YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

**PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**Moshe’s Leadership**

**The three signs**

When God first commands Moshe to go and liberate Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, Moshe refuses the mission:

And Moses answered and said: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor listen to me; for they will say: The Lord did not appear to you.” (*Shemot* 4:1)

Instead of responding to this argument directly, God gives Moshe three signs to perform before Bnei Yisrael, which will cause them to believe him:

And the Lord said to him: “What is that in your hand?” And he said: “A rod.” And He said: “Cast it on the ground.” And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moshe fled from before it. And the Lord said to Moshe: “Put forth your hand, and take it by the tail” – and he put forth his hand, and took hold of it, and it became a rod in his hand…

And the Lord said to him further: “Put now your hand into your bosom.” And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. And He said: “Put your hand back into your bosom.” And he put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh….

“And it shall be, if they will not believe these two signs, nor listen to you, that you shall take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land; and the water which you take out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.” (*Shemot* 4:2-9)

There is nothing obviously negative in these instructions: God is simply equipping Moshe with a means of proving his prophecy. But imagine a leader appearing before his people and giving them signs proving his leadership: he can turn his staff into a snake, and then turn the snake back into a staff; he can bring *tzara’at* upon his hand, and then remove the *tzara’at*; and he knows how to turn water into blood. It is unlikely that he would gain many followers. None of the three signs gives any hope or inspiration; they are all negative, and the natural reaction of his observers would be, “We want neither your honey [i.e., your optimistic prophecy] nor your sting [i.e., the disturbing signs with which you prove it]!”

It seems reasonable to suggest that these negative signs reflect God’s dissatisfaction with Moshe’s argument, a dissatisfaction that seems quite justified. Why is Moshe arguing? Presumably, when God commands someone to do something, he must do it regardless of how he feels about the mission. Avraham bound his son in obedience to a Divine command; surely Moshe should set off on the mission that God has given him? Yet, not only does he argue, but God “yields” to him, as it were, and sends Aharon along with him! If this is the proper course of action, why did God not initiate it in the first place? And if this solution is less than ideal – why does Moshe not accept the mission in its entirety?

**Moshe as leader**

In order to answer our question, let us consider Moshe’s qualities as a leader.[[1]](#footnote-1) After God gives him the signs, Moshe adopts a different argument:

And Moshe said to the Lord: “Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither previously, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.” (*Shemot* 4:10)

What is the nature of this speech impediment, referenced later as well with the phrase “uncircumcised of lips” (6:12, 30)? In the *parashot* that follow, we find no sign of Moshe having any difficulty expressing himself. There are no incomprehensible words or incomplete sentences. Clearly, the Torah does not mean to tell us there is any problem with the content of Moshe’s speech.

If, as per the conventional understanding, Moshe’s problem is a stutter, then the whole situation seems rather strange: could God not heal Moshe of his stutter? Why does God “yield” to this argument, rather than allowing Moshe to speak fluently, as befitting a national leader?

It seems that Moshe’s stutter is merely symbolic of the personal character of this greatest of prophets. Obviously, someone who wants to be a leader needs to be somewhat extroverted. He cannot expect others to follow him if he keeps his qualities and abilities under wraps and does not demonstrate them to the masses. But Moshe, the humblest of all people, has no wish to flaunt his positive attributes. When God calls upon him to lead Bnei Yisrael, even after all his technical objections are dealt with and God says Aharon will speak in his stead, Moshe offers a final plea:

And he said, “Oh Lord, send, I pray You, by the hand of the one You will send.” (*Shemot* 4:13)

Moshe, Yitro’s shepherd, does not possess the necessary attributes of a good leader. There is no one better suited than Moshe to bring God’s word to Bnei Yisrael, to judge their disputes, or to explain the Torah to them, but he is not built for leadership (as we shall see in future *shiurim*). While it is possible to send Aharon together with Moshe, to speak in his name, it seems it would be simpler to choose Aharon as the leader. “Send by the hand of the one You will send” – meaning, by the hand of Aharon.

God does not heal Moshe’s stutter because it is not simply a physical defect. His stutter attests to qualities in Moshe that are not suited to a leader. Of course, God could also change Moshe’s qualities and transform him into a superb leader, but neither God nor Moshe is interested in such a miracle. God does not choose Moshe to lead Bnei Yisrael with a view to changing his character. Had God been interested in a different sort of leader, He would have chosen someone else. God is interested in Moshe – just as he is – leading Bnei Yisrael. Once Moshe refuses, He adopts a different, less ideal strategy, and sends Aharon to be Moshe’s mouthpiece:

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and He said: “Is not Aharon, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well… And you shall speak to him, and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. And he shall be your spokesman to the people; and it shall come to pass, that he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him [in the role of] God.” (*Shemot* 4:14-16)

**Leadership of signs**

Now we can come back to the significance of the signs that God gives Moshe. Good leadership derives its power from the character of the leader and from the people’s esteem for him. It is not built on performing magic, signs, and wonders for the people. What happens to leaders of this sort is that after the first test, the people abandon him and go looking for a different leader.

Moshe, who does not fit the prototype of an ideal leader, cannot establish his leadership on charisma, and so he seeks to perform signs for Bnei Yisrael. God gives him signs – but negative ones, hinting to him that such leadership is deficient. Indeed, the nation rebels against Moshe’s leadership countless times: in the episode of the spies, in the rebellion of Korach… and even immediately after Moshe’s first audience with Pharaoh:

And they met Moshe and Aharon, standing to meet them as they came forth from Pharaoh; and they said to them: “May the Lord look upon you, and judge, because you have made us abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us.” (*Shemot* 5:20-21)

Later, God again hints to Moshe as to the inherent problem with his leadership, by reminding him to take the staff:

And you shall take this staff in your hand, with which you shall perform the signs. (*Shemot* 4:17)

There is no actual concern that Moshe would forget to take the staff. But God is hinting to him that even after he takes Aharon aboard as part of the leadership team, he – Moshe – remains *the* leader, and there will still be a need for signs to prove it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Disadvantages of decentralized authority**

If we take a moment to look ahead in the history of Am Yisrael, we see that there is another negative consequence to the argument between Moshe and God. During the debacle of the golden calf, in addition to the tension between Moshe and Bnei Yisrael, there was an additional point of conflict: between Moshe and Aharon. Aharon led the people – whether intentionally or unintentionally – into one of the worst sins in its history. According to *halakha*, a *kohen* who has worshipped a foreign god may not participate in the priestly blessing. We might, in this light, understand Korach’s argument: how is it possible that Aharon, of all people, after leading the nation into idolatry, is chosen to serve as *Kohen Gadol*?

To understand this, we must consider the structure of power in Am Yisrael. Fundamentally, there are a number of different public roles: there is the prophet, who brings the word of God to the people; the king, who rules over and leads the people; the *kohen*, who is responsible for the service of God’s House; and the judge, who makes laws and interprets the Torah.[[3]](#footnote-3) Sometimes conflict arises among these different functionaries: the books of the Prophets are full of conflicts between the prophet and the king; history books record tensions between the king and the *kohen*; and so on. The ideal situation, then, would be to have these functions and areas of authority concentrated in a single individual. That way there is no conflict, and the leadership of the nation enjoys optimal freedom to make decisions and act. Indeed, Moshe serves in three public positions simultaneously: he is the leader, the judge, and the prophet. Aharon holds two positions: he is the *Kohen Gadol*, and he is charged with bringing God’s words to the people (the “prophet of Moshe,” as it were).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Originally, God’s plan was to have Moshe fill all the leadership roles. When Moshe refused, God split the position and gave some roles to Aharon. Even after the sin of the golden calf, the preference remained to have leadership concentrated as densely as possible, and therefore Aharon, who was already in the role of “Moshe’s voice,” was appointed *Kohen Gadol*. Of course, the splitting of the leadership came at a heavy price, as we see in *Parashat Korach*. Korach would not have complained if Moshe – the greatest of the prophets and the one who brought down the Torah – served as *Kohen Gadol*. It is the splitting of the leadership and the awarding of the priesthood to Aharon that creates the foundation for Korach’s rebellion.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The meaning of the signs**

In light of the way we have understood the role of the signs, we can now address the question of their significance. Why does God choose specifically a snake, *tzara’at*, and blood as the means by which to prove Moshe’s prophecy?

The common denominator in these three signs is that they are all symbols that portend troubles to come. We may therefore suggest that insofar as they are the result of a less-than-ideal form of leadership, the three signs might symbolize three points of future low points in Moshe’s leadership.

The water turning to blood immediately brings to mind Mei Meriva, where Moshe is commanded to speak to the rock to produce water but strikes it instead, after which it is decreed that he will not enter Eretz Yisrael. The *tzara’at* recalls the *tzara’at* of Miriam – which, as we shall see in a future *shiur*, represents the beginning of the end of Moshe’s leadership.

The first sign – the staff that turns into a snake – also possesses profound significance. The staff is the same one that would later be used in the war against Amalek, and the snake is the copper serpent. In order to better understand the connection between these two events and Moshe’s leadership, we turn our attention to a well-known *mishna* that links them.

**The miracle in the war against Amalek**

“And it came to pass, when Moshe lifted his hand, Israel prevailed” (*Shemot* 17:11) – Is it then Moshe’s hands that make or break a war? [Obviously not;] rather, this means to tell you that as long as Bnei Yisrael looked upward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in heaven, they prevailed. And if not, they fell.

Similarly, you say: “Make for yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that anyone who is bitten, he will look at it, and he will live” (*Bamidbar* 21:8). Is it then the serpent that kills or revives? [Obviously not;] rather, when Bnei Yisrael looked upward and subjugated their heart to their Father in heaven, they were healed, and if not, they putrefied… (Mishna *Rosh Ha-shana* 3:8)

In this *mishna*, *Chazal* draw a connection between the role of Moshe’s uplifted hands during the war against Amalek and the role of the copper serpent. Why does Chazal’s question concerning the actual efficacy of these symbols arise specifically in relation to these two events? Could we not ask, in the same vein, “Is it then Moshe’s hands that have the power to split the sea?” Is the fact that Moshe’s hands bring darkness upon all of Egypt any less impressive than the fact that his hands bring victory over Amalek?

Indeed, the miraculous victory over Amalek is different from all the other miracles associated with the Exodus from Egypt. In general, God commands Moshe to perform a certain action, and when he does so, the miracle happens. But in this case, we find no Divine command to Moshe to stand on the hill or to lift his hands. The miracle occurs here at Moshe’s initiative, illustrating the idea that “a *tzaddik* decrees, and the Holy One, blessed be He, fulfills the decree.”

In view of the above, we may note some further oddities regarding the war against Amalek. At the start of the war, the Torah notes that “Moshe’s arms were heavy,” and Aharon and Chur are required to help him and support his arms. But why were his arms heavy? If God wanted Moshe to hold his hands up in the air, why did He not give him the strength to do so? Moreover, why did Moshe need to keep his hands aloft throughout the fighting? In the miracle of the splitting of the sea, Moshe lifted his staff, immediately causing a wind that blew all night, and in the morning the sea split in half. Nowhere is there any hint that Moshe had to hold his staff in the air all night long. And this makes sense: the staff has its effect only by the will of God, and a small, symbolic act is enough to set the miracle in motion. Why, then, must Moshe hold his arms in the air throughout the fighting against Amalek?

Our discussion above offers the key to answering this question. God does not command Moshe to lift his arms so that Bnei Yisrael will win the war. Moshe – the loyal shepherd of Israel – fears that this nation of slaves that has just left Egypt will not hold out in the first war forced upon it. God is displeased, as it were, with Moshe’s initiative, since Am Yisrael needs to fight this war on their own. God therefore makes Moshe’s arms heavy, making it difficult for him to keep them raised.

And truly, as the *mishna* notes, no miracle takes place here. Since God did not command Moshe to perform a miracle, the lifting of his arms does not produce any miracle; rather, it is simply a sign to Israel to keep in mind their Father in heaven. Only when the Israelites contemplated Moshe’s uplifted hands, and subjugated their hearts to God, did they prevail. This is the lesson that God sought to teach Bnei Yisrael immediately upon their leaving Egypt.

**The miracle of the copper serpent**

The story of the copper serpent reveals a similar idea.

And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died. (*Bamidbar* 21:6)

Plagued with the fiery serpents, the people come to Moshe and ask him to pray on their behalf. He does so, but Moshe’s prayer is not what God wants:

And the Lord said to Moses: “Make yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that anyone who is bitten, he will look at it, and he will live.” (Ibid. 21:8)

Every individual of Am Yisrael who seeks healing must look heavenward and pray for himself. Unlike previous incidents, in which Moshe’s prayer on behalf of Am Yisrael was accepted and answered, here God will not forgive the people solely by merit of Moshe’s prayer. At this stage of the nation’s journey, prior to Moshe’s death and just before he passes the baton of leadership to Yehoshua, God teaches Bnei Yisrael that there is no “preferential treatment” before the Throne of Glory: everyone is able to heal himself, through his own prayer.

These two miracles – the victory over Amalek, and the copper serpent – are both symbolic of the same message. Outwardly, they are tremendous miracles performed by Moshe. But if we look deeper, both carry messages of empowerment of the individual rather than the leader. The individual does not need the leader in order to pray to God. It is not Moshe’s hands that bring victory, nor does the copper serpent have the power to kill or revive. It is only the upward gaze, the directing of the hearts of Israel towards their Father in heaven, that can warrant victory.

At the very beginning of Moshe’s path as leader, when he stands and talks with God at the burning bush, God already hints to the end of his leadership – with the sign of the staff and the snake, with the sign of *tzara’at*, and with the sign of blood.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. The theme of Moshe’s leadership will accompany us throughout our *shiurim* on *Sefer Shemot*. Obviously, not everything can be covered in a single *shiur*. I request readers’ patience if some questions remain unanswered and the picture remains incomplete; hopefully, the gaps will be filled in future *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed, Moshe remains the leader of Israel – as is clear from the fact that God speaks only with Moshe, and commands him to speak to Aharon. Moreover, although it is Aharon who actually speaks with Pharaoh, Pharaoh himself understands that it is Moshe who is the leader and not Aharon. He always mentions Moshe before Aharon (even though Aharon is older), and always calls for Moshe, even when he does not call for Aharon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The special status of these personages finds expression in the process of atonement they must undertake for committing a sin: a special sacrifice is stipulated for the *Kohen Gadol*, for the members of the Sanhedrin, and for the Nasi. With regard to the prophet, God has special demands of him, but this lies beyond the scope of our discussion here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Gemara states that Shmuel was considered equal to Moshe and Aharon; he served in all of the public positions, unifying the roles of Moshe and Aharon. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Miriam’s claims against Moshe arise on the basis of the same foundation; this, too, lies beyond our present discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)