

Archive

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The problem of solitude is as old as man. It dates back to the beginning of our entrance into history. Our forefather Adam was alone, and didn't mind it; God did. (laughter) "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam livado,*" God told him. "It is not good," said God, "not healthy, (laughter) not pleasant, not exciting, for a man to be alone." And that is why the creator of the universe offered him what we call in the Bible an *ezer kenegdo*, let's say a kind of alter ego, loyal opposition, or friendly antagonist. (laughter)

[00:01:00] Actually, God could have waited for His patient's consent before performing Biblical history's first rib surgery. Why didn't He? Perhaps He was afraid of Adam's answer. And what if Adam had said, "Master of the universe, wait; I want a second opinion"? (laughter) Or better yet, what if Adam had said, "Don't; I am not sick; I don't need anybody; I am perfectly happy as I am"? But God knew what He was doing. After all, wasn't He present at Adam's birth, as well as at Eve's?

In truth, we learn of the outcome of this first marriage, and [00:02:00] though conceived and arranged by the best matchmaker in the universe, we realize that the *shidduch* was not so perfect. (laughter) Just look at what happened to their children. (laughter) Still, the message is clear: loneliness is not well regarded in the Bible, and, later, in the Talmud. The humanity of a human being is measured by his or her relationship to other human beings. Adam, for instance, was wrong to leave his young bride alone in the garden to chat with a serpent. Had he been with her all the time, Eve surely would not have followed the serpent's advice to eat from the forbidden tree.

Cain and Abel represent the first tragedy of siblings in scripture. [00:03:00] They had to fight their own battle against solitude. Which of the sons is lonelier: the oldest, whom God pushes away; or the youngest, who is snubbed by his big brother? The same situation exists later in the era of patriarchs. Is Ishmael more withdrawn than Isaac? Isaac meditates in the field, whereas Ishmael runs around in the desert. Still, both are alone. As for Jacob, separated from Joseph, and Joseph isolated and hated by his brothers, how is their solitude transformed into reflection or remedy? And what about Saul, the solitary melancholy king? Was his solitude a function of his sadness alone? And the prophet Elijah, alone in

the desert, hiding from Jezebel's wrath: [00:04:00] what about him and his loneliness? And Job, what about Job? Locked in his own pain, abandoned by God, whose answers he desperately needs. What does one draw from his terrible solitude?

Now we know. We know that whatever happened then, in the beginning, actually is happening today. The Bible is a reflection of timelessness in time, and therefore all the passions, all the aspirations, all the ambitions, all the dreams that have hounded our people then, somehow traces can be found, and are to be found already now.

[00:05:00] The tragedy of man is that in essential matters, man is condemned to be alone. One may attempt to reach out, but the attempt is rarely successful. What is worse than being each other's jailer? It is to be one's own prisoner.

Generally, solitude and isolation go together. Yet, there is a subtle difference between them. Solitude is often voluntary, whereas isolation is not. Solitude is the feeling one gets when catastrophe strikes, individual or collective; the first sensation one has when one witnesses the death of a friend; when one is disappointed; when one is harassed; [00:06:00] when one misses a presence that is not there. It's always solitude.

When one is a victim of injustice, when one is a victim, it's always solitude that follows.

Isolation is compulsory, close to imprisonment, whereas solitude is sought, by poets, painters, musicians, dreamers; in other words, creators. The criminal also isolates himself in his crime, but the poet frees himself and his words through and within his solitude. We may return to this theme later, if time permits; if it doesn't, we shall find another time.

For the moment, I suggest we stay in the place where we all belong, [00:07:00] in the book of books, and then focus on its revered prophet, liberator, and legislator. Actually, we could have chosen any character in the Bible and treat or deal with the problem of solitude with regard to that particular character, man or woman. But I chose Moses, because of all the Biblical characters he is the loneliest. More than his predecessors or followers, his solitude is linked to his extraordinary talents, virtues, and responsibilities as our people's supreme leader. In fact, he embodies the very concept of leadership, with its collective triumphs and personal disillusionments. Naturally, a true leader cannot function without those whom he leads. By the same token, he cannot work, he cannot live in their midst as one of them. [00:08:00] Hence,

the ambivalence of his or her position. There must be some distance between the leader and those he is leading. Otherwise, he will not be respected; nor will he be obeyed. A certain mystique must surround the leader, isolating him from those whose servant he's called upon to be, or whose servant he has been elected to be.

Is there a leader here or anywhere who does not find time to complain about his terrible solitude of that moment of decision? Moses himself felt compelled to complain aloud. So it is he who will be at the center of our journey tonight. He's the best example of the theme of our inquiry, because he's a leader, and therefore alone; because he's Moses; because he remains our exalted [00:09:00] and immortal teacher. Does his teaching alleviate our solitude, the one which accompanied us throughout centuries of exile? Has it been transmitted to us, so as to make us feel linked to all those who have since Sinai studied his laws, either together or alone? These questions have waited so long. Let them wait a bit longer. (laughter)

Well, as we are about to begin for the 29<sup>th</sup> time, (laughs) yet another annual series of encounters with our ancestors and masters, let's open once more our customary parenthesis. First, it's not really 29, but we Jews don't know how to count except

when we are on Wall Street. (laughter) It's the 30<sup>th</sup> year that I am here, but the series is 29 years old. I remember I was [00:10:00] here a year before with another person, because the Director of the Y then, a certain Mr. Kolodny, felt that he needs two, and it was very strange because it was a very, very marvelous writer, a great writer, a woman, and those who came for me didn't come for her, and those who came for her didn't come for me. (laughter) So after the intermission it was half. Anyway, I won't tell you which half. (laughter)

So tonight, as always, we shall pore over biblical texts and their Talmudic commentaries. Isn't study, communal study, the principal goal of this hall, in which words from the distant past reverberate in the present? "*umay'idach zil g'mor* [00:10:46]," says the old Hillel, whose wisdom has yet to be surpassed as thus his patience. Study is what envelopes human existence [00:11:00] and allows it to be penetrated by beauty. One can conceive of someone being incapable of absorbing or explaining the mysteries of creation, but even he or she can open his eyes her eyes, and ears, if only to see a tree in blossom and listen to its swaying branches while awaiting the tempest.

There is no substitute for learning. Anyone claiming to have learned enough has yet to begin. Languages, we are told, can be learned if you put an audio cassette under your pillow. Don't try it with the Talmud. (laughter) Whoever declares he knows everything knows nothing. To wish to understand everything is praiseworthy; to say that one has fulfilled that wish is *och unvey*. [00:12:00] It is not. We possess a limited knowledge of the world of truth. God Himself, says the Midrash, is still studying Torah. If He does, how dare we not?

A biblical topic has always been the center of our first study session. Must I state the obvious and speak of my love, my passion for scripture? The more you study a biblical text, the more inviting it becomes. Each time you are convinced that your exploration can go no deeper, and each time you realize that you have hardly scratched the surface. Then, too, biblical stories and topics forever engage our interest in current affairs. All problems posed by society are to be found in the text. When is cover up permissible, and when [00:13:00] is it not? When is it objectionable? What must our attitude be towards suffering? When is a stranger an enemy, and when is someone to be befriended?

Naturally, from Moses we learn many lessons in the realm of leadership, and also of solitude. Can the prophet be alone and still be God's spokesman? Can a prophet be alone, period, or can a prophet be a prophet and not be alone? Can a teacher be alone and still teach? Moses would, on occasion, escape his followers by seeking refuge in his tent, where he would spend time reflecting alone on matters practical and spiritual. Inside the tent he was inaccessible, but none of us [00:14:00] is Moses. Here, as in any beit midrash, the doors are always open, so if you do not wish to be alone do come and study.

(pause) Solitude is, of course, a pessimistic view and condition of the human being. The great Disraeli said, "Youth is a mistake; adulthood a battle; and old age, remorse." [00:15:00] What about solitude? Same, except whatever can be told about a human being in general is amplified when solitude enters that human being. We said earlier that solitude remains a burning problem to this generation because whatever happened then happens now. And it is true: on one hand, one is afraid to be alone, and so we are eager to join groups, parties, communities, cults, and/or professional organizations. Isn't our society the most organized in the world? Is there a Jew who is a member of one synagogue alone? (laughter) Today, to be alone means to be excluded, abandoned, downgraded, rejected, and therefore



[00:16:00] one tries not to be alone. For loneliness means to be within walls, walled in something, walled in silence, and silence therefore is frightening, frightening to the lonely person. Hence the need to be surrounded by noise. Our generation is the noisiest. (laughter) I don't know what is happening to the world today, but surely you cannot think about it because there is so much noise it prevents you from thinking. (laughter)

On the other hand, we seek moments of solitude, to be away from the noise. Hence, the sight of so many youngsters in our streets, running -- always running -- listening to their own private tape recorders, rejecting the outside world and its insoluble conflicts and crisis. So what is it [00:17:00] about them? Do they want to be more alone? Less alone? Maybe differently alone? They're listening to music. What would they say if I were to say to them that, "You know, what you are doing is actually what Moses did when he went into his tent"?

Who is Moses? Why is Moses so rarely, if ever, happy? Why does he so often appear as a solitary figure, in search of more and deeper introspection and solitude? Oh, we have spoken about Moses, some 20 years ago, probably. His dossier in the Bible is filled with informative and descriptive details: his illegal

birth; his strange rescue; his princely upbringing; his escape into the desert; his marriage; [00:18:00] his career; his successes and failures; then his demise. In fact, his life was so dramatic, so suspenseful, so full of spectacular events, that it's no surprise that it ended in Hollywood. (laughter) For filmmakers, everything is clear; for scholars, less so.

For instance, why Moses? I mean, why was he alone saved as an infant from Pharaoh's wrath? What about the countless male children, all Jewish, also thrown into the Nile? Because of a mission given him much later, and of which he was unaware? Is that why he was saved? Was there no [00:19:00] mission in store for any of the others?

But then comes his metamorphoses. It's in the text: the Egyptian prince is transformed into a fervent Jewish activist, ready to give up his luxurious way of life and defend the victim of a cruel fellow Egyptian taskmaster. And what if he had not been there, by sheer accident, by chance, when the Egyptian tormented the Jewish slave? What if Moses had had a different date that day? Strange: until he became God's emissary, he seems to have lived a life not his own, as if he were a stranger to himself. Rather than take initiatives, he submits to

extraneous forces, a tool in the hands of God and man. Rather than make things happen, they happen [00:20:00] to him.

It is by accident, by chance, that Batyah, Pharaoh's daughter, happened one day, that day, to take a walk on the banks of the Nile. Why was she so moved by Moses' tears? Had she never heard a Jewish baby cry? She took him home and gave him a good Egyptian education. What did he know about the suffering of Jewish slaves? They weren't the only ones to be worked to death under the various Egyptian gods. It was by chance that he arrived on the scene where a Jewish slave was beaten up by an Egyptian supervisor. Had he been there one hour earlier or later, wouldn't he have gone home and had a good meal with his high-class Egyptian friends? It is by chance that having reached the land of Midian, [00:21:00] at the well he heard young shepherd girls talk, wondering who he was. They called him "Egyptian," and he did not correct them. Was he that timid? Anyway, why was he there at that particular moment? Was he thirsty, perhaps?

He ended up in their father's home, and it was Jethro, the priest, who offered him his eldest daughter, Zipporah, for a wife. It was God who called upon him in the desert, endowing him with a historical mission: to go back to Egypt and secure

the liberation of his people. And Moses, was he at all aware of his own involvement in his destiny, of the greatness of the moment, of his role in the forthcoming world-shaking events? Yes or no? He declined the nomination. He wasn't Jewish yet. [00:22:00] He preferred to remain far from the turbulence of history. He preferred to be alone. In the text, we never see him at home, keeping away from people. He is devoted to his flock, to his sheep, except for later, much later, when he is with his brother, Aaron, he is often, if not always, alone: alone on the Nile, as only a Jewish child can be, when pursued by ruthless enemies; alone as only a Jewish Marrano can be in the Pharaoh's palace; alone as only a Jewish refugee can be in the land of Midian; alone as a shepherd with his flock; alone in the desert; alone in heaven, when he ascended to receive the law; alone when castigating his people; and alone when pleading for its survival with the judge of all judges.

Did Moses know that he was destined [00:23:00] to greatness? He was. A Talmudic tale confirms it, a tale that all teachers and public speakers would find reassuring, if not gratifying. One day, we are told, the great Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi -- you know, the founder of -- the editor of the Mishnah, the Great Prince, the patriarch -- the old Rabbi Judah noticed that his pupils were not really listening. Some actually had fallen asleep. So, to

wake them, he declared, "Once upon a time in Egypt there was a woman who gave birth to 600,000 men and women." (laughter) The text doesn't say whether this shock treatment was successful. All it says is that among the disciples there was one, a certain Rabbi Ishmael ben Jose, who couldn't repress his curiosity. "Who was she?" (laughter) [00:24:00] And the old master replied, "Jochebed, Moses' mother, for Moses represented the entire community of Israel, and Israel numbered 600,000 souls." In other words, were it not for Moses there would have been no Jewish people. In other words, were it not for Jochebed, there would be no Moses, and no Jewish people.

Incidentally, I've always wondered: what about the other pupils? To be the pupil of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi was a privilege. Did they continue to sleep? We don't know. But to my colleagues I would say, if at times you feel that your audience looks drowsy during your lecture, don't feel bad; (laughter) it happened even to Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi.

As for Moses, was he simply a historical accident, a poorly assimilated [00:25:00] Jew who became a *ba'al teshuva*? (laughter) Is loneliness his most visible characteristic? Let's examine his biography again. What emerges is a portrait of a man who had endured trials and upheavals, challenges and

tragedies, and survived many of his contemporaries. Today, one might call him a survivor. We know much about him. After all, five books bear his name. We know when and where he was born. He was 120 when he died. The Talmud divides his life into three parts: 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in Midian, and 40 years in the desert. Troubling issues seemed to occur in each of these eras. For instance, not enough credit has been given his sister Miriam, especially since Moses owes her his [00:26:00] very existence. That's what the Midrash says about Moses' father, Amram, in quoting the text, "*Vayelech ish m'beit Levi*": "And there went a man from the tribe of the Levites." The Talmud is curious. The Talmud says he went. Where did he go?

Said Rabbi Judah bar Zebina, Amram, when he said, "*Vayelech*," he went, meaning he followed his daughter's advice. Explanation: when Pharaoh gave the decree, issued a decree to kill the children, Amram left his wife, because he heard the decree that all Jewish male children were to be killed, and he didn't want to have more children. He didn't want Jewish children to be killed. So logic was, perhaps, on his side: why have children [00:27:00] only to see them murdered? But his daughter, Miriam, had a logic of her own, and she said to him, "You are a leader of our people. What you do, others will do, too. They, too, will divorce their wives. But then aren't you worse than

Pharaoh? He doomed the males. You are against girls, as well. His decree applies to this world; yours to the next, as well. His will may be implemented; yours surely will."

Persuaded by his daughter's logic, Amram returned to his wife, and Moses was born one year later. Feminists in our midst will be happy. (laughter) The hero of the story is not a man but a woman. Better yet, two women: Miriam, naturally, [00:28:00] whose name is yet to be mentioned in the text; but also Batyah, the royal princess, Pharaoh's daughter. She had immediately guessed that the infant was Jewish, and yet she did not hesitate to act against the will of her tyrannical father. She rescued the child, brought him home, and protected him, as if he were her own son. In fact, she allowed Miriam to bring, really, Jochebed to take care of her son, without telling anyone of what happened. And I really feel that we should award Batyah posthumously the medal of righteous Gentiles. (laughter)

What about her staff? She had a staff. Every first lady has a staff. The staff must have known his secret identity, [00:29:00] yet none betrayed Moses to Pharaoh's police. But did Moses know? If yes, since when? How long did he stay in the royal palace? Forty years, according to the Midrash. What was he doing there while his brothers and sisters were subjected to

pain, humiliation, and slavery? Like his peers, he must have enjoyed the privileges and benefits accorded to his class. As he was handsome -- many sources comment on his physical beauty -- he must have been much admired and much loved. How old was he when he went to meet his brothers? The text states simply, "*Vayigdal Moshe vayetze el-echav*": "And Moses grew up and he went to find his brothers." One Midrashic version indicates his age: five years, though he looked 11. Another version says 20; [00:30:00] a third, 40. Whatever the hypothesis, the question remains: did he know then that the Jewish slaves were his brothers? Or, more importantly, did he know that he was their brother? It seems to me that he did not.

His being Jewish must have been to him a genuine discovery. As long as he dwelled inside the palace, he couldn't have known his true origins. Otherwise, he would have joined his people earlier, much earlier. What made him pay them a visit? Again, a chance? Desire? Capricious mood? Or simple curiosity? As it happened, he witnessed a scene of unbearable cruelty: a Hebrew slave being tortured at the hands of an Egyptian overseer. Probably without realizing what he was doing, Moses intervened on behalf of the [00:31:00] victim. Having looked around and seen that no one was watching, he threw himself at the aggressor and killed him.



In Midrashic literature, the sages, our sages, felt the need to elaborate. They identified the Jew and revealed the wicked nature of his tormentor. The Jew is named Dothan, and he's married to a beautiful woman, Shlomit. So attractive is she that the Egyptian officer covets her. At dawn, he sends her husband to work and, in his absence, joins Shlomit, who in the dark mistakes him for her husband. Actually, Dothan, the husband, suspicious, hurries home just as the officer closes the door behind him. That is why the officer attacks him: he wants to eliminate the jealous husband who could become a dangerous witness for sexual [00:32:00] harassment. (laughter)

As for the avenger, Moses, I imagine him back at the palace. He must feel uncomfortable, Moses. He doesn't understand what had come over him to kill a man, an Egyptian, to boot. What made him, an Egyptian prince, a future pharaoh, perhaps, get in the middle of a fight which was, in fact, none of his business? Distressed, preoccupied, he's aimlessly circling the palace when he meets Batyah, his mother. And she senses that something is wrong. Doesn't he feel well? Did he eat something he shouldn't have? Has he got cold, perhaps? She asks him all kinds of questions, but his thoughts are elsewhere. Finally, he tells her of his anxiety. He has committed murder. [00:33:00] He

tells her everything: the Egyptian attacker; the Jewish victim. Batyah pales. Immediately she understands. Better than he, she sees the connection. Now she can no longer keep it a secret, and I am sure she must have said, "You are not my son. You are not even Egyptian. You belong to the Hebrews. You are a Jew." Only then does Moses understand why he is, why he was so sensitive to Jewish suffering. He realizes that he will never be a pharaoh. From now on, he will be on the side of his own people.

At this point, he spends more and more time with the Hebrew slaves. He's eager to meet what we call today his biological family. Not easy. Luckily, he remembers a certain Jochebed, [00:34:00] a Jewish woman who had nursed him as a child, and in the Midrash you are offered a moving, moving description of their reunion. His father is present, and Miriam, and Aaron. After 40 years, the family unit is finally complete, and under the circumstances everybody is happy, but not for too long.

One day, again, at a quarry, walking among slaves, Moses observes a Jewish slave being beaten by a Jewish taskmaster, and right away he steps in. "Rasha," he admonishes him, "wicked man, why do you strike your comrade?" The taskmaster is furious. "What right do you have to question me and order me

around?" And then he said, "Are you going to kill me, just as you killed the Egyptian?" [00:35:00] Moses' reaction?

Astonishment. Shock. Solitude. He's alone. He wonders how this man could possibly know of the incident with the Egyptian. And suddenly, according to the Midrash, it dawns upon him: the Jew whom he saved and the one who was beating a fellow Jew are one and the same. Otherwise, who would have known? When he killed the Egyptian there were only three persons present: the Egyptian -- cannot speak -- Moses, and the Jew whom he saved, the same Jew who is now beating his brother.

For Moses, this is a dark day, the first of many to come. For the second time since his birth, he feels close to death.

Something dies in him. Early anxieties [00:36:00] resurfaced in him. As an infant he was in danger of death because he was Jewish. Now he was in danger again because he saved a Jew from death. And such thoughts must have deepened his solitude. Why is it that some victims are so ungrateful? What about the mythical Jewish solidarity? Is it possible that suffering could incite more suffering, and evil bring more evil? Like all Jews who return from afar, he wants to be proud of his people, proud of his Jewishness. He wants the Jew to be better than others, purer than others. And so, disillusioned, betrayed,

heartbroken, he leaves his newly-found community and family for another 40 years.

Until now, one can [00:37:00] easily understand Moses' behavior. His reactions seem logical, natural. Having discovered his Jewishness late in his life, he must have idealized the Jew by endowing him with every imaginable virtue he could think of. He's shocked to discover him flawed like anyone else, incapable, if not unworthy, of learning some noble and useful lessons from his experiences. But then why remain his brother? That is why he runs away. Moses is the first fugitive in Jewish history -- I mean, the first Jew wanting to escape Jewish history.

Which explains his regrettable attitude upon his arrival in the land of Midian. He hears young girls refer to him as *ish mitzri*, an Egyptian man, and he keeps silent. Moses, silent about his identity? [00:38:00] Why doesn't he tell them that he is Jewish? Is it because a refugee is always afraid to reveal his true identity? And what if it was simply a decision on his part to no longer appear Jewish? Unlike the patriarchs, he marries a non-Jewish woman, Zipporah, the daughter of a priest, pagan priest, the eldest of seven. Strange as it may seem, when she gives birth to a son, Moses does not bother to circumcise him.

Well, let's pause for a moment. If I can understand Moses' silence when Jethro's daughters called him Egyptian, a silence that God will harshly censor later, I remain perplexed at his subsequent lifestyle. During his 40-year stay [00:39:00] with his father-in-law, does he ever show an interest in the fate of his family, or of the Jewish community at large which he left behind in Pharaoh's Egypt? He knows that they are oppressed, victimized, despairing, and yet he seems to go on living at peace within the family of the Midianite priest. Has he, the sensitive Jew who out of compassion for his brother Jew killed an Egyptian, has he now become indifferent? How can he quietly watch over his sheep, drink clear water from the well, and eat his daily bread, when on the other side, in Egypt, Jewish slaves relentlessly suffer? When finally ordered by God, he decides to return to Egypt. He explains his motive to his father-in-law: I am going back [00:40:00] to join my brother in Egypt, quote, "to see if they are still alive," unquote.

No, really, Moses, all of a sudden he is concerned? He didn't want to know earlier if they were still alive? What happened in all the previous years? Is it conceivable that Moses never missed them? He could have sent a friend, an accomplice, a Midianite spy to go and bring back information about the

situation there. Why didn't he? Was he angry not only with the Jew, the traitor, one Jew, one traitor, but with all Jews? Had he intended to stay away from them forever? Away from our future, away from our destiny, away from our memory, away from our redemption that was waiting for us? But then, why did [00:41:00] God choose him as his personal messenger? Couldn't He have found a less assimilated Jew, someone more conscious of his Jewishness, and therefore more devoted to his people?

Scripture does not deal with this question; the Midrash does. The sages in the Midrash feel compelled to invent numerous reasons to justify God's choice. What don't they say about Moses? He was as agile as a lion. His face, radiant as the sun. He resembled Adam and a celestial angel both. His voice was so powerful that it was heard from a 40-day distance, and if that is not enough, listen twice a day: he built this, and then dismantled, and then rebuilt the future sanctuary. Still more: [00:42:00] from the first day to his last, he felt the *Shechinah* on his face. He was capable with one word of setting the entire world on fire. No wonder he was feared even by the angels Gabriel and Michael, *Michael*. In heaven, his place was higher than that of the Sanhedrin. In other words, he had unique leadership qualities. Why, then, did he say no to God's

appointment? Is it that all true leaders say no before answering yes? Was it his lifelong desire to be alone always?

Actually, at this point we understand Moses, or at least we think we do. There were reasons for his constant habit of seeking refuge in the desert. Fed up with the noisy and hectic life at Pharaoh's palace, burdened with sad memories, he needed to be alone with himself, with his thoughts. [00:43:00] And his taste for solitude was rewarded. Had he been with company, he would not have experienced the awesome, majestic scene at the burning bush. What a scene that was. It marked the end of a chapter, and the beginning of another, in national Jewish history. Exile will soon be over, the first exile. Redemption is near, and Moses is its instrument. Moses is alone more than ever before, alone with God for the first time, the bush that is burning and burning, yet is not consumed. What an image. The voice that addresses him, "*Moshe, Moshe, Moses, Moses.*" And like Abraham, Moses' answer is one word: *hineni*. "Here I am." God's reply? "Remove thy shoes from under [00:44:00] your feet, for the ground under you is sacred." *Admat kodesh hu*. And Moses obeys.

And then he hears God speaking of both his past and future.

"Go," God says to him, "go to Pharaoh and bring my people out of

Egypt." Moses resists God's order, saying, "Who am I to accomplish such things?" And he voices many arguments: he's not fit for the part; he's a poor speaker, a stutterer; and he has no answers to questions the Hebrews and/or Pharaoh will surely put to him. Is this why the Bible later calls him the most modest man in the world? Must all leaders be modest? Can they be? Must they at least appear to be modest? But God [00:45:00] dismisses all his arguments.

Accompanied by his brother Aaron, Moses returns to his native land, confronts Pharaoh, performs various miracles, breathes hope and strength into his despairing community. In short, yesterday's shepherd and dreamer who lived in silence and solitude has overnight turned into a man of action and authority. He commands and all obey, Pharaoh included. Gone are his hesitations and self-doubts. Nothing will stop him, nothing, from accomplishing his mission. He stimulates recalcitrance, encourages the fainthearted, lends support to the weak, shouts orders to each and every one to hurry, hurry. It wasn't easy for the slaves to uproot themselves, to break with what was known for the unknown, but how can they not heed Moses' orders to hurry, hurry, not to waste a second so as not to miss Israel's appointment [00:46:00] with destiny?



Read. Read the biblical texts, as we all do during the *Parshat Beshalach*. Read a description of the very last night, and, like the Jews then, you will be breathless. The mass exodus, the flight towards the Red Sea, where all of a sudden time seems to stop as they realize they are being caught between the pursuing Egyptian army and the terrifying immensity of the sea. Who will dare enter the waves first? Nachshon ben Aminadav shows no fear, and therefore he remains in history as the symbol of courage and fate. Others follow, many others. Will they reach the other shore? Not one remains behind. Who will be saved? They all are. The miracle enveloped the entire community of Israel, but not the enemies of Israel. For them, the sea became [00:47:00] their tomb. And this is now Moses' most glorious hour. Never before has he known such joy. "*Az yashir Moshe*," says the text. Moses began to sing. But the verb is in the future sense: he will sing. "*Mikan*," says the Talmud, quoted by Rashi. From *mikan*, from here we learn the *Techiyat HaMetim*, resurrection of the dead, is from the Torah itself. His song will accompany his people to the end of time.

But this is not the end of his adventure, not yet. His happiness is short-lived. The song is followed by his people's harsh words of bitterness and remorse. Moses, solitary, is faced with numerous obstacles in the desert. Hunger and thirst

provoke discontent. Some men are ambitious; others envious. Some want honors, titles; others demand [00:48:00] meat and bread, or a simple return ticket to Egypt. One day, they all got angry because their drinking water was bitter, commented the great Rebbe Mendel of Kotsk, who said, "The water was not bitter; they were." Bitter at him, at Moses, angry with him, suspicious of him. The custom of submitting political leaders to scrupulous scrutiny is not that new. (laughter)

Some stories in the Talmud seem to have been excerpted from today's newspapers. Jealous husbands accused him, (laughs) Moses, of having affairs with their wives. It's in the Talmud. One Midrash pretends that even Miriam and Aaron whispered behind his back that he was a bit too preoccupied, say, with erotic needs. [00:49:00] Others insinuate that he made money illegitimately. After all, wasn't it he who supervised the budget and the construction of the sanctuary? If anyone came to his defense, the Bible doesn't mention it. Instead, we find that Moses had to publicly defend himself. And he said, "I haven't hurt anyone. Nor have I misappropriated anything." He almost said it. In different words he said, "Let my books be audited." (laughter) There were other accusations, some irrational, and all unjustified. Wasn't he accused, according to a Midrash, of being responsible for Aaron's death? Some evil

tongues went as far as claiming that he was -- I hesitate to repeat it -- mentally unstable. If he was late for an appointment, they said, "Who knows what he was plotting against us at this [00:50:00] moment?" If he was early, they said, "Look, he's not entirely sane."

Right, think about it: the American nation is so proud of the Mayflower people. These are our Mayflower ancestors. What didn't they do to poor Moses? Of all the accusations, the accusation of mental instability is the one that must have been, for Moses, the most painful. How can you prove that you are sane? Once, says the Midrash, as he was admonishing the children of Israel for their sins, they shrugged and said, "Oh, it's all in his mind, and his mind isn't what it used to be."

So he felt the need to prove them wrong. He who remembered God's every word and every silence was forced to submit to humiliating tests. They asked him, innocently, "How many days separate us from Sinai?" [00:51:00] What did they think? That their guide forgot, or that he was disoriented? So he had to answer: "Eleven days," and so forth. Only then did they agree to listen to him.

How could Moses live and function with such slanderous accusations leveled by, quote, "liberated," unquote, men who remained slaves in their heart? Poor Moses. Whatever he did alone was fruitful and blessed; whatever he undertook with others was not. Why did God plague him with so many trials, resulting from his people's disobedience? The loneliest and most insulted man in the Bible, Moses has problems either with God, who is too harsh with His people, or with His people, who too often rebel against God. No pity for the liberator and legislator. Since he became a public figure, [00:52:00] there wasn't a single hour of peace in his life, not a single instance of happiness. How does he cope with such heavy burdens on his shoulders? Granted, his brother and sister assist him; his disciple, Joshua, is constantly at his side; but he is the supreme commander. He is the one to receive complaints and recriminations. When things go badly, which they often do, it is at him that the general anger is directed. Fortunately, his father-in-law, Jethro, counsels him to delegate power by appointing judges and chieftains. But everybody asks for him, not them. Does he ever reach the limits of his endurance? Does he ever hand his resignation to God, saying, "God, I've done my part; let someone else do it"?

Actually, it did happen once. After the deplorable episode of the golden calf, created and idolized [00:53:00] in his absence, he felt sick, according to interpretation of the Kotsker Rebbe, of the word "*Vayechal Moshe*," which means "and Moses prayed." Anticipating God's wrath, he tried to prevent it, or at least reduce it, and to God he declared, "Either you forgive them or *mecheini misifrecha*: erase my name from your book." In other words, let God take another leader, or another people. That is what the Kotsker Rebbe said: they made him sick. And in his sickness he said, "All right, enough."

God yielded to Moses. Moses never failed to reprimand his people for its sins, but never failed to intercede on his behalf when condemned by God. Though judge and prophet of Israel, Moses was also its defender, its supreme defender. In spite of his disappointments, he was never bitter, never vindictive.

[00:54:00] The fierce and implacable leader had a golden heart, tough but tender. "*Moshe Rabbenu*," says the Midrash, "*Ohev Yisrael haya*: Our teacher Moses was in love with the people of Israel."

And here is Moses' singularity: a man of the situation, he was always there when needed, and then he gave himself completely to his task. He had no ambition to become a prophet, but once he

became one he was the greatest. He did not seek the role of political or military leader, but once he took it on he was the best. Philosophers would say that if man is what he becomes, Moses was man par excellence.

What I most like about him is his attitude towards the young. When someone came running to tell him [00:55:00] of two young men, Eldad and Medad, acting as prophets in the camp, Joshua suggested locking them up in prison. Listen to Moses' magnificent and magnanimous answer: "Is your jealousy intended to protect me? *"mi yitein kol am nevi'im"* [00:55:19] I wish that all people would become prophets." What a beautiful example he is to later political and cultural leaders. "One must never envy one's son or one's student," declares the Talmud. In God's world, there is room for more than one prophet, more than one teacher, more than one writer.

To have Moses, at the end, accept that his hour had come, God made him attend the lecture delivered by Joshua, and Moses did become jealous, for a second. For then he said, [00:56:00] "Better a thousand deaths than one moment of jealousy."

For a man like Moses, which solitude is harder to bear: the one caused by God or by man? In his capacity as leader of his

wandering nation, he almost never participated in his joyous celebrations. Always plunged in prayer or meditation, he seems tense, pressured. There was always an emergency demanding his presence, a conflict that he alone could resolve. As in the moving poem by the Romantic nineteenth-century poet, Alfred de Vigny, Moses is presented to us as taciturn, troubled, on the edge of melancholy. Did he think of his future?

His two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, were not destined to public office or career. [00:57:00] They were not his heirs. A Midrash tells us that when Moses realized that neither of his sons possessed the sufficient levels of knowledge to be appointed as his successor, he wrapped himself in prayer and solicited heavenly assistance. A good father, he wanted one of his sons to succeed him, but God ordered him to name Joshua. As Moses allowed himself to drift into sadness, God asked him, "Why are you so disappointed and dissatisfied? Aren't Aaron's sons like your own? Admit it." Well, Moses accepted the argument, but really, there is a subtlety: "like your own."

In general, God was not especially kind to his favorite prophet. Moses' questions, more often than not, remained unanswered.

[00:58:00] Right at the outset, Moses said, "What shall I say if asked who you are?" God answered, "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh.*" Not "I

am who I am," but "I shall be who I shall be." Really, at such a dramatic hour, God had nothing better to do than play with words? (laughter) Later, Moses humbly asked, "*Hareni et-kevodeha*. Show me your glory." And God said no. Why? In the Talmud, when Moses ascended to heaven he asked several questions about Rabbi Akiva, and each time the answer was "*Shtok, kach ala b'machshava lefanai*." "Keep quiet." It's more brutal than that: "*Shtok*." That's how I see things: Moses, such a tragic figure.

That human beings are incapable of answering the essential questions of their existence is something I can live with, but why does God, *kavyakhol*, who knows all the answers, [00:59:00] keep them to himself? Could it be that God wants to impress upon man the idea that questions are more important than answers? Or that he wants to establish, once and for all, the principle that in man's relationship to God faith is more important than reason? Could it be that questions are a remedy for solitude? After all, we have learned from history that people are united by questions; it is the answers that divide them. Or could it be that some answers make the questions sound worse?



For Moses, the most tragic and solitary moment occurs at the end of his life, when God finally gives an answer to a question Moses hasn't even raised. Let's read the text. "On that day, the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him, 'Go up to the heights of [01:00:00] Abarim, to Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, facing Jericho, and see the land of Canaan, which I am giving the children of Israel as their heritage, and you shall die on the mountain that you are now going to ascend. You shall be gathered to your kinfolk just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kinfolk. For" -- listen -- "you both betrayed me among the people of Israel, at the waters of Meribath-Kadesh, in the wilderness of sin, and you have not sanctified me among the children of Israel."

We read these words, actually, a few days ago on Simchat Torah. These are harsh, utterly harsh words. What? Moses and Aaron, sinners against God? [01:01:00] The prophet and the high priest, guilty of betraying the Lord, of failing to sanctify His name? Did God ever have a servant more faithful, an emissary more loyal than Moses? Why did God say such things to Moses before he died? Well, perhaps it would be worth our while to examine these reproaches.

After the children of Israel left Egypt, they arrived at a barren place named Rephidim. In the '67 war I remember I was at Rephidim, an air base. That was an Egyptian air base, and before the war all the newspapers in the world showed Nasser at Rephidim, toasting his pilots to the victory, the Egyptian victory. A week later, we were there. [01:02:00] So they came to Rephidim. They were thirsty and demanded water, and Moses responded, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why are you so determined to put God to the test?" But they refused to listen, and they said, "Why did you make us leave Egypt? Is it that you wish to kill us all with our children and our cattle?" At that moment, Moses exclaimed, "Lord, what can I do? They are going to stone me." That's when God ordered him to take his miracle-making cane and, accompanied by the elders of Israel, go and strike the rock, which Moses did, and out came the water. And he called the place Massah and Meribah, the place of testing and quarrel. For it is there that the children of Israel had tested God to ascertain if he was still in their midst.

And here I fail to understand the text. If the people of Israel have sinned, [01:03:00] why must Moses be punished? Hasn't he fulfilled his duties? Hasn't he done exactly what God asked him to do? Also, the almighty is accusing Moses of not having sanctified him at that moment, but what should he -- what could

he have done? Rashi, in his commentary, adds one most significant word: "*garamtem*." "It is because of you and your brother that the people have sinned. You are a kind of pretext." Wait a minute, Aaron. He wasn't even involved in that incident. Furthermore, when has Moses done anything to incite the children of Israel to sin against God? Not then, not ever. What, then, is the explanation?

Are we to conclude that God, *kavyakhol*, was unjust, even cruel, towards Moses? I know this question is disturbing. Thus, I suggest a different [01:04:00] approach to the passage in which God speaks to Moses for the last time. And I'm asking myself, what if God reminded him of an old, rather unimportant episode for his own good? Not to pain him, but, on the contrary, to reassure him? As if to say, "Moses, my dear friend and messenger, do not try to look for nonexistent sins to explain your death now. You have done nothing terrible to displease me. If I choose to evoke the Meribah episode, the one about your people's quarrels, it is to assuage your concerns. That is why I associate your name with that of Aaron, who has nothing to do with it. No, Moses, you have nothing to feel remorseful about, but you will die, for you are human."

In Midrashic literature, this is not the end of the tale. There, Moses refuses [01:05:00] to die. Listen: "And Moses learned of the celestial decree that his last hour had arrived. He drew a circle around himself and declared, 'Master of the universe, I shall not move until you revoke this decree.' And then all the heavens and the Earth and the laws of nature shook in fear and screamed, 'Is it that the Holy One, blessed be He, had decided to renew His creation?' A celestial voice answered them, 'No, no such decision has been made by the Holy One, blessed be He.' And so, as to limit Moses' powers, God ordered all the gates in heaven to stop his prayers, to block them. But Moses addressed the almighty with pertinent questions: 'Haven't I suffered for your sake? Haven't I sacrificed my days and nights to prevail upon your people to accept thy law and thy commandments? Having witnessed their sorrow, why do you forbid me to share in their happiness? Also, what will people say? That I committed such sins that I am [01:06:00] to receive the most severe of punishments?' And then he said, 'God of compassion, where is thy compassion towards me?' And the almighty replied, 'That is my will.' Moses: 'Then I accept it, oh, Lord. I shall not enter thy promised land alive, but let me at least enter it dead.'"

And, again, the Almighty refused to be moved. And then we learn how he died: on the mountain he died, but he was buried in the valley. And, as you know, nobody knows where he was buried. Nobody knows because...? [01:07:00] Because those in the valley believed he was in the mountain, and those in the mountain believed he was in the valley. But Moses ascended to Mount Nebo alone. The people remained behind. And the Almighty Himself guided him to a cave, and God alone took care of his last moment.

Why? My feeling is God did it not only because, as tradition says, so as not to allow his place to become a cult, a place of idolatry, but because when a person dies, that person becomes impure, even Moses. Alive, he was the greatest; dead, [01:08:00] he would be impure and make others impure. And I believe that God, in an ultimate gesture of grace, decided that He, therefore, will be with Moses when Moses dies, so that no human being will ever receive the impurity of Moses when he was dead.

And finally, there they were, far from all human beings, far from their voices, far from their troubles, far from everything. And Moses, at last, was alone with God, as God is always, for all eternity, alone.

(applause) [01:09:00]

**M1** :

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