**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARaSHAT VEZOT HA-BERAKHA**

**Moshe, Man of God**

**I. How did Moshe achieve his distinct level of prophecy?**

Our *parasha* brings the Torah to an end with the death of Moshe. Moshe is deeply identified with the Torah, to the point that it is even referred to by his name: "Remember the Torah of Moshe my servant" (*Malakhi* 3:22). He is an exemplary figure among the people of Israel, and his prophecy is unique among the prophecies of other prophets (as discussed at length in the *shiur* on *Parashat Behaalotekha* in this series).

In this *shiur*,we will delve a little more deeply into the special character of Moshe Rabbeinu, following on some brief comments of the *Or Ha-Chaim* that point to several unique qualities that led Moshe to merit being called "Rabbeinu" and becoming the teacher and leader of all of Israel.

The *parasha* ends by describing the greatness of Moshe:

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe, whom the Lord knew face-to-face, regarding all the signs and the wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land; and regarding all the mighty hand, and all the great terror, which Moshe wrought in the sight of all Israel. (*Devarim* 34:10-12)

In addition to the description of Moshe's actions, the *Or Ha-Chaim* learns from here the source of Moshe's prophecy and special closeness to God:

The words "in Israel" hint that all of Moshe's accomplishment as a prophet was through the people of Israel. Go out and learn this from the fact that during all the years when the Jewish people were in God's disfavor, God did not communicate with Moshe. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 34:10)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* is making a fascinating claim based on the seemingly extraneous words, "in Israel."[[1]](#footnote-1) Presumably, Moshe grew into prophecy when he was far away from the people of Israel – as a child in Pharaoh's palace, and later as a refugee in Midyan. Yet now it turns out that "all of Moshe's accomplishment as a prophet was through the people of Israel"!

We will explore several ways to understand these words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* – why and how the people of Israel were the means by which Moshe Rabbeinu achieved his special prophecy.

**II. “And he saw their suffering”**

Though Moshe grew up in Pharaoh's house, he first began to prophesy because of his concern for the people of Israel – as in the well-known words of the *midrash* about how Moshe arrived at the burning bush:

The Holy One, blessed be He, tested Moshe…with flocks. Our Rabbis say: When Moshe, may he rest in peace, was herding Yitro's flock in the wilderness, a kid fled from him. He pursued it until it reached cover. Once it reached cover, a pool of water appeared, and the kid stopped to drink. When Moshe reached it, he said: I didn’t know that you were running due to thirst! You are tired. He carried it on his shoulder and was walking. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: You have the compassion to behave with the flocks belonging to flesh and blood in this manner; by your life, you will herd My flock, Israel. That is: "Now Moshe was tending the flock" (*Shemot* 3:1). (*Shemot Rabba* 2, 2)

The *midrash* describes Moshe's compassion and concern for the flocks he was tending, but in fact this quality manifested itself even earlier in his life, when Moshe went out to his brothers "and he saw their suffering" (*Shemot* 2:11). Moshe did not content himself with merely feeling compassion for the people of Israel (as in the story of the sheep); rather, he acted on his feelings. Indeed, he risked his life by killing the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrews. The *midrash* can be understood as alluding to this killing of the Egyptian, but mainly to Moshe's special quality to see the plight of each individual and take action to save him and extricate him from his predicament – even at the expense of Moshe’s own honor and standing. The ability to forego your own standing and honor for others is a basic requirement for a leader. (Most failed leaders fell because of the issue of their own honor in the face of the needs of God and the people).

If this is true, it can be argued that it was indeed Moshe's concern for the people of Israel that led to the unique revelation at the burning bush, to the selection of Moshe, and thus to his special prophecy.

This explanation, however, is not fully satisfying, for it does not really see the people of Israel as having caused the prophecy of Moshe; rather, it was Moshe's special characteristic of compassion that led to his prophecy, while Israel was only the means through which Moshe expressed his unique quality.

**III. Israel as the Chariot of the *Shekhina***

We opened the prayer of *Kol Nidrei* on Yom Kippur,based on the ruling of the *Shulchan Arukh* (OC 619), with the words: "With the approval of God and the congregation, we sanction prayer with sinners." The source of this practice is the *Mordekhai*:

And we enter the synagogue and remove the ban on praying together with someone who violated a communal decree, even if that person did not ask that the ban be removed, because Rabbi Shimon Chasida said: A fast in which none of the sinners of Israel participate is not a fast. (*Mordekhai*, *Yoma* 725)

The *Mordekhai* is referring to a Talmudic statement that emphasizes the importance of the participation of all of Israel in a fast. This is learned from the incense, whose unique scent is created only by combining *all* the spices, even those that give off a foul smell:

Rabbi Chana bar Bizan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon Chasida: A fast in which none of the sinners of Israel participate is not a fast; for behold, the odor of galbanum is unpleasant, and yet it was included among the spices for the incense. Abaye said: We learn this from here (*Amos* 9:6): "And has founded His vault [*agudato*, which can also be understood as "His binding together"] upon the earth." (*Keritot* 6a)

We can see in many places that the incense expresses the revelation of the *Shekhina*, such as when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur and burns incense as part of the revelation of the *Shekhina*. This is also how we can explain the location of the incense altar at the end of *Parashat Tetzaveh*, just before the resting of the *Shekhina* in the *Mishkan*, rather than together with the rest of the vessels of the *Mishkan* in *Parashat Teruma*.[[2]](#footnote-2)A public fast is beneficial because it is community-wide and includes everyone, just as the *Shekhina* can only rest on all of Israel when they are together. This is also why donations were taken from all of Israel for the building of the *Mishkan*.

Based on this, it is possible to suggest another way to understand the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* – that Moshe's greatness as a prophet was due to Israel because it was Israel that brought about the resting of the *Shekhina,* and only with the help of the *Shekhina* could Moshe achieve his prophecy. According to this, the proof brought by the *Or Ha-Chaim* is much clearer: When the people of Israel are in God's disfavor, and the *Shekhina* does not rest upon them, God's conversation with Moshe also does not take place.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**IV. The Lover and His Beloved**

If we wish to understand the principle of the people of Israel serving as the catalyst for Moshe’s prophecy in a slightly different manner, we can consider Moshe as Israel's representative to God, and that this is the source of Moshe's special standing.

This can be explained based on another surprising comment of the *Or Ha-Chaim* regarding Moshe's prophecy. At the beginning of our *parasha*, Moshe is called "a man of God," and the *Or Ha-Chaim* offers an amazing interpretation based on a *midrash*:

Regarding *ish ha-Elokim*, "man of God" – go out and learn how *Chazal* expounded these words, going as far as to consider them parallel to the description of Elimelekh as *ish Naomi*, "the husband of Naomi" (*Ruth* 1:3). What this means is that Moshe would issue a decree and God would fulfill it. Understand this. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 33:1)

The *midrash* itself presents this idea even more directly, and uses it to explain Moshe's conduct on several occasions when he, as it were, criticizes God brazenly:

Another explanation: This man, if he wishes to annul an oath taken by his wife, he annuls it, and if he wishes to confirm it, he confirms it, as it is stated: "Her husband may confirm it, or her husband may annul it" (*Bamidbar* 30:14). So too Moshe said: "Rise up, O Lord," "Return, O Lord" (*Bamidbar* 10:35-36). "The man of God" – Reish Lakish said: Were it not for an explicit verse, it would be impossible to say: Just as a man decrees about his wife, and she complies, so with the Holy One, blessed be He, Moshe decrees, and He complies. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, 951, based on *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*)

The *midrash* describes the relationship between Moshe and God as the relationship between a husband and his wife. This parable is used in many places to describe the relationship between God and the people of Israel; it is the foundation of the book of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, and it is mentioned in many places in Scripture. This *midrash* is unique, however: usually, the people of Israel are described as the wife and God as the husband; here, to our surprise, the roles are reversed. Moshe is the husband, and God is the wife.

It is possible to see the strength from which Moshe draws as the strength of the entire nation. Avraham conducted himself in a manner similar to that of Moshe when he "argued" with God about the overthrowing of Sodom. There too, Avraham represented the entire nation. It is possible that when one comes before God with the strength of the entire nation, the relationship with God is different and takes on a unique character.

**V. The Blessings of Moshe**

And this is the blessing with which Moshe the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death. (*Devarim* 33:1)

The verse that opens the *parasha* begins with a *vav,* i.e., with the word "and," and the *Or Ha-Chaim* wants to know why. He also raises a general question about this introduction:

We need to explain why it *says* *ve-zot*, with a [conjunctive letter] *vav*, at the beginning of this topic. Moreover, we need to examine the need for the entire verse. If it is to inform us as to who was the person who bestowed the blessing and to whom it was bestowed – surely we would have known this without the benefit of this verse, if the Torah had simply begun with the words, "And he said." And if it was to inform us that Moshe bestowed these blessings immediately prior to his death – this too is clear from what the Torah wrote before and afterward. Besides, what was the need to record the precise timing? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 33:1)

Indeed, when you think about it, it is puzzling – why did the Torah find it necessary to preface Moshe's blessings with this introduction? Could it not simply have said: "And Moshe blessed the people of Israel, saying…"?

In order to answer these questions, the *Or Ha-Chaim* combines a characteristic explanation of the plain meaning with a significant moral teaching:

It appears that the Torah's purpose was to praise Moshe, the man of God – how great his deeds were. Behold – immediately preceding this statement, “*ve-zot ha-berakha*,” Scripture mentioned the decisive decree that Moshe would die, when it said, “Go up on Mount Ha-Avarim… and die… because…” (32:49-50), and one might claim that this man Moshe had a grudge in his heart because of his death, since it had a cause from the children of Israel … they [i.e., their rebellious behavior] caused his death outside the land of Israel and prevented him from crossing into the land he longed for. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* uses context to answer his question. In the verses at the end of *Parashat Haazinu*, God notes that Moshe did not enter the land because of the people of Israel, following an event that took place as part of his leading them:

Because you trespassed against Me in the midst of the children of Israel at the waters of Merivat-Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin; because you did not sanctify Me in the midst of the children of Israel. (*Devarim* 32:51)

Moshe as well, in *Parashat* *Devarim*, sees Israel as responsible for this punishment:

Also the Lord was angry with me for your sakes… (*Devarim* 1:37)

When a failure of leadership occurs, one of the significant tests of the leader is how he deals with that failure. Does he continue to harm the people and justify his actions? Does he go home as an admission of his mistake? To a certain extent, it was expected that Moshe would behave this way:

It is human nature to distance from those who cause them evil, and while this righteous one was known to suffer them according to his ability, [one would expect] that would allow him to not *hate* them, but closeness of heart is nevertheless impossible. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 33:1)

Even if the leader continues to lead the people, it is to be expected that that there will be a change in his leadership, that he will no longer only desire the good of the people but will lead them in a slightly colder and more alienated way. But this was not the case with Moshe:

The word of God therefore comes in the Torah to attest about that righteous one - that only did he not harbor any hatred or distance them from his heart, but even “this was his blessing.” (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Even though Moshe was hurt by the people of Israel, nevertheless, he assumes responsibility for his actions and continues to lead the people with the same degree of compassion and the same love that he had for them before. The great proof of this is his willingness to bless the people of Israel, as well as to appoint Yehoshua as their leader and give him his blessings:

And Yehoshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moshe had laid his hands upon him. (*Devarim* 34:9)

We can try to explain this behavior of Moshe based on what we saw at the beginning of the *shiur* – that the source of the power of Moshe's prophecy and leadership comes from the people of Israel. As noted above, Moshe self-effacingly cancels himself before the people of Israel and represents them before God, and therefore he merits such a special relationship. Moshe effaces himself before God as well, as the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains in *Parashat Behaalotekha* when he clarifies the fundamental difference between Moshe and the rest of the prophets:

Therefore, all of the prophets, with the exception of Moshe, had to convey their messages in the form of parables and riddles [so that the equilibrium of their bodies and minds would not be permanently upset]. And more than the others, Zekharya, for he was the last of the prophets – the word came to him and was moved and manifested even more than other prophecies, in order to make it bearable. And therefore, it is filled with metaphors and the deepest similitude, to the point that later generations don’t know his words! And that is what God made known here, regarding the aspect attained by Moshe, and He said “mouth to mouth,” meaning that the word was not cut off from God’s mouth to pass through the atmosphere of the world and be changed along the way and lead to speaking in parables and riddles. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 12:6)

It is perhaps possible to draw a connection and say that it was the absolute self-effacement of the most humble of men before the people of Israel that allowed him to totally efface himself before God.

In any case, in Moshe's blessings in our *parasha* we see the manifestation of this two-fold self-effacement. On the one hand, Moshe cancels his anger and personal feelings towards the people of Israel, so that despite all the difficulties that they created for him, he is ready and willing to bless them. On the other hand, Moshe's self-effacement before God also finds expression here, as he performs the will of God regarding the content of the blessings – most of which deal with what will happen to Israel when they enter the land.

It may be suggested that Moshe's capacity to waive his honor stems from his immense love for the people of Israel. In fact, the source of Moshe's prophecy, which allows him to pass on in these prophetic blessings the word of God to the people of Israel before his death, is the same source that allows him to waive his honor for the sake of the people of Israel. Moshe understands that the whole purpose of his life is to serve God and His people. It is possible that this emphasis specifically before his death comes to express his greatness and his special role just before the Torah finishes writing the book of Moshe. The verses that are attributed to Yehoshua[[4]](#footnote-4) reveal to us the secret of Moshe: "And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe…" (*Devarim* 34:10).

The ability of a leader to express the will of the people in such an upright and profound way, without introducing his personal emotions into his leadership, is amazing and inspiring. Let us pray that God will restore our judges as in ancient times and that we will have leaders who draw their power from the people of Israel and work for them while cancelling their individual selves and aiming only for the benefit of the people as a whole.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. The *Or Ha-Chaim* also mentions the explanation of *Sifrei* (357): "*In Israel* there has not arisen [a prophet like Moshe], but among the peoples of the world, there has arisen. And which is this? Bilam…" [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Seforno*, *Shemot* 30:1, for an alternative explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to the previous explanation, the proof is not valid: only the beginning of Moshe's prophecy was due to the people of Israel, but afterwards, the connection between Israel and Moshe's prophecy was severed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to one opinion in the Gemara in *Bava Batra* 15a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)