from them? Reading the biblical material and the midrashim associated with it has made those questions a bit easier to answer. It is clear that our Rabbis felt that certain human qualities were essential to be the Israelites' leader, and it is clear to me that many of those same characteristics are necessary today to be a successful Jewish leader. Let us look at those qualities – those ingredients – here.

1. HUMILITY & DOUBT

It is interesting to note that there is only one adjective to describe Moses in all of Torah; humble:

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:
Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.
(Numbers 12:3)

He was not just humble, but the most humble man on the entire planet. Why humble? The biblical writers were clearly trying to say something about Moses, who had already established himself as the Israelites' leader. But what are the biblical writers trying to show? That humility is the most important characteristic for any leader? That as long as

²¹ Ari Zivotofsky, "The Leadership Qualities of Moses," in *Judaism* (Fall, 1992), 258.

a leader keeps him/herself grounded, s/he can always have a chance of being successful? There are no clear answers.

The view expressed in Numbers 12:3 is foreshadowed throughout the dialogue between God and Moses on Mount Horeb. Each objection Moses gives can be seen through the lens of humility as well as self-doubt:

- Exodus 3:11 – **מִי אֲנִי**. Although the midrashim offer alternative suggestions other than humility as they interpret this phrase, if we look at the biblical text itself, there is certainly a degree of “I am not worthy of such a task.” Moses sees himself as a simple man who couldn’t possibly free an entire people.
- Exodus 3:13 – Moses is convinced that before he has a chance to begin to fulfill God’s charge, he will be questioned by his own people about whether he received this call – and God’s name – from the Divine. We learn from Shemot Rabbah 4:1 that Moses’ concerns are meant to gain more information from God
IN ORDER TO HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE IN HIMSELF!
- Exodus 4:1 – **וְהֵן לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקִלִּי**. Again, Moses insists that the Israelites will not believe that God had appeared before him and given him his mission. I posed a question in my analysis of Bamidbar Rabbah 7:5, and I offer it again here: Why was Moses so pessimistic? He assumes the worst, and the doubt that he has in himself will translate into a doubt among his own people.

- Exodus 4:10 – **לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים**. Why wait this long into the dialogue to point out the fact that he was a stutterer? Perhaps his humility was so great that he did not want to initially point out this defect, because he felt that it might embarrass God and God's choice of emissary.
- Exodus 4:13 – **שְׁלַח־נָא בִידְתְּשִׁלַּח**. Moses pleads with God one final time to send someone else. The Rabbis offer two ideas in Shemot Rabbah 3:16 to highlight Moses' great humility:
 1. God sent angels to save Lot. Moses points this out to God and wonders aloud how saving an entire people – 600,000 people! – could possibly be a job for him. It is a task, he insists, for one of God's angels.
 2. Showing his humility in a different way, Moses believes that it should be his brother, Aaron, not him, to receive such an honor as leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

Five objections, and five examples of Moses' humility and doubt. But perhaps these are traits that one should not avoid or hide from. It seems clear from these biblical texts and the midrashic interpretations that humility is not just recommended. It is, as the Rabbis see it, a vital component for successful leadership. Further, personal doubt may allow that leader to never get too far ahead of him/herself.

In his autobiography, Calvin Coolidge wrote, "It is a great advantage to a President and a major source of safety to the country, for him to know that he is not a great man."²²

The Rabbis teach, using Moses as their exemplar, all leaders in general, and Jewish leaders specifically, indeed any successful leader should not view him/herself as being more important than the community that s/he serves.

2. INTEGRITY

The Rabbis emphasize, in Shemot Rabbah 2:3, that Moses displayed his honesty and integrity by taking the sheep "deep into the wilderness," so as not to have them graze on private property. The Rabbis scrutinized the innermost thoughts of the shepherd to show how he might justify his flock feeding on someone else's property. Perhaps the shepherd would say, "I am not stealing for myself but for these animals, which I am unable to support. Having an animal suffer is a Torah prohibition, whereas the animals serve an important and necessary function in my own community." Shepherds, therefore, will often have their flocks graze on other people's land. But Moses did not use this justification. Shemot Rabbah shows a man who took his job seriously and made sure he did it with honor and sincerity. Community leaders must make the same choices. A leader must always consider the consequences of ANY ACTION s/he takes.

²² Calvin Coolidge, *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation), 118.

The success of any community (religious or not) can be directly influenced by the honesty and integrity of its leader(s). If a leader is honest and shows great integrity in his/her work, it will become a part of the life of the community that s/he is leading. And as we see with Moses and his flock, honesty and integrity is not something you learn along the way. It is not something that a leader "grows into." A leader either has it or not. Moses was always a man of integrity, but, perhaps, his integrity wasn't evident until it needed to be. "In times of crisis, adversity, and temptation, a leader's integrity becomes most evident."²³ Perhaps the Israelites' suffering in Egypt was the necessary crisis for Moses' integrity and honesty to be displayed as he brought his flock to Mount Horeb and witnessed the Burning Bush.

3. COMPASSION

Why does God ask Moses to remove his shoes at the Burning Bush? The immediate response is because he is on holy ground and must show the proper respect, as the text clearly states. This is certainly a perfectly acceptable reason, but perhaps there is another. When we wear shoes, we protect ourselves from the elements: rocks, the cold, etc. We can easily walk over these objects without much notice or worry of personal injury. But when we remove our shoes, our feet are exposed to the elements. We must be careful with every step we take, and even then, we may get hurt. "The leader of the generation must be aware of every obstacle and every impediment on the

²³ Lorin Woolfe, *Leadership Secrets from the Bible* (New York: MJF Books), 23.

road. He must feel the pain of his people and realize what is bothering them.”²⁴ Every Jewish leader must be compassionate and must be human. A Jewish leader does not sit on his/her perch and see how his/her flock is doing down below. We learn from Shemot Rabbah 2:2 that Moses felt such compassion towards his father-in-law’s flock of sheep. How much more so, our Rabbis taught, must he have been concerned for the Israelites? The midrash in Shemot Rabbah 1:27 further underscores Moses’ compassion. R. Jose teaches that Moses showed great compassion for his brethren throughout his life in Egypt, particularly when he was a prince in Pharaoh’s court.

But we see compassion coming from another source as well: God. Shemot Rabbah 2:5 teaches us that God anticipated Moses’ anxiety in fulfilling his role, and so the angel appeared to Moses in Exodus 3:2 in a flame of fire to serve as a metaphor: Moses will be a flame of fire which the Israelites will look for in their times of need. The flame from the bush that captures Moses’ attention is the same flame that will carry him in his moments of doubt and enable him to succeed.

4. OPTIMISM vs. REALISM

What did God *surely see in the affliction of My people* in Exodus 3:7? According to Shemot Rabbah 3:3 (which I did not include in my analysis), God not only saw the Israelites at their finest while receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, but God also saw them at their

²⁴ Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, ed., *Torah Gems* (Brooklyn: Hotzaat Yavneh, 1992), 26.

lowest with the sin of the Golden Calf. God saw both their successes and their failures.

I believe that the midrashim offered in my analysis paint a picture of Moses who felt the same way.

At times, as Shemot Rabbah 3:4 points out, Moses wonders whether or not Israel deserves to be redeemed. Does this take away from his leadership abilities? **Just the opposite!** Moses, although deeply compassionate and concerned with each and every one of God's creatures, is both an optimist and a realist. A religious leader surely needs to be optimistic that s/he is doing the right thing and that the people s/he is leading are learning and striving to be better people. But a leader also needs to be realistic and not hold him/herself or his/her community to an impossible standard. Moses' first objection of **מִי אֲנִי** in Exodus 3:11 highlights both of those points.

5. FAITH

It is necessary to ask why God simply did not tell Moses how the future would unfold. It would have made sense for God to say,

"Moses, trust Me and have faith in Me. You will go before Pharaoh and tell him that you and the Israelites are leaving. You will bring the Israelites up from out of Egypt. Then you will cross the Sinai and wander through the desert. The Israelites are going to be angry and even try to revolt. But do not worry, you will be safe. I will begin to give you certain laws and will require the Israelites to do certain things. I will reveal the

Torah to you. And you will direct the Israelites as they journey to *Eretz Yisrael*."

But God does not say any of this to Moses. However, what God does do is to provide

Moses with a series of promises and assurances:

- *You shall free My people, the Israelites from Egypt.* (Exodus 3:10)
- *I will be with you.* (Exodus 3:12)
- *I will take you out of the misery of Egypt...to a land flowing with milk and honey.* (Exodus 3:17)
- *I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt.* (Exodus 3:20)
- *Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you as to what to say.*
(Exodus 4:12)

With leadership, particularly with Jewish leadership, there must be a real sense of faith.

Faith in the leader and faith in God are necessary, but there is another component as

well: The leader has to have faith in him/herself. Moses, even with all of God's

guarantees, is not convinced that he will be able to do what God has asked of him. His

lack of personal faith is something that every leader needs to address.

Section III

Conclusions

A. What have we learned from the Bible and the Rabbis?

Moses was a shepherd, a husband and a father who was given the charge of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. "We tend to expect a great leader to be charismatic, eloquent, and most of all eager to lead, and yet Moses was none of these. He fervently did *not* want the job. Still, God insisted he take it."¹⁹ The Bible is a tool that is meant to help us understand the human condition, and Moses clearly exhibits very human traits. What we learn from it can help inform us on our own journeys. The midrashim of our Rabbis are meant to make sense of the complexities, discrepancies and contradictions that often appear in the text.

In Exodus 3 and 4 the Rabbis offer a picture of a man who initially thought little of himself, a man who was so convinced that he was the wrong person for the job, but who, nonetheless, achieved greatness and became *Moshe Rabbeinu*. The Rabbis use Moses' objections, his excuses, his flaws and his deficiencies not to show his weaknesses, but rather, to show his strengths as a great leader. Why? Because they understand the human elements in themselves, and all of Moses' traits – the positive ones along with the negative ones – give them a greater sense of their own leadership abilities. The midrashim in my analysis emphasize his qualities:

¹⁹ David Baron, *Moses on Management: 50 Leadership Lessons from the Greatest Manager of All Time* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 9.

- Bereshit Rabbah 30:8 teaches that Moses was destined to redeem the Israelites out of Egypt.
- Shemot Rabbah 2:2 highlights Moses' compassion – a necessary ingredient for leadership – for even the frailest of sheep in his father-in-law's flock.
- Esther Rabbah 7:9 shows that Moses was ready to see the sacred through the mundane.
- Shemot Rabbah 1:27 indicates that Moses already had a great propensity for leadership as was evidenced in his dealings with the Egyptians and his brethren.

These midrashim, along with countless other examples, show Moses' potential for being a strong, caring and successful leader. Moses is our archetype. Both his strengths and his weaknesses are what make him our greatest leader.

Further, the ongoing dialogue between God and Moses proves the special relationship that they had with each other. As was mentioned earlier, God and Moses needed each other in order to prepare the Israelites for the Torah. The Covenant that Moses entered into with God would be the same Covenant that all Israelites would enter upon receiving the Torah. Knowing that his leadership was being supported by a committed God – committed to our past, our present and our future – undoubtedly, added to Moses' confidence.

B. Areas for Further Analysis

Moses is an extremely complex person, arguably more complex than any other biblical figure in the Bible's narrative. He is at once caring and withdrawn, patient and short-tempered, and decisive but ambivalent. Moses received special divine favor, but also showed, at times, normal human irritability. Through all of this, he became Israel's greatest leader and an exemplar for future Jewish leaders.

This thesis was an analysis of both the biblical and rabbinic materials on Exodus Chapters 3 and 4 in order to look at Moses the man and Moses the leader. I wanted to see if there were lessons that could be learned in this material that could be instructive for Jewish leaders today. What does it mean to have doubts about one's abilities? Can a deep sense of humility empower us or paralyze or both? What traits do the communities we serve look for, conscious or not, in their leaders?

But how else might we use Moses' dialogue with God in Chapters 3 and 4 to learn about ourselves? I offer a few possibilities here.

1. OBJECTIONS OR REQUESTS

Perhaps the dialogue between God and Moses did not contain objections at all.

Although the midrashim, along with the later commentators, see Moses as objecting to

God and refusing to accept God's charge to him on five separate occasions (Exodus 3:11, 3:13, 4:1, 4:10 and 4:13), perhaps these are not really objections. Perhaps Moses does, indeed, want to accept God's charge, but he is so concerned with his people's welfare that, like any good visionary, he is attempting to get all the necessary information, necessary tools and necessary guidance that he needs in order to be successful. Seen in this light, these are not objections at all, but rather, they are requests. In fact, as I tried to show in my analysis of Shemot Rabbah 3:16 on Exodus 4:13, each of Moses' "objections" brings him closer and closer to the mission.

When I initially started my research, I immediately read Moses' responses to God as objections. This clearly colored my analysis of the midrashim. I wonder if had read these interchanges not as objections but as requests, would that have changed my reading of the midrashim and my subsequent analysis?

2. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Daniel Goleman, in an essay entitled, "What Makes a Leader?" believes that the most effective leaders all have a high degree of something he calls Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence can be broken down into five categories:²⁰

- **Self-Awareness:** The ability to recognize and understand ones moods, emotions, and drives as well as their effect on others

²⁰ Daniel Goleman, "What Makes a Leader?" *Harvard Business Review* (November-December 1998): 95.

most dignified way that could be found. Clearly, the only way to find this was to succumb to risky, while temporarily reassuring seclusion.

In Warsaw, beginning in the 1920's, a cabaret style of its own called *kleynkunst* began. In her history of Yiddish theater, Nahma Sandrow describes *kleynkunst* as "a sort of cabaret revue, witty, gay, and irreverent, rapidly winging from music to dance to monologue to sketch."¹⁹⁶ From its description, *kleynkunst* sounds like a cousin to the cabaret of Berlin. It was remarkably similar with skits making radical political statements such as in "Two Nazis Smell a Plot," where "two Berlin officials think they discover hidden meanings in the simplest Hebrew words and phrases."¹⁹⁷ *Kleynkunst* was equally just as risqué, toeing the line of the acceptable when dealing with religious matters. One skit in question was entitled "Is it Kosher?" and involved a young woman making advances upon a rabbi under cover of asking traditional, *Halakhic* questions.¹⁹⁸ Unlike in Berlin, *kleynkunst* failed to find its audience, and ultimately failed to survive much more than a decade. Polish audiences had greater interest in whole plays, and not the bits and pieces of the *kleynkunst* revues.

Kleynkunst found itself being resurrected in the ghettos. It served well and found new life through the need for small, more improvised performances. It was most predominant in the Warsaw ghetto, the largest of all the ghettos, whose population was between 400 to 500 thousand by 1942. There were 139 members of the Yiddish Actors' Union present within the ghetto, and the old headquarters of their union at 2 Leszno

¹⁹⁶ Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: a world history of Yiddish theater* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 323.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Street was even within the ghetto.¹⁹⁹ With that said, there was little acclaim in being a Yiddish actor in those days. It was not a reputable job in the eyes of the Jewish community. Amongst entertainers, people were more likely to be drawn to an opera star or a "darling of [the] Polish cafe society."²⁰⁰ As in Lodz, people took to the streets to sing there. However, these usually were poor beggars. A description by survivor Jonas Turkow talks of his walk through the streets seeing a fiddler with a shaking hand, a mother singing operatic arias to the accompaniment of her baby's cries, and a cantor singing cantorial melodies while carrying his child.²⁰¹ It should be noted that the gates of the Warsaw ghetto were kept open for more than a year. Non-Jews were able to come into the ghetto during this time, and there were likely many exchanges of goods, providing the ghetto inhabitants, or at least those who had any money or tradable valuables, with some of their needs. It was during this first year that the ghetto cabarets and cafes thrived the most. These cabarets were mainly on Leszno Street, "a sort of Broadway, with a cafe, restaurant, or cabaret theater in almost every other house. Music could be heard all along the street."²⁰² A girl named Mary Berg describes one of the most popular and expensive of these cafes, which had taken over the former Actors' Union building:

At number 2 Leszno Street, there is now a cabaret called Sztuka [Art] In the ghetto, light was permitted until a certain hour. After that we had to sit around the house by the light of candles or kerosene lamps. When we reached the nightclub, the street was dark. My escort suddenly said to me, "Be careful not to step on a dead man." When I opened the door the light blinded me. Gas lamps were burning in every corner of the crowded cabaret. Every table was covered by a white tablecloth. Fat characters sat at them eating chicken, duck, or fowl. All of these foods would be drowned in wine and liquor. The orchestra, in the middle

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 339.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

of the nightclub, sat on a small podium. Next to it a singer performed. There were people who once played before Polish crowds. Now they were reminded of their Jewish heritage. When I came in, M.Z., the renowned Polish actor, played the role of a comic character, eliciting lots of laughter. Afterwards a singer, U.G., sang old Polish hits and romantic songs. The audience crowding the tables was made up of the aristocracy of the ghetto—big time smugglers, high Polish officers, and all sorts of big shots. Germans who had business dealings with Jews also came here, dressed in civilian clothes. Within the walls of the cabaret one could not sense the tragedy taking place a few yards away. The audience ate, drank, and laughed as if it had no worries.²⁰³

The performers of the cabarets were well respected. Stephen Powitz writes, "A beneficial relationship existed between the performers and the audience. The former desperately needed money, and the latter sought to forget its troubles for awhile."²⁰⁴ Consequently, these performers did not need to be famous or acclaimed performers to draw an audience. These cafes were in operation between the beginning of the ghetto in October, 1939 through late 1940, when the ghetto was sealed off. The clientele at the finer of these cafes were clearly wealthy. The Nazis knew that the cabarets existed, and, in fact, encouraged more to open. They took this as a practice of demoralization for the more they flooded the ghetto with cafes, the more this lowered the status and caliber of the cabarets, as it cheapened the quality of the entertainment.²⁰⁵ Even greater divisions of class then developed in terms of which cabarets were frequented by which types of people.

Some of the cabarets chose to remain hidden, and it was in these cabarets that the most radical of performances still took place. One was held in an attic of a house that was located through many side streets, past the rubble of destroyed houses.²⁰⁶ "In order

²⁰³ Quoted in Sandrow, 340-1.

²⁰⁴ Stephen Powitz, "Musical Life in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* No. 4 (1978), 6.

²⁰⁵ Moshe Fass, "Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos, 1939-1942" in Rovit and Goldfarb, 100.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

to let the public know the place of performance, guides would be stationed in many corners to direct the people. They would also see that no undesirable (German) guests would come."²⁰⁷ But, according to another description of the public Art Cafe by Mary Berg, even there one could hear songs and satires on the police, the ambulance service, and on the Gestapo. There even were jokes about the typhus epidemic, "laughter through tears."²⁰⁸ Berg's initial response was indignant, but she then evolved and wrote, "I have gradually come to realize that there is no other remedy for our ills."²⁰⁹ She also notes that like in Lodz, there was satiric comedy about community leaders and the presidents of various welfare institutions . . . portrayed by marionettes.²¹⁰ There seems to have been a disparity with these risky performances being semi-public, while other performing groups were even going to the degree of masking the non-Jewish author of their play, who happened to be none other than Molière. Performances of works by non-Jewish authors were prohibited, so instead, the theater group publicized the play as if written by their in-house translator.²¹¹ Unfortunately, little of the music from the Warsaw ghetto has survived.²¹²

In the Vilna ghetto, Sandrow explains, ". . . the cultural atmosphere was traditionally elevated, [and] there had never been the desperate frivolity of the cabarets

²⁰⁷ Jonas Turkow quoted in Fass, 99.

²⁰⁸ Mary Berg quoted in Sandrow, 345.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 345-6.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Sandrow, 346.

²¹² Two songs, "Mues" ("Money") and "Coolies," are included in the Kacerginsky anthology, *Lider fun di Ghetos un Lagern*, recently republished and edited by Tara Publications under the title *Songs Never Silenced* (Velvel Pasternak, ed., 2003). These two songs have also been recorded by Yiddish songstress Adrienne Cooper with arrangements and accompaniment by Zalmen Mlotek on their recording *Ghetto Tango: Wartime Yiddish Theater*. The song "Coolies" is comparison of the use of rickshaw carts powered by people pushing them (coolies) as transportation in China and in the Warsaw ghetto. The lyrics were written by Sh. Sheynkind, and sung by actress Diana Blumenfeld at the "Splendid" coffee-house at 12 Leshne Street. The lyricist died in Treblinka in Summer, 1942.

and home entertainments of Warsaw's ghetto."²¹³ Performances there did not develop until a bit later than elsewhere. Initially, there were protests, and Vilna was the home of the original expression "*Afn beys-oylem shpilt men nisht keyn teater!*" ("You don't play theater in a cemetery!"). Although, between January, 1942 and June, 1943 there were 119 performances for a total of 35,000 spectators.²¹⁴ In line with Vilna's high society, many of these performances were either readings of Hebrew or Yiddish poetry or performances of classic Yiddish dramas.²¹⁵ However, new *kleynkunst* made a strong impression of itself in Vilna through the performing company "Diogenes," who performed seven satirical revues, with music by Kasriel Broydo. Broydo composed greatly in the Vilna ghetto, and a number of his songs have survived.²¹⁶ Amongst other prominent songs were many songs with texts by the young poet and playwright Lev (Leyb) Rozenthal (1916-1944/5).²¹⁷ Rozenthal wrote the song "*Yisrolik*"²¹⁸ for his sister, Khayelev, to sing its debut at a concert on January 18, 1942.²¹⁹ Mischa Veksler, whose collaboration with Rozenthal is clear by other songs included in the *Songs Never Silenced* and Kaczerginsky collections, composed its music. Veksler also worked with Broydo on at least one occasion. "*Yisrolik*" is a character piece, where the singer portrays a young boy who is risking his life to smuggle food and other items into the ghetto by periodically escaping to sell cigarettes on the street. The real "*Yisroliks*" of the ghettos would smuggle their items in by wearing large overcoats with big pockets. In the song, it becomes clear that the young boy is so desperate, that he will even sing or whistle to

²¹³ Sandrow, 346.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 347.

²¹⁵ Ibid. These included those by Sholom Aleichem and Abraham Goldfaden.

²¹⁶ See *Songs Never Silenced* or Kaczerginsky for their inclusion.

²¹⁷ Many of these are included in the aforementioned anthologies.

²¹⁸ See Appendix 6-a.

²¹⁹ Shoshana Kalisch and Barbara Meister, *Yes, We Sang! Songs of the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 125.

make money. There were thousands of these children who would escape through holes in the walls or navigate the sewer system in their escape. Often times, they would find it impossible to reenter the ghetto, and needed to sleep outside the walls in ruins, cellars, or open fields. On occasion, a kind-hearted non-Jew would take them in, but this was rarely a permanent situation.²²⁰ A literal, while singable, translation of Rozenthal's lyrics tells the story:

So come and buy some cig'rettes,
Some candies and some cake,
These goods were never cheaper than today.
My life is worth a penny,
That's all I ever make,
This ghetto here is where I earn my pay.

Refrain:

I'm called Yisrolik, a kid from the ghetto.
I'm called Yisrolik, I'm tough and I am strong.
Though I'm left here in this ghetto,
I can give you a whistle and a song.

A coat without a collar,
I've pants made from a sack.
I have galoshes, but I'm out of shoes.
Whoever starts complaining,
Whoever starts to laugh,
You just be careful, I'll show you who I am!

Refrain

Don't think that I was born here,
This miserable street.
I had my mother and my father too.
But, now I have no family,
Don't think it is a joke,
Wand'ring round like winds and gypsies do.

I'm called Yisrolik, and when no one sees me,
Secretly, I wipe away a tear.
I've had troubles, let's not talk about it.

²²⁰ Ibid. See also Roman Polanski's film *The Pianist*, which features scenes of young "Yisroliks" sneaking in and out of the walls of the Warsaw ghetto.

Why remember? It makes me feel so sad.²²¹

Through his translation, Cantor Robert Abelson has made clear that the focus of this piece is less on the rhyme scheme or poetic shaping of the text, but centers itself in the simple, yet hefty weight of the words. He has chosen not to remain faithful in its entirety to the original rhyme scheme of the Yiddish, as it only becomes secondary. For these young children, their situation was anything but simple. In her anthology, Shoshana Kalisch writes that without the "*Yisroliks*," starvation would have been quicker in the ghetto. Their role was this important in the ghetto's livelihood. Furthermore,

The bravery of these children, tough and cocky on the outside but bereaved and frightened underneath, cannot be evaluated. When the ghetto fighters organized their resistance struggle, these children served as messengers to the outside world and as smugglers of arms into the ghetto. Very few survived, for most of them were hunted down by the Germans and shot.²²²

The song's organization opens with the first verse playing out the daily routine of the "*Yisrolik*." He is hawking his wares for as little as he can get with bravado, while making parallel commentary on the valuelessness of his life. It is this dichotomy of content that is a constant shift in the dialogue of this song. It shows both sides of Yisrolik's demeanor. The refrain stays within the tougher range of emotions of his personality, trying to prove that nothing can break through his shell. The second verse continues in the same manner as the first. Yisrolik is now giving a physical expression of his "persona." Yet, this really is no persona at all. This is the reality of his day-to-day life. The refrain returns, ever building the necessary artificiality of Yisrolik's shield of strength. Only in the third verse does the real boy behind Yisrolik's front peek through. He allows himself to describe his true circumstances, as if not to let people guess why he

²²¹ Translation by Cantor Robert Abelson.

²²² Kalisch and Meister, 125.

is all alone. This situation was not meant to be. In an adult manner, he recognizes the seriousness of his situation. It is not meant to be humored. This time the refrain returns with a new, more emotional tone. Yisrolik is just like you and me, no stronger or more able to take on his situation. Yisrolik's story is semi-paralleled in a song from the Lodz ghetto, "Sweet Cry for Saccharine." The song is a short jingle which survivors remember being sung on the streets in the ghettos by peddlers, many of them young, poor, and orphaned.²²³ In fact, Gila Flam collected this melody from a survivor who sang it himself when he was thirteen. The song announces the going price of the saccharine for sale. She notes that there was variance in this price amongst the various versions of the song she recorded. This reflected the economy of the ghetto and "the inevitable laws of supply and demand."²²⁴ However, the emotional investment within this song can only be attested to when one understands the background so clearly defined in "*Yisrolik*." Ultimately, "*Yisrolik*" is a song of survival and the use of the diminutive of "*Yisroel*" for the name of the character of the song represents "the essence of Jewish survival."²²⁵

The song "*Friling*" ("Spring")²²⁶ is another prominent song of the Vilna ghetto written in April, 1943. The text is by Shmerke Kaczerginsky, also the editor of the predominant collection of Yiddish songs of the Holocaust. Kaczerginsky included many of his own songs in his anthology. This song has music by Abraham Brudno, and Kaczerginsky notes that it was written in memory of the author "Mrs. Barbara from the house of Kufman in Crackow."²²⁷ He notes the song was sung on the small art-stage "*Di*

²²³ Flam, 100.

²²⁴ Ibid., 101.

²²⁵ Kalisch and Meister, 125.

²²⁶ See 6-b.

²²⁷ Kaczerginsky quoted in Velvel Pasternak, ed., *Songs Never Silenced* (New York: Tara Publications, 2003), 18.

Yogenesh in Fas ("The Rush of the Barrel"), and was continually performed in other camps, ghettos, and partisan camps.²²⁸ The song has a timeless quality in its bittersweet tone. The first verse is the only verse directing its attention at life in the ghetto:

I wander in the ghetto from street to street,
And can't find any place: my beloved isn't here.
How can one stand it? Please, please, speak to me.
Now on my house shines the blue skies.
What does that mean to me now?
I stand like a beggar by every gate and beg, a little bit of sun.²²⁹

The refrain then enters, treating spring as the saving grace to bring back the singer's lost love:

Springtime, take away my grief,
And bring my loved one, my true one back.
Springtime, on your blue wings,
Take my heart with you, and return my happiness.²³⁰

By the second verse, it is clear that the singer is either reminiscing or daydreaming. His or her mind has entirely left the ghetto. The gates of the ghetto have become a single gate on the garden of the singer's home, where the flowers are withering in mourning. Once upon a time, the long lost love was here too, but no longer:

I go to work past our little house,
In mourning – the gate is shut.
The day is shattered, the flowers wither,
They fade, for them it is night too.
In the evening on my way back,
My sorrow haunts me,
Right here, darling, you waited.
Right here in the shadow
Your footstep is familiar,
You kissed me lovingly and gently.²³¹

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Translation by Lawrence Berson in *Songs Never Silenced*, 19.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

With the return of the refrain, the singer's plead intensifies. Perhaps the hope the singer holds in the hands of spring will reawaken the peaceful memories into reality. But, as the third verse tells us, the garden is like the singer's yearning. From the sense of mourning described in verse two, it has blossomed newly with yearning as the spring arrives:

It is springtime again this year,
And it came quite early.
My yearning for you has bloomed.
I see you as if you were here,
Laden with flowers, happily you come to me.
The sun has spilled the garden with sunbeams,
The earth has spread out in green.
My true one, my darling,
Where have you gotten lost?
You never leave my memory.

If the yearning in the song seems unanswered, an answer seems to approach in the third verse. The singer searches for the lost love, but like the memories shared of the house and the garden, side-by-side with reminiscences of the lost love, it is all still there in his or her mind. This is the comforting hope of the song. Yet, the song does not end here. It returns to the passionate longing of the refrain once again. Thus, the yearning remains, and the song ends in heartbreak.

"Friling" is appropriately set in the style of a tango and when set to an accompaniment of this style, the radiance of its emotion shines through. Tango melodies were prevalent before the war within the canon of Yiddish folksongs. There even was a song called "Yiddish Tango," a tango melody that had lyrics discussing its very subject. This song became a contrafact during the Holocaust. Yiddish tango is further demonstrated by the popular song *"Makht tzu di eygelech"* ("Close Your Little Eyes") written by David Beyglman. Although this song may have remained a prominent song of Beyglman's in the Lodz ghetto, it is believed that he wrote it before the war. Just as