

Pesach 5782 Day 1 April 16, 2022

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Moshe's Development

Friends,

I'd like to explore with you a sequence of events occurring over the parshiot represented during Pesach that speak to Moshe's personal development.

We first meet Moshe in Shmot as a beautiful Jewish baby boy, cast into the Nile in a wicker basket, his sister watching anxiously from afar, awaiting whatever fate would bring.

We next meet him as a young man, privileged yet conscious of his identity and the social injustice around him. In his first autonomous act of adulthood that we see, Moshe loses self-control, succumbs to anger, and kills a man. Filled with righteous indignation, he then castigates two of his kinsmen for fighting, and then freaks out when he learns that others are aware of the murder he committed, and he skips town.

Next we observe another brash act of youthful autonomy as he displays courage, a sense of justice, and chivalry, in not only rising to defend 7 young women who are being harassed by some shepherds, but also offering to water their flock. Someone raised this boy well! Another person's son might have wanted to keep a low profile under the circumstances, but not our Moshe!

His actions here are richly rewarded. He is given a wife from among the maidens, and has a son of his own. A long time passes. The Israelites suffer while Moshe, so far as we know, lives in peace, although we don't know what internal struggles he faces as he holes up in the wilderness. Perhaps he is on an extended gap year, struggling with his identity and past actions, wondering how he got where he is, how things could have gone differently, and how to get back home, and if that were even possible. Or perhaps, as he mediated, he concluded that all who wander are not lost, but there are still things to learn...

In either case, God has clearly been impressed with this young man, and sees him as the leader needed to bring the people out of bondage. But when presented with this major career opportunity, Moshe balks. Despite the revelation he was witnessed, his confidence collapses. "Who am I..." he asks, "...what if they don't believe me?" Despite God's promised support – a good faith backing if ever there was one - Moshe suffers from an insidious Imposter Syndrome. God tries to bolster Moshe by revealing to him his heretofore unknown powers. Moshe's rod can become a snake. His hand can become diseased and then healthy again with a simple touch of his chest. God assures Moshe that Moshe has the power to turn Nile water into blood.

Moshe remains nonetheless diffident. His speech impediment unnerves him. This young, brash man, so confident in his earlier righteous indignation, so dangerously impulsive, is now paralyzed when presented with his true calling. Perhaps he fears being exposed as a fraud, set up to fail, or to rise to the level of his most naked incompetence. Perhaps, having reflected on his earlier actions, he now fears his

power. With a wife and a kid, he's got more to lose. Perhaps being a husband and a father has made him more humble, more aware of his vulnerabilities and sensitivities.

At this point, his sponsor, who has a keen ability to identify talent, becomes irritated but understands that some support is necessary to nurture Moshe's early leadership. God begins by making Aharon Moshe's chief spokesperson, instructing essentially that Moshe will play the role of God to his brother. And so he sets Moshe off making sure to include the rod, just in case Moshe's personal powers of persuasion are insufficient. The question is whether Moshe really needs the rod, or whether it is a crutch – a prop to bolster his confidence. Regardless, Moshe and Aharon set off and assemble the people. Aharon does the talking; Moshe demonstrates his powers; the people are convinced.

The newly minted leadership team gingerly takes a courageous first diplomatic step with Pharaoh - a verbal request to let the people go to a festival in the wilderness (Burning Man, or something like that). They are taken aback by Pharaoh's harsh response – a big C-Suite FU (some of you may be familiar with such meetings...). Pharaoh rebukes them, and further undermines their credibility with the Israelites by making the servitude even harsher. Shmot ends with Moshe as a shaken young leader in need of substantial confidence building. God steps in with some words of encouragement – “hang in there, Moshe, we've got 'em right where we want 'em...”

It doesn't help. Ve-era begins with a similar strategy. God tells Moshe to use his words to reassure the people –

לֵךְ אָמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי יְהוָה וְהוֹצֵאתִי

“Say to the Israelite people that I am the Lord and will free them...” (6:4)

This, of course, does nothing to appease the dispirited population. Moshe disparages himself in protest when God instructs him once again to talk to Pharaoh.

וְאֲנִי עֵרֵל שִׁפְתַּיִם

“and I, a man of impeded speech’

When events run adversely, he loses self-confidence and falls back on old insecurities that render him incapacitated.

At this point, God institutes a subtle change in approach.

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן

God directly addresses Aharon in addition to Moshe. Except on one prior occasion, when God instructs Aharon to meet Moshe in the wilderness, God has previously only directly spoken Moshe. Now he directs both of them to proceed in freeing the Israelites. First, he sets Moshe off with the rod, and now he more explicitly enlists Aharon, perhaps, as a second supportive measure. When they next meet with Pharaoh, God's direct instructions to the two brothers is precise: Moshe is to instruct Aharon to use Aharon's rod to turn into a serpent. It is Aharon's rod that then swallows the serpents created by Pharaoh's lemmings.

At this point, God turns again to speaking only to Moshe, who then instructs Aharon. It is Aharon who is to use his rod to turn the water into blood. This is particularly interesting because God has previously assured Moshe that Moshe himself possessed the ability to turn Nile water into blood on his own. Perhaps God is still concerned that Moshe remains too insecure to exercise his innate power, or still too paralyzed by his inner demons. At the same time, God reasserts the fraternal hierarchy that had been deviated from briefly, perhaps to indicate his continued ultimate confidence in Moshe.

The dynamic is similar for the next two plagues: God directs Moshe to instruct Aharon to use his rod to bring on the frogs, and then the lice. But a shift occurs in the commands for the fourth and fifth plagues: Moshe is instructed to use only his words to herald the beasts and the pestilence. Aharon is removed as the intermediary agent. The dynamic shifts further in the 6th plague: Both Aharon and Moshe are instructed to take soot into their hands, but only Moshe is instructed to throw it toward the sky, which brings on the boils. This is a major new developmental milestone for Moshe. He doesn't need either his rod or Aharon. He finally utilizes the powers contained within his own hands.

For the seventh plague and eighth plagues, as we move from Ve'era to Bo, Moshe is instructed specifically to lift only his arm to begin the hail and then the locusts, although he holds out his rod – perhaps still a bit insecure, or maybe somewhat apprehensive with the emerging understanding of the power he holds with just his hands. Or perhaps Moshe remains haunted by the power he took into his own hands so long ago when he killed the Egyptian.

By the ninth plague, however, Moshe now seems finally secure in his role. He is told to lift up his arm, and he does so, with no use of the rod. One can only imagine what he is feeling as he raises his arm and the darkness descends.

It is notable that God does not empower Moshe to initiate the final plague. Moshe is tasked with facilitating the necessary preparations for exile and Pesach, but Moshe has no direct role in the deaths of the firstborn. Perhaps God sees initiation of this action as not within the appropriate domain of any human, or perhaps he does not want to emotionally reinjure Moshe, whose life went dramatically askew after the first killing for which he was responsible so many years earlier.

Thus, over the course of several parashiot, from the time Moshe is a baby up through the 10th plague, we see the developmental course of an individual who at first is completely helpless and ostensibly powerless, and who in his young adulthood succumbs to blind rage and an unbridled power that leads to his personal exile into the physical and perhaps psychological wildness. When later called upon to serve at the highest level, and given a strong nod of confidence by a leader who sees greatness within him, Moshe nevertheless falls into paralysis fed by deep insecurity. He is shackled by his self-perceived limitations, bound by his self-doubt, enslaved by his inner demons. With the careful, deliberate stepwise guidance of a leader who has bestowed enormous responsibility upon him, and some brotherly assistance, he grows sequentially more confident, until he ultimately reaches his full potential, his highest level of brilliant competence. To be sure, there is a lot more that can be explored about Moshe's personal development when we look at his actions at the Yom Suf, Mei Marivah, and the war with Amalek. And there are clear leadership lessons to be learned here about bringing along apprentices, mentees, and our children.

But there is a universal lesson here that resonates particularly on Pesach for all of us. It is one about unshackling ourselves from the emotions that derail us, liberating ourselves from the insecurities that oppress us, harnessing our self-discipline and freeing ourselves to realize our fullest potential. It is a

message that was succinctly conveyed by Bob Marley who, in paraphrasing Marcus Garvey, admonished: "Emancipate yourself from inner slavery, None but ourselves can free our minds."