

# Moshe – Overview

**This topic is still being developed and updated**

## Introduction

For many readers, Moshe Rabbeinu looms larger than life. He is an unparalleled prophet and miracle-maker with a unique connection to Hashem, the only human to regularly speak to God face to face. But he is also a leader of men, someone who stands up to kings, champions the cause of justice, and manages a fledgling nation in a grueling wilderness. He provides for both the people's physical and spiritual needs, nurturing, chastising, defending and teaching in turn. And, somehow, he still manages to be the most humble of beings.

The overview below will attempt to explore both Moshe's character and career, looking at his unique traits and triumphic moments but also at his challenges and difficulties. It will look at not only Moshe Rabbeinu after he has become a beloved leader, but also Moshe the person en route to leadership. Commentators discuss both of these stages, often differing greatly in their evaluations and explanations of Moshe's deeds. The varying portraits drawn leave much food for thought and many lessons to explore.

## Prophet

### Unparalleled prophecy

Devarim 34 declares Moshe's prophetic abilities unparalleled: "ולא קם נביא עוד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ יְיָ פְּנִים" "אל פְּנִים".

- **In what way was Moshe's prophecy unique?** Commentators differ in their understanding of the phrase "אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ יְיָ פְּנִים אֵל פְּנִים":
  - **Full comprehension** – R"Y Bekhor Shor compares this phrase to Bemidbar 12's statement, "פֶּה אֶל" "פֶּה אֶדְבָּר בּוֹ וּמְרָאָה וְלֹא בְּחֵידִית". Unlike other prophets, when Moshe spoke to Hashem the message was not revealed via parables or visions which allow for errors in interpretation, but in a straightforward fashion which left no room for unknowns.
  - **Propheesied while awake** – According to Ralbag the verse is sharing that Moshe received prophecy while awake and in full control of all his faculties.<sup>1</sup>
  - **Direct line to Hashem** – Abarbanel, instead, claims that Moshe's uniqueness lay in his having a direct line to Hashem, enabling him to act without the need for prayer. See Moshe's Epitaph for more.
- **Moshe at the Decalogue** – What role did Moshe play during revelation? Did he have the same prophetic experience as the rest of the nation, or did he receive more than they?
  - Rambam and R. D"Z Hoffmann claim the latter. The people heard only the voice of Hashem, but could not distinguish His words, while Moshe understood all. Moshe, thus, was needed to act as a mediator, translating each of God's utterances to the people. As such, the main purpose of revelation was not to instill faith in Hashem, but to teach the nation to believe in Moshe's prophecy. For elaboration, see The Decalogue: Direct From Hashem or Via Moshe.

- **Moshe vs. Bilam** – Commentators debate whether Bilam's prophetic abilities might have been on par with those of Moshe:
  - See Sifrei Devarim, Midrash Tannaim, and Bemidbar Rabbah who claim that Bilam might have reached Moshe's level of prophecy and that the verse in Devarim 34 means only that Moshe's prophetic abilities were unparalleled among Israelite prophets.<sup>2</sup>
  - Others strongly disagree, emphasizing that Bilam was, in fact, only a low level prophet. Thus, Rambam claims that Bilam attained only the level of "רוח הקודש" but not full-fledged prophecy. See Bilam for more.

## Prophetic Autonomy?

Throughout most of Torah, Moshe acts according to the Divine command. However, on occasion, he appears to act without prior Divine consultation, even declaring on his own initiative that miracles will occur.<sup>3</sup> On other occasions, we find him speaking in Hashem's name even though we have no previous record of any such speech of Hashem.<sup>4</sup> Are we to assume that in all of these cases, despite the textual silence, Moshe must nonetheless have operated according to a received Divine directive? Or, is it possible that, at times, Moshe had the authority to make his own decisions, declare miracles on his own, and even to attribute these initiatives to Hashem? Commentators debate the question:

- **All Divinely commanded** – All of Moshe's deeds and everything he conveyed in Hashem's name was Divinely commanded. Despite Hashem's instructions not being explicitly mentioned, it can be assumed or implied from context that they were communicated to Moshe.<sup>5</sup>
- **Moshe's own initiative** – In certain instances, Moshe had the autonomy to determine his own course of action even without Hashem's prior approval. Moreover, he could even invoke supernatural means to do so and /or lend authority to his decisions by invoking Hashem's name.<sup>6</sup> For further discussion and sources, see Prophetic Actions Without Explicit Divine Sanction and Invoking Hashem's Name Without Explicit Divine Sanction.

## Miracle Maker

The concluding verses of Torah suggest that no other prophet compares to Moshe, not only in his prophetic prowess, but also in all of the signs and wonders he wrought. What, though, was so exceptional about Moshe's miracle-making? Did not other prophets perform similar feats?<sup>7</sup> [See Moshe's Epitaph – Signs and Wonders and Miracles for full discussion.]

- **Abundance** – Ramban, Ralbag, and Shadal assert that Moshe's miracles were unparalleled due to their sheer numbers, duration, and/or the area which they affected.
- **Wide audience** – R"Y Bekhor Shor and Rambam suggest, instead, that Moshe's wonders surpassed those of others because they were viewed by a wider audience. While most prophets performed miracles for individuals or a small portion of the nation, Moshe's were known to all of the Children of Israel as well as the surrounding nations.
- **Instantaneous** – Abarbanel explains that in contrast to other prophets, Moshe could bring miracles without needing to first pray. Moshe's face to face connection enabled a direct hotline to Hashem and instantaneous implementation.

- **Not unique** – Sforno uniquely suggests that the verse is saying only that Moshe's prophetic powers were singular, but not that his miracle making was superior to others.

## Unique Traits

### Sense of Justice

See Tzeror HaMor who points to the fact that in Shemot 2, Moshe saved not just his fellow Israelites from injustice but also unknown Midianite women as proof that Moshe was driven by a sense of justice and mercy and not just kinship. It was this trait, he suggests, that merited Moshe to be the leader of Israel. See below, though, that not all share this positive view of Moshe's Killing of the Egyptian.

### Humility

"מי אנכי כי אלה אלהיך" (Shemot 3:11) – When Hashem tasks Moshe with the mission of confronting Paroh to demand that he let the nation go, Moshe responds, "מי אנכי כי אלה אלהיך". Is Moshe's hesitation to accept Hashem's mission an expression of modesty, fear, or something else?

- **Modesty** – Rashi, R"Y Bekhor Shor, Rabbag, and R. Hirsch all see in Moshe's initial refusal evidence of Moshe's humility. He truly believed that he was not worthy of the mission.
- **Fear / insecurity** – Lekach Tov and Ramban assert that Moshe feared that Paroh would kill him, while Rabbag posits that Moshe lacked confidence due to his speech impediment.
- **Lack of Concern** – It is also possible that Moshe's hesitation stemmed from a lack of connection to both Hashem and the Israelite nation. Having grown up in the palace, he might not have had much knowledge of his Israelite roots and its belief system prior to Hashem's revelation to him. If so, he might have felt no responsibility to aid the nation, or else that he was an inappropriate candidate to lead them. [See the discussions below about Moshe's upbringing and religious Identity.]

"והאיש משה ענו מאד" (Bemidbar 12:3) – This verse declares Moshe to be more humble than any other individual.

### Possible Sins

In several places in Torah, commentators question Moshe's behavior and suggest that he might have sinned, even if this is not explicit in the text:

#### Moshe's Killing of the Egyptian (Shemot 2)

Many laud Moshe for killing the Egyptian taskmaster (Shemot 2:11-12) and view him as championing the cause of justice. Others, though, question whether his response was not overly harsh and if Moshe was justified in taking the law into his own hands: [See Moshe's Killing of the Egyptian for elaboration.]

- **Justified** – The majority of commentators justify Moshe's actions by suggesting either that in killing the taskmaster Moshe was actively saving a life (Shemot Rabbah) or that the Egyptian was guilty of a capital crime, having committed adultery with the slain Hebrew's wife (Tanchuma). R. D"Z Hoffman, instead, argues that the trampling of human rights in Egypt was so massive that legal norms did not apply.
- **Unjustified** – Midrash Petirat Moshe, in contrast, finds Moshe's deed blameworthy and suggests that he was even punished as a result.<sup>8</sup>

- **Unintentional** – R. Saadia Gaon charts a middle ground, suggesting that Moshe's action was indeed problematic, but unintentional. He had meant only to harm the Egyptian, not to kill him.

### Moshe at the Malon (Shemot 4)

Hashem's attempt to kill Moshe (or perhaps his son) during the incident at the inn (Shemot 4:24-26) implies that there had been some serious transgression. Yet, there is no explicit mention of any wrongdoing in the text. Moreover, attributing a crime to Moshe implies that Hashem had chosen an unworthy messenger! How, then, is the story to be understood? Is it a tale of sin and punishment or something else? For details, see Mystery at the Malon.

- **Sinned in not circumcising his son** – Many Tannaitic sources, working backwards from the circumcision at the story's conclusion, suggest that Moshe must have been lax in circumcising his son. While Yerushalmi Nedarim and Shemot Rabbah attempt to minimize Moshe's guilt by explaining that there was merely a slight delay due to the journey, R. Elazar HaModai tries to find a crime more befitting Hashem's harsh response and proposes that Moshe has sealed a pact with Yitro that one of his sons would never be circumcised.
- **Sinned in delaying his mission** – Rashbam connects the sin to the larger context of the story and the national mission upon which Moshe was embarking. He suggests that Moshe sinned in bringing his family to Egypt as this caused him to tarry and delay the redemption of Israel.<sup>9</sup>
- **Miscalculation** – Ibn Ezra implies that Moshe did not so much sin as make an error in judgment. As bringing Moshe's family to Egypt might have demoralized the nation,<sup>10</sup> Hashem told Moshe to circumcise his son enroute so as to ensure that the family remained behind.
- **No sin** – Ibn Kaspi goes further to suggest that Moshe did not err at all. Moshe's anxiety at having to confront Paroh and warn him of his son's impending death is what made Moshe gravely ill.

### "למה הרעתה לעם הזה" – An Unwarranted Accusation? (Shemot 5)

After Moshe's initial failed negotiations with Paroh, he accuses Hashem, "why have you harmed the nation?!" (Shemot 5:22). Considering that Hashem had previously told him that Paroh was not going to acquiesce immediately, Moshe's complaint appears unwarranted, leading commentators to question whether it constituted a sin:

- **Unwarranted** – Bavli Sanhedrin 111a has Hashem castigate Moshe for questioning Him and not trusting that He would punish Paroh and redeem the nation. It even suggests that Moshe's inability to enter Israel and participate in the Wars of Conquest was punishment for casting such aspersions on Hashem.
- **Appropriate** – Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, maintains that Moshe's complaint was legitimate. Moshe was distressed not that Paroh had refused to free the nation, but that he had intensified the workload due to Moshe's demands. Cassuto goes further to suggest that Moshe's words betrayed true leadership. It is a leader's job to look out for his flock, even if that means speaking harshly to Hashem.<sup>11</sup>

### "הצאן ובקר ישחט להם ומצא להם" – Lack of faith? (Bemidbar 11)

When the nation complains about lack of food in Bemidbar 11 and Hashem tells Moshe that he will bring them meat, Moshe appears to question Hashem's abilities, asking: "שש מאות אֶלֶף רִגְלֵי הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי בְקִרְבּוֹ" (Bemidbar 11:21). How is Moshe's question to be understood? Does it not betray a lack of faith in Hashem?

- **No doubts** – Many suggest that Moshe did not sin in these words and never doubted Hashem's abilities. According to R"Y Bekhor Shor, Moshe's words were not an expression of doubt, but simple curiosity.<sup>12</sup> Ralbag, instead, suggests that Moshe doubted himself, not Hashem. Given that the nation was undeserving and the food unnecessary, Moshe wondered whether, under the circumstances, a miracle could possibly be brought by his hand.<sup>13</sup>
- **Doubts** – Rashi, in contrast, assumes that Moshe did indeed doubt Hashem, but was not punished as this was a private sin and thus caused no desecration of Hashem's name.

### Moshe and Mei Merivah (Bemidbar 20)

In this story Hashem explicitly punishes Moshe (and Aharon), telling them "לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל". It is not at all clear, however, what specific action constituted the sin, and why this error was so grievous that it resulted in the brothers being refused entry into the Land. For more, see Moshe's Misstep and Mei Merivah.

- **Sin** – Commentators mine almost every word of the text, raising numerous possible sins, including: lack of faith (Rashbam and Sforno),<sup>14</sup> desecration of Hashem's name (R. Chananel, Rashi, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor),<sup>15</sup> excessive anger (Rambam and Ibn Kaspi),<sup>16</sup> and faulty leadership (Minchah Belulah).<sup>17</sup>
- **No Sin** – Ralbag and Abarbanel also raise the possibility that Moshe did not sin at all in this episode and that his being denied entry was either collective punishment for sins of the nation, or due to previous misdeeds.

### Possible Flaws

#### Misunderstanding Hashem

Commentators disagree as to whether it is legitimate to maintain that Moshe could have ever misunderstood Hashem. After all, if a prophet can make a mistake and misinterpret Hashem's words, how can he be trusted to correctly transmit Hashem's messages?

- **Moshe could have misunderstood Hashem** – Several sources assert that it is possible that, on occasion, Moshe erred in understanding Hashem's speech, causing him to question Hashem's actions:<sup>18</sup>
  - **Korach's rebellion** – Both R. Chananel<sup>19</sup> and Sforno suggest that Moshe misunderstood Hashem's statement "הַבְּדִלוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶכְלֶה אֹתָם" (Bemidbar 16:21) to mean that Hashem intended to wipe out the entire nation, when Hashem really was referring only to the congregation of Korach. This led Moshe to question Hashem's seeming injustice in collectively punishing the innocent.<sup>20</sup> See Dialogue with the Divine During Korach's Rebellion for discussion and additional sources.
  - **The spies** – Sforno suggests that Moshe similarly misunderstood Hashem in the aftermath of the spies' report. When Hashem said, "אֶקְוֶה בְּדַבְּרִי" (Bemidbar 14:12), he thought that Hashem planned to exterminate the nation all at once.<sup>21</sup> Hashem, though, had really meant that he planned to destroy the nation slowly, over forty years in the Wilderness. It was this misunderstanding which led Moshe to question, "what will the nations say."

- **Moshe could not have misunderstood Hashem** – R. Mubashir HaLevi,<sup>22</sup> and Ramban<sup>23</sup> vehemently argue against the possibility that Moshe could err in understanding Hashem.<sup>24</sup>

## Lack in Leadership

**Administrative Shortcomings** – Some exegetes suggest that Moshe exhibited certain weaknesses as an administrator, while others think that saying so borders on the blasphemous:

- **Yitro's Advice (Shemot 18)** – When Yitro sees the nation standing online to await Moshe's judgment, he suggests that Moshe delegate some of his responsibilities to lighten the load. Yitro's advice seems like such an obvious and simple solution that one cannot help but wonder: How could it be that Moshe, the greatest of all men and in possession of a direct line to Hashem, needed Yitro's help to figure this out? [See Did Moshe Need Yitro's Advice?]
  - Ralbag suggests that due to Moshe's closeness to Hashem, he was indeed deficient in civic leadership.
  - Abarbanel strongly disagrees, claiming that it is impossible that Moshe was flawed in this regard.

**Lack of initiative?** Though many suggest that Moshe's sin at Mei Merivah in Bemidbar 20 related to the realm of man and God, others suggest that the problem was one of faulty leadership, specifically Moshe's lack of initiative.

- See, for instance, Minchah Belulah who asserts that in "fleeing" to the Tent of Meeting, Moshe betrayed a fear of the nation and an inability to act and rebuke them on his own.
- Others, though, see in this very same action a positive act. According to them, prophetic greatness lies in strict obedience to Hashem's word. A prophet should not act on his own, but must always consult with Hashem and follow Hashem's commands. For further discussion, see Prophetic Actions Without Explicit Divine Sanction.

**Misunderstanding the nation?** – Commentators raise the possibility that in certain instances there might have been a communication gap between Moshe and the people:

- **Petition of the Two and a Half Tribes** – In this story, Moshe initially responds negatively to the request to settle the eastern bank of the Jordan, chastising the tribes for leaving the burden of fighting to the rest of the nation (Bemidbar 32). Immediately thereafter, Reuven and Gad express their willingness not just to fight, but even to lead the nation in battle, whereupon Moshe agrees to their original demands. What leads to the about-face both on the part of the tribes and on the part of Moshe? Did the tribes change their stance only due to Moshe's condemnation, or had they always planned to take part in the Conquest? Might Moshe have misunderstood their intent?
  - **Moshe misjudges** – Abarbanel maintains that Moshe misunderstood the tribes' request and wrongly assumed that they did not want to participate in the Canaanite campaign when they had meant to all along.<sup>25</sup>
  - **Moshe judges correctly** – Akeidat Yitzchak, in contrast, justifies Moshe's angry reaction, opining that Moshe correctly read the tribes' petition and that it really was problematic both on the

interpersonal level,<sup>26</sup> and in relation to Hashem.<sup>27</sup> In face of Moshe's anger, the tribes revise their proposition and only then does Moshe agree.

## Errors in Judgment

Several commentators suggest that, at times, Moshe might have made errors in judgement:

- **Mystery at the Malon** – See Ibn Ezra's understanding of the story discussed above.
- **Story of the spies** – See Abarbanel who suggests that the nation requested spies to determine the route of the conquest and which cities they should attack, but Moshe, on his own, added that they should also evaluate the strength of the people and the fortifications of the cities and the like. Though Moshe had good intentions, it was this further scrutiny that led to the spies' failure.<sup>28</sup>

## Anger

Several commentators have faulted Moshe for unwarranted anger:

- **Explicit cases** – The Torah explicitly notes Moshe's wrath in three places:<sup>29</sup> Shemot 16:20 (after the nation leaves over from the manna), Vayikra 10:16 (when Aharon's sons burn the goat of the sin-offering), and Bemidbar 31:14 (when the officers leave the women alive in the war with Midyan).
  - Numerous Rabbinic sources criticize Moshe for this loss of control and say that Moshe's anger caused him to forget either the Halakhah or the need to convey it to the people – see Sifra, Sifre Bemidbar, Bavli Pesachim, Vayikra Rabbah.
  - However, Ralbag excuses such outbursts by saying that Moshe was so spiritual that he was angered even by what appeared to be slight deviations from Halakhah.<sup>30</sup>
- **Non explicit cases** – There are a number of additional cases where some commentators claim that Moshe's temper got the better of him:
  - Moshe's Killing of the Egyptian – R" Y Bekhor Shor attributes Moshe's killing of the Egyptian taskmaster in Shemot 2 to his anger boiling over out of mercy for his brethren, rather than to a strict sense of law and order.<sup>31</sup>
  - Breaking the tablets – Ramban attributes Moshe's breaking of the tablets to a loss of control upon seeing the nation sin with the Calf. Moshe was so upset that he could not hold back<sup>32</sup> and smashed the tablets.<sup>33</sup>
  - Moshe and Mei Merivah – Rambam and Ibn Kaspi assert that Moshe's sin at Mei Merivah was his excessive anger, leading him to inappropriately refer to the nation as "rebels" and to defy God's instructions by hitting the rock (Bemidbar 20:10-11).<sup>34</sup>

## Speech Impediment

The three verses of Shemot 4:10, 6:12, and 6:30 describe Moshe's speech impediment using the terms of "כָּבֵד פִּי וְכָבֵד לְשׁוֹן" and "עָרַל שְׂפָתַיִם". Exegetes debate whether or not this disability was of a physical nature, and why Hashem would choose a disabled messenger to be His spokesman. See Moshe's Speech Impediment.

- **Physical disability** – According to Shemot Rabbah, R. Chananel and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Moshe's speech impediment was of a physical nature and involved difficulties in letter pronunciation or stuttering. The Ran states that Hashem intentionally chose a leader who was not a charismatic speaker to insure

that all would recognize that the miracles of the Exodus were brought about not by oratorical talents but rather by Hashem's will.<sup>35</sup>

- **Non-physical disability** – Rashbam deems it impossible that Hashem would elect to transmit the Torah through a stutterer, leading him to posit that Moshe's challenge was an inability to speak Egyptian well.<sup>36</sup> Lekach Tov and Ralbag more simply suggest that Moshe was not a gifted orator and incapable of ordering his speech in a clear and organized manner. Ralbag explains that this was a result of Moshe's high spiritual level which led him to have difficulties in mundane dealings with humans.<sup>37</sup>

## Birth and Upbringing

### Miraculous Birth?

Commentators divide in how they view Moshe's birth and early years, with some presenting every aspect of these as being filled with miracles and others seeing them in a more natural light.

- **Yocheved's Age**<sup>38</sup> – Rashi, following Bavli Sotah, asserts that Yocheved bore Moshe at the advanced age of 130. Ibn Ezra disagrees, claiming that if there had been such a miracle the Torah would have shared it.<sup>39</sup>
- **Premature Birth?** Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) and Rashi, noting that Yocheved hid Moshe for 3 months, assert that Moshe was born prematurely, after just six months of pregnancy. Ibn Ezra disagrees, pointing out that the Egyptians had no way of knowing when a woman conceives.
- **"כי טוב הוא"** – While Bavli Sotah and Rashi claim that this phrase implies that some miracle occurred upon Moshe's birth, the house was filled light or that Moshe was born circumcised, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra more simply claim that Yocheved saw that Moshe was unblemished<sup>40</sup> and handsome.
- **"וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת אֶמְתָּהּ"** – Bavli Sotah understands this phrase to mean that the arm of Paroh's daughter stretched to reach Baby Moshe, while Ibn Ezra explain that she sent a maidservant to fetch the baby. The varying positions impact a second question – was Moshe's true identity a secret known only to the princess, or were others aware of it?
- **"וַתִּרְאֶהוּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד"** – Rashi, following Bavli Sotah, understands the seemingly extraneous "וַתִּרְאֶהוּ" to mean that Paroh's daughter saw the Divine presence with Moshe. Ibn Ezra claims, instead, that the doubling is for clarification.
- **"מִיִּנְקָת מִן הָעִבְרִית"** – According to Bavli Sotah and Rashi, the princess asked for a Hebrew wet nurse because Moshe had refused all the Egyptian ones. A mouth that was to speak with God could not be sullied. Akeidat Yitzchak, instead, suggests that due to Paroh's decree, there were many Israelite mothers bereft of their children who were available to nurse others.

### Palace Upbringing

Why might Hashem have orchestrated events so that Moshe would be brought up specifically in the palace of a king?

- **Education** – Philo and Ralbag point to the royal education received by Moshe, which provided him with both much knowledge and vital leadership skills.
- **Self confidence** – Both Ibn Ezra and Ralbag point out that by growing up in the palace, Moshe acquired a self-confidence<sup>41</sup> that he would never have received had he been raised a slave.<sup>42</sup>

- **Outsider status** – Ibn Ezra further suggests that effective leadership requires that others fear and look up to you. Had the nation known Moshe from his youth, they would not be able to view him as their superior.

## Family Ties

What did Moshe know of his biological family? Did his family maintain a relationship with him after he was adopted by the princess? Shemot 4:14 implies that he and Aharon had a close relationship, but if he grew up in the palace where did this come from? These questions are related to a textual ambiguity. Shemot 2:10 states, "וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבָאֶהוּ לְבֵת פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֵן". How old was Moshe when he "grew up" and was adopted by the princess?

- **Moved after weaning** – Shemot Rabbah suggests that the phrase "וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד" refers to Moshe's weaning and that Moshe moved to the palace at the age of two. If so, it is possible that Moshe did not really know his family. Shadal,<sup>43</sup> however, asserts that Yocheved visited her son from time to time, and that Moshe thus had a continued connection to his family.<sup>44</sup>
- **Moved as a youth** – Alternatively, though, one could suggest that "וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד" means that Moshe only left his home after he matured and was no longer a young boy. See R. Chama in Shemot Rabbah who suggests that Moshe was 12 when taken from his parents' home.
- **Never moved** – HaKorem (as cited by Shadal) uniquely suggests that Moshe actually never moved to live in the palace. According to him, the word "וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֵן" in Shemot 2:10 refers to Yocheved, who requested of Paroh's daughter that she (Yocheved) receive the boy as a son instead of a nursing fee. Alternatively, the phrase "וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֵן" does refer to the princess, but might merely mean that she served as a "godmother" while Moshe lived in his real home.<sup>45</sup>

## Religious Identity

### Journey to Belief

At what age did Moshe recognize that he was an Israelite? How did he know that the Israelites were "his brothers"? Had he any connection to his nation and Hebrew roots while growing up? What did he know of Hashem? Though most readers assume that Moshe was "religious from birth", the verses are less clear.

- **Always viewed himself as Israelite** – According to those opinions that Moshe lived at home for a significant period of time, that he had a continued relationship with his parents, or that he never moved to the palace at all (see discussion above), Moshe was likely always very connected to his nation, its values, and its monotheistic belief system.
- **Cognizant of Israelite identity only later** – Ramban, in contrast, maintains that Moshe first found out that he was Israelite in later years, right before he went out to "see his brothers". This would suggest that he knew almost nothing about his nation or its belief system when fleeing to Midyan. If so, Moshe's story might be one of a journey towards belief rather than of a leader born into it. It is perhaps first at the "burning bush," when Hashem reveals Himself to Moshe, that their relationship begins.
- **Somewhere in the middle** – Ralbag takes a middle position, implying that though Moshe grew up in the palace, he nonetheless knew about his Israelite roots early on. He even raises the possibility that everyone in the palace might have known that Moshe was an Israelite.<sup>46</sup> It is not clear according to this

reading, however, how this knowledge impacted Moshe. Though he might have known his "real" nationality, did Moshe prefer to identify as Hebrew or Egyptian? What did he know of Hashem?

The issue is related to several other questions:

- When Moshe saved the Hebrew from the taskmaster, were his actions motivated by a feeling of brotherhood or just a strong sense of justice?
- When the daughters of Reuel speak about Moshe's aiding them, they say, "אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם הָיָה". Does this imply that Moshe, too, viewed himself first and foremost as an Egyptian?
- How is one to understand Moshe's marriage to Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest? [See discussion below.]
- "גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְיָן" - In naming his son Gershom, was Moshe suggesting that he felt like a foreigner in Midyan because they were not Israelite (Malbim), or because they were not Egyptian?

## Moshe at the Burning Bush

How is Moshe's hesitancy to accept his mission to be understood? See the discussion above regarding Moshe's statement "מִי אֲנִי כִּי אֵלֶּךָ אֶל פְּרַעֲהוֹ".

## Intermarriage?

The question of whether Moshe intermarried arises regarding both his marriage to Zipporah, described in Shemot 2, and his marriage to the Cushite woman, alluded to in Bemidbar 12:

**I. Moshe's Marriage to Zipporah** – How could Moshe marry the daughter of an idolatrous priest? [For elaboration, see Moshe's Family Life, Zipporah, and Yitro – Religious Identity.]

- **Zipporah was monotheistic** – Several sources maintain that Zipporah either converted (Midrash Tadshe) or was a monotheist from beforehand (R. Mubashir HaLevi). R. Saadia, Tanchuma and Shemot Rabbah go further to suggest that Yitro, too, was monotheistic and/or converted from his pagan beliefs before meeting Moshe.
- **Zipporah was a heathen** – Others suggest that Zipporah was idolatrous when she married, and that perhaps even afterwards she might have continued to cling to her old beliefs (see Shadal and the opinion rejected by Ibn Ezra). This position explains and justifies Moshe's marriage in varying ways:
  - **No prohibition before Sinai** – Rashi explains that before the revelation at Sinai, there was no prohibition of intermarriage. Everyone had the status of Noachides, and Zipporah converted with the entire nation at Mt. Sinai. This led Moshe to look for a woman of good character.
  - **No choice** – Ibn Ezra defends Moshe by claiming that there was nobody else to marry in Midyan.
  - **Moshe unaffiliated** – It is also possible that Moshe had only limited religious affiliation when he married Zipporah, and that had this been later in life he would not have married her.<sup>47</sup>

**II. Moshe's Marriage to the Cushite** – Bemidbar 12:1 shares that Miryam and Aharon complained about "the Cushite woman which Moshe took". This is the first time that this marriage is spoken of in Tanakh. When and why did Moshe marry a Cushite? The fact that the siblings gossip about it in Bemidbar would suggest that it took place after the Revelation at Sinai. If so, why was this legitimate? Were the siblings not justified in their critique?

- **No intermarriage** – According to the Sifre and Rashi, the verse is actually speaking not of a new wife but rather of Zipporah. Moreover, the siblings gossip not about their marriage but rather their separation. According to these sources, then, Moshe never married a Cushite and the question of the legitimacy of such a marriage never arises.
- **Intermarriage** – Rashbam and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, in contrast, assume that Moshe did indeed intermarry and it was about this that Miryam and Aharon complained. If so, though, one must wonder why Hashem does not seem to share their negative evaluation of the marriage. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor leaves this question unanswered, saying merely: "אין גלויין לנו, אלא נודע למה היתה סיבה זאת של משה, אין גלויין לנו". Rashbam, though, suggests that the marriage took place long before the revelation at Sinai, and moreover, that Moshe never consummated the marriage. For further discussion, see Miryam's Critique of Moshe and his Cushite Marriage.

### Was Moshe's Son Uncircumcised and Why?

- See the various approaches in Mystery at the Malon

## Marriage and Family Life

### Marriage

See the discussions above regarding whether or not Moshe intermarried and how his marriage to both Zipporah and the Cushite have been viewed.

### Divorce?

Shemot 18 describes how Yitro returns Zipporah to Moshe "אחר שלוחיה". Does this phrase suggest that Moshe had previously divorced his wife? See אחר שלוחיה and When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan.

- **Divorce** – R. Yehoshua in Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael claims that the words "אחר שלוחיה" teach that the two had been divorced. This position might be motivated by a desire that Moshe not be married to the daughter of an idolatrous priest when he became the leader of the Children of Israel. If so, it is possible that they never remarried.<sup>48</sup> R. D"Z Hoffmann, in contrast, suggests that the divorce might have only been a formality while Moshe was in danger.
- **Separation** – R. Elazar HaMadai in Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Rashi and Ibn Ezra all suggest that Moshe only separated from Zipporah for a short period. While enroute to Egypt to confront Paroh, Moshe realized that it would be better for his family to return to Midyan until after the Exodus. Moshe might have realized that journeying with his family would delay him. Alternatively, he felt that his family's presence might be demoralizing to the nation as it suggested that the Exodus was not imminent. See Mystery at the Malon and When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan.

## Children

See the discussion above regarding why they were not circumcised.

## In-laws

- **Who was Moshe's father-in-law?** In Shemot 2:16-21, Zipporah's father is introduced as Reuel, yet in subsequent chapters (Shemot 3:1, Shemot 4:18 and Shemot 18) it is Yitro who is referred to as "*choten* Moshe" (a term generally understood to mean father-in-law). To complicate matters further, Bemidbar

10:29 speaks of "Chovav the son of Reuel the Midianite, the *choten* of Moshe". What is the relationship between all the various characters? Was Yitro, Reuel, or Chovav Moshe's father-in-law?

- Commentators offer almost every possible permutation of the characters' relationship one to another, with some positing that there were 3 distinct individuals (M. Mendelssohn in the *Blur*), others identifying all three characters as one and the same person, (Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael) and yet others identifying just two of the three: Yitro and Reuel (Hoil Moshe) or Yitro and Chovav (Rashbam).
- The various possibilities allow Yitro to be either Moshe's father-in-law, brother-in-law or grandfather-in-law. For details, see Yitro – Names.
- **A unique relationship** – Whether Yitro is Moshe's father-in-law or brother-in-law, the two appear to have a fairly positive relationship. In contrast to Yaakov and Lavan or David and Shaul, who are in constant strife, Moshe and Yitro appear to get along without trickery, jealousy or hatred. For a detailed comparison of the various relationships and how this might shed light on the characters of Moshe and Yitro, see In-laws.

## The Nation's Perceptions of Moshe

### Questioning Moshe's Authority

The nation's travels in the Wilderness are marked by complaints, many of them aimed at Moshe. In any given story, though, the fact that Moshe is the address of the people's grievances might stem from one of two opposing attitudes – trust and dependence on Moshe or rebellion against him.

- **Trust** – See Derashot HaRan that most of the nation's complaints to Moshe likely stemmed from their utter dependence upon him. They were not a sign of rebellion but of need; the people continuously whined to Moshe because they trusted him to help and provide for them, not because they thought he had failed them.<sup>49</sup>
- **Rebellion** – Others see in many of the people's complaints (at least after the first year) a direct challenge to Moshe:
  - **Tavera and Kivrot HaTa'avah** – In contrast to the complaints of the first year which are addressed to Moshe, the complaints of Tavera and Kivrot HaTa'avah are aired in public. This is perhaps the problem; the nation is no longer looking for Moshe to aid them but for Moshe to take the blame.
  - **Miryam and Aharon** – See Miryam's Critique of Moshe for opinions which suggest that the siblings were not merely gossiping about Moshe's wife but contesting Moshe's leadership and claiming themselves his equal.
  - **The spies** – Commentators debate the specific sin of the people which led to their punishment in the aftermath of the spies' report. See Derashot haRan who claims that the nation's main error was their statement "נִתְּנָה רֹאשׁ וְנִשְׁוֶבָה מִצְרָיִם" and their desire to replace Moshe with a new leader.

- **Korach's rebellion** – Commentators debate what was the main focal point of the uprising, but see Ramban in Korach's Rebellion who claims that Datan and Aviram's complaint was aimed solely at Moshe, as they challenged his leadership and failure to bring the nation to the Promised Land.

## Comparison to Other Figures

Setting up foils is often a useful method to highlight the unique aspects of a character or story. What can be learned about Moshe from the following comparisons?

- Moshe and Yehoshua
- Moshe and Eliyahu at Sinai

## Moshe in the Arts

Moshe's life and deeds have been often depicted in the arts. The varying artistic renderings offer differing interpretive stances on each story, adding another layer to the text. See some of the examples below:

- Moshe Saved from the Nile in Art
- Moshe Killing the Egyptian in Art
- Burning Bush in Art
- Yitro's Arrival in Art
- Moshe and the Luchot in Art
- Mei Merivah in Art

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<sup>1</sup> See also Sforno.

<sup>2</sup> They, do, nonetheless note the differences between the two.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Shemot 8, Moshe tells Paroh, without prior discussion with Hashem, to set a time for the plague of frogs to end, promising that it will terminate as requested. During Korach's rebellion, Moshe appears to independently devise an "incense test" to prove whom God has chosen (Bemidbar 16:1-7), and later declares that the rebellion's leaders will die an unnatural death. Finally, when Reuven and Gad negotiate to settle the land east of the Jordan (Bemidbar 32), Moshe grants them permission to do so without first consulting with Hashem.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Moshe proclaims both the plague of locusts and firstborns in the name of God, though Hashem had not previously told Moshe the nature of these upcoming plagues. In the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf (Shemot 32), Moshe employs the name of God ("לַיהוָה אֱמַר יי") in commanding the Levites to kill all idolaters. However, no record exists of any such explicit Divine command. In Vayikra 9, after the consecration of the Mishkan, Moshe directs Aharon regarding several sacrificial procedures, telling him, "זֶה יי הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי". Nowhere, though, does the Torah recount Hashem's giving of this directive.

<sup>5</sup> See above that, according to Abarbanel, in this lay Moshe's greatness. Since Moshe had a "direct line" to Hashem, he never had to make independent decisions.

<sup>6</sup> Some commentators allow for one of these, but not the other. Thus, though Ramban allows for the possibility that Moshe might perform wonders at his own discretion, he does not agree that this is accompanied by a license to attribute one's own decisions to Hashem.

<sup>7</sup> Was Yehoshua's making the sun stand still or Eliyahu's reviving of the dead any less remarkable than Moshe's miracles?

<sup>8</sup> The Midrash contains a picturesque account of Moshe's dialogue with Hashem before his death, where Moshe pleads with Hashem not to die. Hashem responds that he is deserving of death for this very incident, telling Moshe, "כלום אמרתי לך שתהרוג את המצרי".

<sup>9</sup> He compares Moshe's sin to those of Bilam, Yaakov and Yonah who similarly tried to avoid fulfilling the mission assigned them by Hashem, and who were similarly punished. Each is put into a potentially fatal situation, and, like Moshe, each of Yaakov and Bilam are also injured or touched on the thigh. It is possible that in all three cases the leg is specifically chosen as a "measure for measure" punishment for not going to do what Hashem desired. For more on Rashbam's reading of each of these stories, see Wrestling With Angels and Men and Why Was Hashem Angry at Bilam.

<sup>10</sup> The people might have believed that Moshe was merely coming to live with his family in Egypt and that the redemption was not imminent.

<sup>11</sup> Moshe's reaction further demonstrated the depths of his caring for both the nation and Hashem. Moshe's distress highlighted his total devotion to the people, and the audacity of his complaint betrayed his closeness to Hashem.

<sup>12</sup> As Hashem's words implied that he was not to create a new phenomenon (like the manna) but to bring a natural source of meat, Moshe questioned how.

<sup>13</sup> See also Ibn Kaspi who also presents Moshe as doubting himself. Moshe was questioning his own understanding of Hashem's words and wondering if he comprehended them correctly.

<sup>14</sup> They suggest that Moshe's hitting the rock rather than speaking to it was the problematic action. Moshe doubted whether simply talking to the rock would elicit the miracle.

<sup>15</sup> According to Rashi, hitting rather than speaking to the rock minimized the miracle and caused a lesser sanctification of Hashem's name. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains instead that Moshe's posing his words, "הֲמֵן הַפֶּלֶע הַזֶּה...", as a question caused the people to think that he doubted that Hashem could indeed bring forth water from the stone. Finally, R. Chananel points to Moshe's problematic use of the word "נוציא" specifically. Moshe's saying "we will bring forth water" led the nation to wonder whether he and Aharon, rather than Hashem, were the source of the miracle.

<sup>16</sup> According to Rambam and Ibn Kaspi the nation did not deserve rebuke for their complaints as the lack of water legitimized their murmurings. As such, Moshe's angry retort "listen you rebels" was unwarranted.

<sup>17</sup> See above that Minchah Belulah blames Moshe and Aharon for not standing up to the people on their own, but instead "fleeing" to the Tent of Meeting.

<sup>18</sup> Some commentators also suggest that, in certain cases, it is possible that Moshe might have not been privy to Hashem's full intentions and that he did not always understand the reasons behind Hashem's actions. In these cases, though, Moshe is not misinterpreting Hashem's speech. He is simply not aware of the larger picture. Thus, the Ran assumes that the entire ruse regarding the three day journey and the borrowing of the Egyptians' vessels was intended to induce the Egyptians to chase after the nation (in order to retrieve their loaned belongings) so that they would drown in Yam Suf. This goal, though, might have been unknown to Moshe, "וכונת כל אלו הדברים, היתה נעלמת מישראל, ואולי גם ממה". [See A Three Day Journey and Reparations and Despoiling Egypt.]

See also R. Yosef Albo who opines that Moshe was surprised at Hashem's command that the nation ask permission to cross through the lands of Edom and Moav only to then veer from them, being unaware of

Hashem's larger goal. Only later did he realize that Hashem had orchestrated this so as to harden Sichon's heart into thinking that the nation was weak and would be easy to defeat.

<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is cited by Ramban who apparently obtained a copy of R. Chananel's commentary only upon his arrival in Israel. This passage is one of Ramban's Eretz Yisrael additions to his commentary. For further discussion, see Ramban's Updates, and specifically Ramban Bemidbar 16:21.

<sup>20</sup> These sources claim that Hashem was never unjust as He had never planned to wipe out the innocent.

<sup>21</sup> See Moshe's words in Bemidbar 14:15, "וְהִמַּתָּה אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד".

<sup>22</sup> Cf. R. Mubashir's position regarding Zipporah's religious identity discussed in Moshe's Family Life.

<sup>23</sup> Ramban's commentary on this verse was augmented significantly upon his arrival in Israel. For further discussion, see Ramban's Updates, and specifically Ramban Bemidbar 16:21.

<sup>24</sup> See also Abarbanel with regards to Korach's rebellion, "והראב"ע פירש שלא היתה כוונתו לכלות אלא קרח ועדתו". As far as the more general question of whether prophets as a whole (i.e. not just Moshe) can err in their understanding of Hashem's will, see Prophetic Actions Without Explicit Divine Sanction and Prophecy.

<sup>25</sup> See R"E Samet, "דברי משה לבני גד ולבני ראובן", who suggests Moshe was haunted by the debacle of the Spies and therefore read their mistakes back into the words of the two tribes. He writes, "משה רדוף בזיכרון, ..חטא המרגלים, והוא רואה את צלו גם במעשיהם של בני הדור החדש העומד להיכנס לארץ".

<sup>26</sup> The tribes really did not initially intend to join their brethren in the Conquest.

<sup>27</sup> They rejected His Promised Land.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. R. Medan in The Story of the Spies in Bemidbar and Devarim who suggests that the spies were sent on a dual mission: a military reconnaissance mission as well as a surveying mission to determine the tribal inheritances, and that Moshe erred in combining the two. Had the missions remained separate, maybe the mishap of the Spies would never have occurred.

<sup>29</sup> See below that there is one other episode in which Tanakh explicitly presents Moshe as being filled with anger. Upon seeing the people worship the Golden Calf, Moshe's ire is raised: "וַיְהִי כְּאִשֶּׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמִּצְחָה נִירָא". In this case, though, no commentators criticize Moshe's reaction as being unwarranted.

<sup>30</sup> This is consistent with Ralbag's explanations of Moshe's other flaws – see the discussions below regarding Moshe and Yitro's Advice and Moshe's Speech Impediment.

<sup>31</sup> It is not clear, though, if he necessarily views this as a flaw.

<sup>32</sup> Ramban uses the language of "לא יכול להתאפק".

<sup>33</sup> Though the verse explicitly mentions Moshe's anger, many other commentators suggest that the breaking of the tablets themselves was not a purely emotional response but rather an intentional, thought out action.

<sup>34</sup> This second point is made only by Ibn Kaspi.

<sup>35</sup> R. Yosef Bekhor Shor similarly suggests that Hashem wanted to demonstrate that the Divine will could be realized even via a messenger lacking a silver tongue.

<sup>36</sup> Having left Egypt while still young, he was not as fluent as needed to feel comfortable speaking in the king's palace.

<sup>37</sup> See Ralbag's similar take on Moshe's administrative shortcomings in Did Moshe Need Yitro's Advice.

<sup>38</sup> See how differing opinions of Yocheved's age impact how one understands the Duration of the Egyptian Exile.

<sup>39</sup> He points out that this would have been an even greater miracle than Sarah bearing Yitzchak (at the age of 90). Since the Torah highlights the miraculous nature of Sarah's childbearing, it should have done the same by Yocheved..

<sup>40</sup> As Rashbam assumes that Moshe was born prematurely, he suggests that the Torah is sharing that nonetheless he was complete.

<sup>41</sup> Ralbag emphasizes how vital this would be when Moshe needed to stand up against Paroh. See also Ramban, "כי לפני מלכים יתיצב".

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Ezra writes, "אולי סבב השם זה שיגדל משה בבית המלכות להיות נפשו העליונה בדרך מלכות והרגילות, ולא תהיה, ולא תהיה נפשו שפלה רגילה להיות בבית עבדים".

<sup>43</sup> See also Abarbanel who also posits that Moshe had a continued relationship with his family.

<sup>44</sup> He points out that it was common for nursemaids to visit with the babies they had nursed, so this would not have been strange.

<sup>45</sup> This reading assumes that Moshe had a close relationship to his family, but probably no relationship to Paroh. It easily explains how Moshe knew about "his brothers" (Shemot 2:11), why Paroh was willing to kill Moshe for killing a "mere Egyptian" (something which is strange if he had been raised as an Egyptian prince), and how he had an apparently close relationship to Aharon (Shemot 4:14).

<sup>46</sup> Alternatively, he suggests that perhaps the princess had told him.

<sup>47</sup> See the discussion above and see Bavli Bava Batra which suggests that because Moshe married the daughter of an idolater he had a descendant who was an idolatrous priest.

<sup>48</sup> According to this reading, it is not clear what Yitro intended when he returned Zipporah to Moshe.

<sup>49</sup> He writes, "היה ענינם כבן המתחטא אצל אביו, שהם היו רואים שמרע"ה היה משיג מהש"י כל מה שהיה שואל"