

Dear Chavraya,

Do you remember when we gathered together to greet little Moshe, Moishela, at the time of his birth? There was such light and joy in the midst of that foreboding and forbidding time of Pharaoh's edict to kill the male children of our people. How strange it is that we experienced and celebrated his birth, that we knew him from the very beginning, and, yet, through the flow of Torah, that we were also there at the time of his death, that we grieved so deeply for our teacher when he was gathered to his people at one hundred and twenty years. And we were there all along the way, celebrating the great journey of his life. Timeless, the Torah is a map of life, our own and that of our people.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mot*, the first portion in the second book of Torah, we encounter Moses very much as a person, not as leader yet. In the early details of his life, his birth and early years, his maturation and early adulthood, the path as it unfolds toward his calling, we see through windows in time the process of his becoming. Moses' story becomes a mirror in which to see our selves, a story of what it is to overcome the barriers and meet the challenges of our own lives. In the interaction of events and people, much is learned directly from the Torah text itself of Moses' struggle to be Moses. As with all of Torah, here focused on one person, we find our selves taking part in the conversation between Oral and Written Torah. It is an ever-recurring and ever evolving conversation through time. Filling in the blanks between the letters and words of Torah, we discover meaning in the empty spaces of our lives, filling spaces in our own souls and consciousness with insight that comes of engagement.

Moses' life begins with the trauma of separation. As an infant, he is placed in a basket upon the waters of the Nile, either to be waters of life or of death for him. Rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, she saves him and makes him her son, defying the edict of her father. Nursed by his own mother until he is weaned, given then to Pharaoh's daughter, he grows up in the palace. Trying to weave together strands of Moses identity and the inner struggle of Moses to understand himself, Ramban (thirteenth-century Spain) offers the thought that Moses was told in the palace, while growing up as an Egyptian prince, that he is a Jew. It is further reflection of the compassion that filled the woman who saved him and made him her own, referred to by the rabbis as Batya, daughter of God. She was brave enough and strong enough within herself to tell the son whom she had drawn from the water the truth of his origins, of his own people, the story of who he is. With that information, the young man Moses *went out to his brothers/vayetze el echav*. There, he saw an Egyptian taskmaster striking a Hebrew slave. In a moment of passion, overcome with horror, he struck and killed the Egyptian. In the conversation that unfolds through time, that incident becomes the context of great moral wrestling. Was Moses right or was he wrong to respond as he did. Though borne of noble impulse, his act is not condoned by most commentators, an encounter for us with the challenge between means and ends.

Fleeing to Midian, Moses is called by God to begin his role as liberator and leader. Judged by human assumptions of leadership, he is an unlikely leader. In God's eyes, perhaps that is what makes him a likely leader, not a person of valor and strength, but of humility, doubt, and disability. As Israel is to understand the

soul of the downtrodden and dispossessed from out of our own experience of slavery, from out of his experience of personal struggle, Moses is to understand the weakest among his people, those most in need of support and succor. Moses struggles from the very beginning with gnawing self-doubt and a disability that feeds his doubt. Pouring out his heart before God that he is not the one to plead with Pharaoh on behalf of his people, he says, *lo ish d'varim anochi/I am not a man of words...*, *ki ch'vad peh uch'vad lashon anochi/I am heavy of speech and heavy of tongue*. Whether born of his speech impediment or of his conflicting identities, a Jew who as an Egyptian prince has not shared in the suffering of his people, there is a fine line between the self-effacement that comes of his doubt, and the humility for which he is revered. At times a reflection of the beauty of Moses' soul, at other times his humility becomes a barrier to doing what needs to be done, for his own sake and that of others, his family and his people. Moses is responsive to the world around him and to the needs of others. For all of its moral complexity, in striking down the taskmaster, Moses stands up for his own people in the face of brutality. Fleeing to Midian, he stands up for non-Jews, coming to the aid of Midianite shepherdesses driven from the well by shepherds. As he later tends the flock of his father-in-law, symbolically preparing for his role as shepherd of Israel, he turns aside to see why the bush burns and is not consumed, passing the first text that God has set for him. Though Moses himself is far from accepting his role, the Midrash brings God's voice into the conversation with words not found in the Torah, *im eyn atah go'alam, eyn acher/if you don't redeem them, there is no other*. Moses' response to God's call speaks to the essence of his self-doubt, *mi anochi ki elech el Par'o/who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...?* Though exasperated, that self-doubt is for God the mark of Moses' leadership.

In Moses' struggle to accept his role and purpose, it becomes our struggle to see who we really are, in our own eyes and in God's eyes. As the Slonimer Rebbe teaches through his signature theme, each one of us has our own unique task and purpose toward whose fulfillment we have been brought into this world. No one else can fulfill the purpose for which we are in the world. The proof of each one's uniqueness is the very fact of our presence. Having been told of his purpose and calling by God, Moses nevertheless goes to his father-in-law, Yitro, and in a display of solicitous respect, Moses asks the elder man for permission to leave and embark on the great journey to which he has been called. As we are present with Moses from his birth to his death through the cycle of reading Torah, it is the span of our own lives, the task and purpose to which we are called that underlies the story of Moses, our calling interwoven with his. That is the deeper telling, the calling that we are to hear at our own moments of encounter with God and with our selves. In response to Moses' sharing with his father-in-law of what he has been called to do, of who he is meant to be, Yitro's simple words of encouragement and affirmation are meant for each one of us as we follow the path of our own journey, *lech l'shalom/go toward peace*.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor