YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Vaera**

**Moshe’s Greatness**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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Translated by David Strauss

I would like to discuss a number of points that illustrate the greatness of Moshe Rabbeinu – his sensitivity, his prayer, and his efforts on behalf of the people of Israel.

**Sensitivity**

Moshe's extraordinary sensitivity reveals itself over the course of the plague of frogs:

And the Lord said to Moshe: “Say to Aharon: Stretch forth your hand with your rod over the rivers, over the canals, and over the pools, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt.” And Aharon stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. And the magicians did in like manner with their secret arts, and they brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh called for Moshe and Aharon and said: “Entreat the Lord that He take away the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice to the Lord.” And Moshe said to Pharaoh: “Have you this glory over me; against what time shall I entreat for you, and for your servants, and for your people, that the frogs be destroyed from you and your houses, and remain in the river only?”  And he said: “Against tomorrow.” And he said: “Be it according to your word; that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God. And the frogs shall depart from you, and from your houses, and from your servants, and from your people; they shall remain in the river only.” And Moshe and Aharon went out from Pharaoh; and Moshe cried to the Lord concerning the frogs, which He had brought upon Pharaoh. And the Lord did according to the word of Moshe; and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the courts, and out of the fields. And they gathered them together in heaps; and the land stank. But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart and hearkened not to them, as the Lord had spoken. (*Shemot* 8:8-11)

God does not command Moshe to pray on behalf of Pharaoh, nor does He even inform Moshe of such a possibility. Moshe, on his initiative, chooses to show Pharaoh the contrast between him and the magicians, who know only how to bring the plague, but not how to stop it.

Moses reveals here his great sensitivity not only to his own people, but also to Pharaoh, despite the fact that he is an evil enemy who enslaved the people of Israel.

Here, Moshe stands as an antithesis to the prophet Yona. Yona demonstrates what borders upon apathy to his mission, and even a desire to avoid it altogether so that Ninveh would be punished and destroyed. In contrast to Yona stand the seamen, who are not God-fearing men, but who are nevertheless sensitive to Yona – even though they know that he is the wrongdoer responsible for the storm, and even though Yona himself suggests to them that they cast him overboard. They are prepared to discard their wares, as long as Yona is not hurt, for they are not willing to hurt even the wrongdoer himself. Yona, in contrast, relates to the people of Ninveh with indifference, and for this he is criticized by God at the end of the book:

You have had pity on the gourd, for which you have not labored, neither made it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night; and should not I have pity on Ninveh, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle? (*Yona* 4:10-11)

In any case, Moshe Rabbeinu reveals himself as sensitive and caring to every person qua person, even if he is not a Jew and a member of his people.

**Effort in Prayer**

For the most part, we see the duty of effort in prayer as the need to contend with the issue of "a commandment of men learned by rote" (*Yeshaya* 29:13). But another difficulty arises in prayer – the fact that it appears at times that God has already decided the matter: "most people in a dying position die" (*Gittin* 28a), statistics of road accidents, the fact that in wars there are casualties on both sides… How can one pray in such a world? All the more so in the modern world, where we know of many causes of rain, economic fluctuations, and the like.

Rashi, in the context of the plague of frogs, writes:

Wherever the root *a-t-r* is used, it denotes to pray much.

"And entreated (*va-ye’etar*) the Lord" – He concentrated his energies on prayer. So too, if it had wished to use the term *va-ya'atir* [the *hifil* form], it could have used it, and that would have signified "and he increased words in prayer." But when it uses an expression denoting "and he did something" [the *kal* form], it signifies he prayed much. (Rashi, *Shemot* 8:5, 26)

Moshe Rabbeinu must pray much, because it is necessary to overturn a heavenly decree. Thus, we find in tractate *Sukka*:

R. Elazar said: Why are the prayers of the righteous likened to a pitchfork (*eter*)? To teach you that just as the pitchfork turns the corn from place to place in the barn, so the prayers of the righteous turn the mind of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the attribute of harshness to that of mercy. (*Sukka* 14a)

A reversal of this kind requires great effort. Moshe knows that God has his own considerations and that he has to "persuade" Him to reverse the decree issued against Egypt.

Such a prayer is special because the petitioner is not merely seeking to change a small detail or improve his condition on the basic level. The experience of the worshiper becomes like that described in the *Yerushalmi*:

Like one who whispers into his fellow's ears, and he listens. (*Yerushalmi* *Berakhot* 9:1)

A person who prays when he is aware that God has already "decided" the matter comes to God from the close and intimate relationship that was established between him and God.

**Effort and Action**

We have a tradition that "prayer avails to atone half" (Rashi, *Devarim* 9:20, citing a *midrash*). Moshe also did much on behalf of the people of Israel, and on this plane, he underwent a change. As a young man, perhaps of high-school age, he delivered the people of Israel by killing the Egyptian, but then he ran away to the wilderness in despair. The *midrash* suggests several possibilities regarding his age at that time – 12, 20, or 40 – so that in any case, he spent decades in the wilderness until the episode of the burning bush. Then God reveals Himself to Moshe and places His trust in him that he will deliver Israel. He alludes to Moshe that this is a one-time revelation and that the true worship of God will take place only "when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain" (*Shemot* 3:12).

Moshe understands that he must interrupt his studies: "When a scholar occupies himself with many things, his wisdom becomes confounded… One who occupies himself in communal affairs forgets his studies" (*Shemot Rabba,* *Vaera* 6:2). So too in the Yeshiva, it is one's duty to be prepared to leave the world of study in order to help the people of Israel.

**Conclusion**

We have tried to uncover the sources of Moshe's greatness – his sensitivity to the people of Israel and to every person qua human being, even in the case of a wicked Egyptian who is enslaving his people; his readiness to pray even about matters that have already been decided; and his preparedness to abandon his Torah studies and personal greatness for the sake of the people of Israel. All of these things attest to Moshe's greatness.

This greatness – whether we adopt the position of the Rambam that any person can be like Moshe, or we understand that most people cannot reach that level – obligates us also as Yeshiva students who are immersed in the world of Torah. There are many ways to help the people of Israel and to pray on their behalf, and we must make sure that we do not neglect these tasks.

(This *sicha* was delivered at *seuda shelishit* on Shabbat *Parashat Vaera* 5774 [2014].)