

Though it might be easy for a Disney to produce a film like *Prince of Egypt* or Cecil B. DeMille to direct *The Ten Commandments*, it would be much harder to create an artistic work describing the “inner Moses.” There just isn’t enough material with which to work. Moshe Rabbeinu is a dramatic figure, but he tends toward the impenetrable, his persona wears psychological armor that’s difficult to pierce. Yet here and there, the Torah provides a glimpse of insight into Moshe’s character. In *Parshat B’ha’alotekha* we have a double jackpot, for today’s reading treats us to not one, but two, narratives that shed light on the personality of Israel’s greatest teacher.

In the first story, we find the Israelites bitterly complaining about the monotony of their desert diet: The people’s rebelliousness and ingratitude is simply too much for Moses to bear. He protests to the Almighty, “למה הרעת לעבדך ולמה לא מצאתי חן בעיניך לשום את משא כל העם הזה עלי. -- Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, that You have laid the burdens of this people on me? Did I conceive them or give birth to them that You should tell me ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant’? If you deal thus with me,” says Moses, “kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!” (*Numbers* 11:11-12, 15).

Moses’ complaint resonates with God; the Almighty responds with a plan whereby others will share the responsibility for prophetic leadership with the people. God instructs Moses to gather into the sanctuary seventy elders. There, the Divine Presence that rests on Moses is shifted in some measure to each of the chosen ones, granting them a godly spark that enables them to share in the burden of leadership. Yet two individuals selected by Moses, who remain in the Israelite camp, also receive a share of the prophetic spirit. It isn’t clear why these fellows, Eldad and Medad by name, opted not to join the other elders at *אהל מועד*, the Tent of Meeting; nor does the Torah explain why they were touched by the spirit of ecstasy. Joshua, Moses’ second-in-command and ever protective of his boss’ authority, sees the prophesying of Eldad and Medad as a potential challenge. “My lord, Moses, restrain them!” he urges. Yet Moshe, who above all wants to share the weight of responsibility with others, exclaims, “ומי יתן כל עם ה’ נביאים כי יתן ה’ -- Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and the Lord put His spirit upon them!” (*Numbers* 11:29).

According to Rabbi Yitzhak Arama, who lived in the age of the Spanish Expulsion and authored a Bible commentary entitled *Akedat Yitzhak*, “The prophet’s words constitute a remarkable example of humility. Apart from not envying those who were his disciples, he earnestly desired that all the people of God should be prophets and that the Almighty should bestow His spirit upon them.”

Now for the second story. Aaron and Miriam, Moshe’s own brother and sister, attack his character. In ironic counterpoint to the first narrative, they complain that Moses has gotten too big for his britches, that he tried to monopolize God’s message. “Has the Lord only spoken through Moses? Hasn’t He spoken through us as well?” they complain. In a rare editorial comment, the Torah itself responds to their allegation: “והאיש משה ענו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה” -- Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other person on earth” (*Numbers* 12:4).

Yet in this second tale, God’s reaction to Miriam’s and Aaron’s jealousy stands in tension with Moshe’s own modesty, his desire to have others shoulder the burdens of leadership alongside him. In no uncertain terms God sets the record straight for Moses’ siblings: “Not so with My servant Moses; he is the most trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles . . . How then did you dare to speak against My servant, Moses!” (*Numbers* 12:7-8).

In the earlier incident, Moshe is overwhelmed by the burden of leadership. Not surprisingly, when he learns of Eldad and Medad, he prays that all God’s people could be prophets -- perhaps, then, he might be able to retire! But in the second story, God answers Moshe’s wish in the negative. “No, Moses,” the Almighty seems to say, “You are unique. No one, not even your own brother or sister -- prophets in their own right -- will ever reach your exalted level.” We find this belief embedded in the final verse of the Torah itself, as well as in *Yigdal*, the 14th century hymn of Daniel ben Yehuda embodying the thirteen Maimonidean principles of faith: לא קם בישראל משה -- There never arose in Israel another like Moses, a prophet who possessed the deepest grasp of a godly likeness.”

Dr. Joseph Lukinsky, professor emeritus of education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, once said that “The challenge facing the rabbi today is to become dispensable!” If you think about it, that’s a stunning claim. It suggests a very specific model of the rabbinate, one in which clergy strive to be mentors, empowering congregants to raise themselves to the rabbi’s level of observance, to teach the knowledge required for congregants to become authorities in Jewish decision-making. It echoes Moses’ wish, ומי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים -- “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”

Yet this model clashes with the operative value described in the second story, a model in which the rabbi is unique and indispensable. The rabbi alone serves as the authority figure, the *mara d’atra*, the person to whom congregants look up to for answers regarding belief, practice, or an understanding of God’s will.

I cannot speak for all rabbis, of course, but clearly there has been a paradigm shift in the last generation. Once upon a time, rabbis wore ecclesiastic robes at services that set them apart. In sanctuaries built in the early decades of the 20th century, the *bimah* was deliberately designed to be significantly higher than the level of congregational seating; congregants looked up to the rabbi literally, while he looked down at them. A formal sermon, rather than dialogue or give-and-take teaching, represented the most important form of communication between spiritual leader and laity. These were but the outer trappings of deeply rooted assumptions. The rabbi was supposed to be a kind of resident Moses, unique, holy, possessed of access to the the Almighty somehow denied the *hoi polloi*, the common man or woman. Growing up, I vividly remember peers astounded to learn that my father did not always wear a dark suit, that he had interests and quirks, a life apart from the rabbinate. Of course, sometimes rabbis themselves fell victim to these presumptions. I have a dear colleague who never wears jeans, not even at home, not even on his day off -- lest a congregant see him in the supermarket, or he be called to respond to an emergency and be seen as . . . a real person.

In the last thirty years so much has changed. I think it fair to say that the rabbis of my generation are more favorably disposed to the empowerment model. We’re uncomfortable with the idea that God listens to the rabbi more than to others, and reject the notion that we understand the Almighty better than any other, sensitive and decent human being. Often we feel the inevitable

loneliness that Moshe must have felt, the sense of being an integral part of a community, yet somehow separate and apart, possessing a unique set of lenses through which we see the world in a different manner than those we serve.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Shalom Lewis, noted this in a poignant piece he authored for *Conservative Judaism* in the winter issue of 1984. Entitled “The Rabbi is a Lonely Person.” Rabbi Lewis wrote:

The loneliness we suffer is not necessarily social but spiritual. We might bowl, swim, and *kibitz* with the best of them, but we are still in another world entirely. We quote Heschel and no one understands. We perform *netilat yadayim* and our friends think we’re rude when we are momentarily silent. We cite halakhic restrictions and are dismissed as fanatics. We walk home, alone, on Shabbos. I am blessed with a wonderful social community, but I have no spiritual community in which I have companions. When I am Shalom Lewis, the phone does not stop ringing. But when I am Rabbi Lewis, I am indeed alone.

If rabbis were satisfied with the notion that they alone are the keepers of the flame, that observance were their bailiwick and no one else’s, they’d have no complaints. It’s only when they buy into the model of leadership that says *ומי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים* -- “Would that all the Lord’s people be prophets” that problems arise. In contemporary terms, “Would that all the Lord’s people be prophets” becomes translated into “Would that people come to *shul* simply because it is Shabbat” or “Would that they attend *minyan* just to talk to God,” or “Would that *kashrut* be viewed as a very doable and undaunting experience, one that doesn’t require the wisdom of Solomon, the wealth of Rothschild, or the piety of Maimonides to establish a kosher home.

The rabbi’s hope to become dispensable is more a dream than a reality. In the end the tension between the two models of leadership found in this week’s Torah reading -- the authority figure vs. the empowering one -- is inherent in the contemporary rabbinic role. As my colleague, Dr. Jack Bloom, observes in his recent book, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar*, “It does no good for a rabbi to repeatedly proclaim that he is only human, with human needs, desires, and limitations. A congregant’s answer is, “Of course the rabbi is human, but after all, he is THE RABBI . . . It is this symbolic exemplarhood that enables the rabbi to be taken seriously in the first place . . . The congregation wants someone who, beyond his professional roles of preaching, teaching, counseling,

administering, and representing them to the community, will, in his very being, be the embodiment of Jewish life, the quintessential Jew. If congregations were to change this about themselves, rabbinic placement lists would be precipitously shortened.”

Something in both rabbi and congregant should protest Judaism as a religion of surrogacy. The rabbi will protest because he desperately wants a community of caring and serious Jews, learning and growing. And hopefully, enough laity will protest as well. Rarely in Jewish history have our congregants been composed of men and women, who, in other areas of their lives, are more competent, educated and comfortable with authority roles. Some may not be Jewishly learned or casual about their Jewish commitments; they may resist the responsibility for Jewish decision-making . . . but that’s why they need a rabbi. The challenge rabbis face is how to speak to their strengths, and not just their weaknesses.

The empowerment model makes new and serious demands on all concerned. It requires the rabbi have infinite patience and respect for the independence and integrity of the laity coupled with the determination never to confuse communal empowerment with rabbinic disempowerment. And where lay people are concerned, it requires a willingness to not only talk the talk, but walk the walk -- to be empowered not simply in word, but deed. For all, it takes a recognition that the boundary issues between rabbi and congregant become insignificant when both clergy and laity subscribe to same set of Jewish values, and seek together to raise the quality of religious life in the community. It also requires that congregants being willing to challenge and stimulate the rabbi’s creativity in order for the rabbi to do the same; empowerment, after all, is a two-way street.

The spiritual leader as authority figure, the rabbi who seeks to empower others. Even the skills of a Moses could not resolve the tension between these two models. In the end we must read both stories and blend both narratives together. In so doing, all of us will become more aware and sensitive to what it takes for congregants and rabbis to be more like one another, while being very different at the same time.