

Parashat Vayikra, 5775, 2015:

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Moshe: The Prophet of and for the Jewish People

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And He called to Moses, and the L-rd spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying. (*Sefer Vayikra* 1:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

The final word of our *pasuk* (verse), “saying” i.e. “*lamor*” in the original Hebrew, has challenged the *meforshim* (commentators) since the beginning of the Jewish exegetical tradition. This is the case, since the verse could have been written, thematically, conceptually and grammatically, without it. Therefore, we might well ask, “Why does the text include ‘*lamor*’ when it appears to be completely unnecessary?”

As in many matters of this nature, Rashi’s commentary provides us with an answer to our question. He suggests the following interpretation of “*lamor*,” in the first of his two explanations of our term:

Saying: [G-d told Moses:] Go forth and say to them [the children of Israel] captivating words, [namely:] “For your sake G-d speaks with me. ” Indeed, we find this is so for all the thirty-eight years that the Israelites were in the desert, placed under a ban, [i.e.,] from the incident involving the spies and onwards, the [Divine] speech was not addressed specifically to Moses, for it says, “So it was, when all the men of war had finished dying from among the people, that the L-rd spoke to me saying ...” (*Sefer Devarim* 2: 16-17). [Only then was] the Divine speech [again] addressed specifically to me. (With my emendations for the sake of clarity)

It must be noted that Rashi (1040-1105) did not originate this response. Instead, it has deep roots in passages in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Ta'anit* III:4 and the halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Vayikra* known as the "*Sifra*" (Chapter II, section I). One point is clearly underscored in these different sources, "for all the thirty-eight years that the Israelites were in the desert, placed under a ban, [i.e.,] from the incident involving the spies and onwards, the [Divine] speech was not addressed specifically to Moses."

We are immediately met with a very disturbing question: "Why was Moshe denied the complete prophetic experience during the thirty-eight year period in which the Generation of the Desert (*Dor Hamidbar*) was under the ban?" Stated somewhat differently: "Why did the *Dor Hamidbar*'s behavior and subsequent punishment so negatively affect the relationship that obtained between the Almighty and Moshe?" This is particularly of the moment since the Torah states, "And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom the L-rd knew face to face" (*Sefer Devarim* 34:10, underlining my own). In other words, given Moshe's singular distinction, one would have thought that the banned status (*nidui*) of our forebears would have had little or no impact on Moshe's unique relationship with Hashem; why, then, was direct Divine speech withheld from Moshe for the seemingly endless period of thirty-eight years?

One of the many answers to our question is found in the work, "*Tzeror HaMor*," written by the 15th Century Castilian commentator, Rav Avraham Saba *zatzal*. His response provides us with a holistic understanding of the dynamic and interdependent relationship that obtained between *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moses) and the Jewish people:

This [absence of direct communication between Hashem and Moshe] teaches us about the notable status of the Jewish people and their holiness. Even though *Moshe Rabbeinu* was the greatest of the prophets, his prophecy was solely based upon his connective link to the Jewish people (*b'sibat Yisrael*) and their causal role in the prophetic process (*u'b'emtza'utam*). (All translations, brackets, bolding and underlining my own)

Rav Saba proves his two-pronged assertion regarding the role of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) in Moshe's prophecy, in the following manner:

We see these points illustrated when Hashem declared to him [Moshe]: "... and all the people in whose midst you are shall see the work of the L-rd how awe inspiring it is that which I will perform with you." (*Sefer Shemot* 34:10) This means, that the sole reason the Divine Presence (*Schechinah*) rests upon you is because you [Moshe] are amongst the people. This idea is found once again [at the beginning of this verse] when Hashem declared to Moshe: "And He said: 'Behold! I will form a covenant; in the presence of all your people, I will make distinctions such as have not been created upon all the earth and among all the nations ...'" [This means] it is a direct result of you [Moshe] being in the center of the Jewish people that they will see the awesome actions of G-d that I will perform through you (*asher ani oseh imach*) – because of them and account of them... **I [Hashem] did not bestow your greatness upon you except on account of the Jewish people.**

After providing several other textual proofs for his thesis, Rav Saba proceeds to the heart of the matter as to why Moshe was denied the fullness of his prophetic experience during the time the *Dor Hamidbar* was under the ban:

If so, since the Jewish people were distant from Hashem and subject to the ban of modified excommunication for forty years [note forty rather than thirty-eight], they were, therefore, separated from the highest form of splendor (*m'zohar elyon*). As such, how could it have been possible and proper for Moshe to receive direct Divine speech in the highest and most mystical manner (*b'aspekariah hameirah*)? This is the case, since Moshe received his prophecy solely as a result of the Jewish people's mediating agency (*b'emtza'utam*). Given that this is the case, it is not surprising in the least that when there are evil ones in a generation [such as the *Dor Hamidbar*] the prophet will not be granted direct Divine speech and that prophecy will depart from him.

We now find that Moshe suffered a prolonged dark night of *hester panim* (departure of Hashem's Divine presence) wherein he was unable to receive direct prophetic communications. This was the express result of *klal Yisrael's* spiritual failures at the time

of the Episode of the Spies (*sippur HaMeraglim*), and the fulfillment of the verse, “And I will hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they [the Jewish people] have committed ...” (*Sefer Devarim* 34:18, brackets my own). Clearly, then, Moshe was not independent from the Jewish people in his relationship with the Almighty. On the contrary, Moshe’s role as the prophet *par excellence*, and his prophecy, were contingent upon the spiritual status of the Jewish people – to the extent that when they were under the ban, the *Schechinah* departed from before him and he was no longer able to receive direct Divine speech.

May we experience the end of *hester panim*, rejoice in the imminent arrival of *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah) and bear witness to the revelation of Hashem’s Divine presence soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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