

Ariel's L.'s Bar Mitzvah D'var Torah (Teaching)

January 26, 2008

Shabbat Shalom everyone!! My parsha for this Shabbat, Parashat Yitro (*Exodus* 18:1 20:23), begins with Jethro bringing Moses' wife, Tziporah, and Moses' two sons, to Moses where he and the Israelites were camped. Jethro acknowledges God as the only true God, greater than all others. Jethro witnesses Moses judging the people all by himself. Jethro, concerned about Moses, gives him advice to appoint leaders or judges of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, so that Moses wouldn't have to judge everyone by himself, and Moses accepts this advice. Soon after that incident, Moses sends Jethro on his way from the area.

A few weeks later, the Israelites arrive at the Wilderness of Sinai, and camp opposite Mt. Sinai. God speaks to Moses after calling him up the mountain, and instructs Moses to tell the Israelites the words that He says. Moses then speaks before the Israelites, and the people respond, saying "Everything that God has spoken, we will do." Moses carries their words back to God, and He gives more instructions to Moses. Moses descends once again and sanctifies, or blesses, the Israelites, and tells them to be prepared in three day's time. So three days from then, God "descends" to earth in thunder and lightning. Moses brings the people closer to the mountain. The mountain burns with God's intensity, and God calls upon Moses to once again climb up the mountain. He does, and God uses Moses once again as a messenger to tell the Israelites not to break through to see God. Moses and Aaron then ascend together; but only Moses goes further up in order to receive the Ten Commandments. The Israelites see the thunder and flames, and the Torah even says that they see the sound of the Shofar, and the smoking mountain. They say to Moses, "You speak to us and we shall hear; let God not speak to us lest we die." Moses reassures the people and approaches the thick cloud where God is present. God speaks the Ten Statements (in Hebrew, Aseret Hadebrot, which means "the ten statements"). He tells the Israelites not to make images of God or of heaven, not to make any gods of gold and silver, or to build an altar to sacrifice to them on it. He also tells them not to make an altar of hewn stones, for they would have to raise their swords to cut the stone. Also among many other things, God tells them not to ascend the altar. In summary, the ten statements that God speaks are:

1. I am your God who has brought you out of slavery.
2. You shall not worship any other gods or make idols for yourself.
3. You shall not take the Name of Hashem, your God, in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
5. Honor your mother and father
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness against your fellow.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or belongings.

The Main question that came up in my studies has been: What was Moses *feeling* all this time? Nowhere in this parsha does it actually state Moses's feelings, although

there are many places where it shows. This question is important because Moses is the most pivotal character in the Torah, and it is good to have a better understanding or perspective about him.

Also, despite the importance of this Parsha, it actually doesn't have much direct information on how the leader of the Jewish people feels at this most momentous time in Jewish history, so I explored the rest of the Exodus, and also studied some Rabbinic Legends or Midrashim.

In the beginning of the parsha, Moses possibly was frustrated with Jethro because Jethro may not understand him and his role, or with other people trying to tell him how to do his "job" in general. (For example, for me, when I was deciding whether to continue ballet, some people said, "You should do what you are passionate about" and I wasn't frustrated with them, but that did not help, because I am passionate about everything that I do.)

Perhaps Moses must have been hesitant, because all of a sudden he wasn't just accepting help from a Higher Being, but committing to God's covenant and following the laws and rules of God. Some of the Israelites may not have liked some of the rules, but this God was great and had brought them out of the house of bondage. Since both ideas have weight, Moses could have been a little hesitant, but, after all he, too, was the one person who was chosen to lead the people, so he asks the Israelites to accept God, and they do.

Moses probably felt a lot of stress from the weight of tons of responsibility in receiving the Torah from God, because this is what would stay with the Jewish people for so many thousands of years to come. Did Moses know or think about that? Did Moses envision a future for Israel beyond arriving at the Promised Land? I don't think he realized it at the time, just as we don't always consider what we do now could affect the future. I think that he knew that there was more after the Promised Land, but he couldn't exactly know what or when. He also might have felt like just a tool or channel through which the Torah was given to the people of Israel from God.

Moses was also shown to be frustrated both with God and with the Israelites many times, which is perfectly understandable, because who can lead the always complaining Israelites and teach them Torah all at the same time? The Rabbis called Moses "Moshe Rabeynu" which means "Moses our teacher," Moses was like the teacher of an unruly and rowdy class! Only a person with lots of mental strength, patience, and powerful control, or presence, could pull off this task, or God himself.

God had the power to do this. However, some people believe, according to the Midrash, that when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, that the way God called to Moses was in distress, as if God needed help. Could it be that God was a little overwhelmed with all of this too? I also believe that God thought that it would be better if Moses led the Israelites to freedom, because if it was just God by himself, than the Israelites maybe would not have agreed with, believed, or even followed God, since He was just a spirit with no physical being. But through Moses, God could communicate with the Israelites and could show them the power of God.

One of the questions that Jeremy Alk, my madrich, asked me was "Was Moses an extraordinary human being? Or was he a tool of God? Or was Moses just an ordinary man called upon to do extraordinary things- a hero at the time?" I think that he was a little bit of all three.

Moses was a tool of God when he was used to deliver the Ten Commandments and the Torah to the Israelites, and also when God used Moses to speak to the Israelites at all other times. Moses was perhaps going against his own will in castigating the Israelites and even the Egyptians, which maybe Moses wouldn't have done of his free will.

Moses was also an ordinary man, with maybe a little luck and opportunity, when he was called upon to lead the Israelites. When God called upon him with that request, Moses must have said to himself, "Why me?" The Torah indicates early on that he thought that he was inadequate to carry out the task.

Moses was also an extraordinary man in the long run to be willing and courageous throughout most of the whole Exodus from Egypt. If he had the courage to stand up to Pharaoh and to strike down the Egyptian slave master, then he was also an extraordinary man.

Also, Moses not so goody-two-shoes side showed in certain points of the story, sometimes with reason and sometimes without. When he killed the Egyptian slave-master, according to Rabbinic Legend, it wasn't just because the Egyptian was beating an Israelite, but also because that Egyptian had also raped the wife of the man he was beating, which made Moses' killing more righteous, if at all.

Perhaps the fact that Moses was closer to Pharaoh and not raised a slave also impacted why he was chosen to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. But this idea did not really make sense to me, because if God had chosen someone who actually was a slave, that person might have tried harder and would have wanted freedom a lot more than Moses would have, having not experienced slavery himself.

Jeremy explained about something called "slave mentality," which is that someone who lives as a slave only knows slavery, and maybe sees people as either masters or slaves. If God had put a slave in charge, he might have tried to make the Egyptians their slaves and themselves the masters.

I also wonder why God only called upon one man to lead the Israelites. It is true that he was the only Hebrew who was not a slave, but maybe there were other worthy people in villages or even in the palace.

In the end, I guess Moses was the only man and was in the right place at the right time. If Pharaoh's daughter had not picked Moses out of the river, or if Moses's mother had not even put him in the basket, then God might have chosen someone else or no one at all. This makes the story of our people depend on all these little but important things.

According to a Midrash of Rabbi Nehorai, when God called upon Moses to carry out the task of freeing, and then leading the Israelites through the desert, Moses sort of freaked out, exclaiming, "You say to me: Go and bring Israel out. How can I manage it with so many people to take care of? Where can I shelter them from the heat in summer and from the cold in winter? From where can I provide food and drink? How many midwives are there among them? How many pregnant women? How many infants? What delicacies have you prepared for those who are pregnant? How many parched grains and nuts have you prepared for the little ones?" God replied, "You will understand from the parched bread Israel will take with them out of Egypt, bread that will suffice them for thirty days, how I intend to provide for them," This shows how much Moses cared about the Israelites, but also how excited he can get.

During the school year, when I am occupied with senior jazz band, senior concert band, my jazz quintet, ballet, and at least three hours of homework a night, I obviously

feel stress, and I question if it was a good idea for me to take all of this on. Perhaps Moses too felt some sort of stress and overwhelming feelings, and might have been thinking of dropping the job. Between guiding the Israelites through the vast dry desert, “judging” the people, and being the bridge between God and the Israelites, Moses was likely stressed.

I guess the main difference is that I am a thirteen year old in the 21st century. My one chance to ease up on myself came during this last summer before seventh grade. In the end, I decided to do all my extra curricular activities again, because I love what I do, and I will benefit from taking all this on once again. So I guess that’s what was in it for Moses. He wasn’t chosen just because he was noble or humble, but he was also capable and willing to become a leader of the people. Moses, though, did not get to the Promised Land with his people, which probably would have been the success and victory that he was looking forward to. Even though he didn’t reach the freedom land, he was definitely happy for his people and did not regret it. Thinking about all this has helped me decide to continue Ballet at least for this year, because, even though I don’t really see myself becoming a dancer, I still have so many options, and it is all good fun, and satisfying.

So in answer to the first question, “What was Moses feeling?” I answer, Moses was frustrated and stressed many times, but he knew it was for his own people and all of them to come. If he hadn’t been willing to take this on, how could we all be here now?

I would like to thank all my friends, family, and everyone else for coming to my Bar Mitzvah on this day. I would like to especially thank my dad and my mom and my brothers for supporting me in all that I do. I also give huge thanks to my Bar Mitzvah teacher and tutor, Jeremy Alk, for helping and supporting me as I have been preparing for my Bar Mitzvah. Without Jeremy, my Bar Mitzvah could not have been possible. Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom.