

Parashat Vayikra 5771, 2011:

Ah – To Be Like Moshe

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha*, and the third book of the *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (The Five Books of the Torah), begins with the words: “*Vayikra el Moshe*” (“And He called unto Moshe”). The unnamed “He” in this phrase is G-d; this is contextually evident based upon the remainder of the verse: “...And G-d spoke to him [Moshe] from the Tent of Appointed Meeting.” While finite man can never truly apprehend G-d’s infinite nature, we can do our best to understand His most famous and trusted servant – *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe).

In broad strokes, we can view Moshe from three different, but interrelated, perspectives: Prophet (*navi*), Torah scholar (*talmid chacham*), and man. According to the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), Moshe’s prophecy was different in kind and degree from any other prophet in history:

1. What is the difference between Moses' prophecy and that of all the other prophets? [Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets in a dream or vision. Moses, our teacher, would prophesy while standing awake...
2. [Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets through the medium of an angel. Therefore, they perceive only metaphoric imagery and allegories. Moses, our teacher, [would prophesy] without the medium of an angel... i.e., there was no metaphor. Rather, he would perceive the matter in its fullness, without metaphor or allegory... His appreciation of prophecy would not be through metaphor, but through open revelation, appreciating the matter in its fullness.
3. All the [other] prophets are overawed, terrified, and confounded [by the revelations they experience], but Moses, our teacher, would not [respond in this manner]... i.e., just as a person will not be awe-struck from hearing his friend's words, so, too,

Moses' mental power was sufficient to comprehend the words of prophecy while he was standing in a composed state.

4. All the [other] prophets cannot prophesy whenever they desire. Moses, our teacher, was different. Whenever he desired, the Holy Spirit would envelop him, and prophecy would rest upon him. He did not have to concentrate his attention to prepare himself [for prophecy], because his [mind] was always concentrated, prepared, and ready [to appreciate spiritual truth] as the angels [are]. Therefore, he would prophesy at all times... (*Mishneh Torah* 7:6, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Given that Moshe differed radically from all other prophets, Moshe as prophet cannot be emulated by anyone else. He cannot serve as a *navi* role model to us precisely because of the once-in-history prophetic gifts that Hashem bestowed upon him.

Just as Moshe was different from all other prophets, he was different from all other Torah scholars. Here, too, as we find in the *Soncino Talmud's* translation of *Talmud Bavli*, *Rosh Hashanah* 21b, Hashem gifted to him an unequalled level of Torah understanding:

Rab and Samuel [gave different interpretations of a certain text]. One said: Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world, and all were given to Moses save one, as it says, "Yet thou hast made him but little lower than the angels" (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:6). Now, Kohelet sought to find out words of delight. [That is to say,] Kohelet sought to be like Moses, but a *bath kol* (Heavenly Voice) went forth and said to him, "It is written uprightly even words of truth": "There arose not a prophet again in Israel like Moses." (*Sefer Devarim* 34:10)

Clearly, based upon Hashem's overwhelming beneficence, Moshe reached a level of Torah comprehension that will ever elude all Torah scholars to come. Thus, in regards to Torah study, Moshe will always be our teacher and rebbe, even though we will never be able to achieve his level of Torah knowledge and understanding.

Given Moshe's unique stature and status as a *navi* and *talmid chacham*, the Torah self-consciously rejected any supernatural origin that might be attributed to him, and

specifically referred to him as a man: “And the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more so than any other person on the face of the earth.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:3) It is in this sense, i.e. as a man, that we have the greatest opportunity to model ourselves after Moshe. Thus, the Rambam states: “Each person is fitting to be righteous like Moses, our teacher...” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2).

The Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Chafetz Chaim, Hagaon Rav Alter Henoch Leibowitz *zatzal* (1918-2008), raised a fundamental question regarding the Rambam’s suggestion that everyone can potentially reach the level of righteousness personified by *Moshe Rabbeinu*:

Behold, the level of a person’s righteousness is directly contingent upon his level in Torah. As our Sages of blessed memory stated: “I [G-d] have created the evil impulse and I have created Torah to control it.” (*Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin* 30b) Moreover: “The boor can never be truly righteous.” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:6) By definition, no one can ever reach the level of *Moshe Rabbeinu* in Torah and in the apprehension of Hashem, may He be blessed.... (*Sefer Chidushei Halev, Sefer Vayikra, Parashat Vayikra* on 1:1, translation my own)

The Rosh Yeshiva quoted the above-cited Talmudic passage from *Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah*, as incontrovertible proof that no one can ever achieve Moshe’s level in Torah scholarship. Thus, to paraphrase his question, Rav Leibowitz asked: “If people can never achieve Moshe’s level in Torah scholarship (*lamdut*), how can they ever achieve his level of righteousness (*tzidkut*)?” His answer is as inspiring as it is beautiful:

Perforce we must admit that it is impossible for any person to achieve the level of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, whether in Torah scholarship or in the apprehension of Hashem, may He be blessed. Nonetheless, it is possible for each person to reach Moshe’s level of righteousness. [This is the case] since that which our Sages of blessed memory said: “One’s level of righteousness is directly contingent upon his level of Torah,” in actuality means that [one’s righteousness] is dependent upon his level of Torah – i.e. according to the level he is personally able to achieve. [This means that if] one actualizes their complete potential, and they achieve the highest possible level of Torah study that they can possibly achieve, then it is manifestly the case that it is within their reach to achieve ethical and moral perfection. Thus, they are able to be a righteous person – equal in kind

to *Moshe Rabbeinu*. (Underlining and brackets my own)

The Rosh Yeshiva's answer is a paean of praise to the potential inherent in the universal human condition. Rav Leibowitz at once gives us the hope, and perhaps the promise, that with truly profound personal achievements in Torah, we, too, can reach the level of righteousness of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. May this be our goal as individuals, and as a people.

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.