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Moshe: National Leader and Divine Representative

By Rav Yair Kahn

"Behold, Benei Yisrael have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen, and I am of uncircumcised lips?"

(Shemot 6:12)

This statement is repeated almost verbatim in verse 30 of the same chapter, at which point the narrative resumes. In between we find what appears to be an artificial insert, dealing with the lineage of the Jewish people. Rashi, in fact, comments:

"This statement (verse 30), is the same statement mentioned above (verse 12) ... it was repeated at this point because of the interruption ..."

Why was it necessary to insert the lineage of the Jewish people at this point? Are there no locations more fitting for this survey? For instance, chapter 4, where Moshe returns to Benei Yisrael, seems suitable. Alternately, it could have been placed in chapter 7, following Moshe's dialogue with God.

Rashi (6:14) already noted that the survey is incomplete. Apparently, the Torah was interested not in the lineage of the entire Jewish people, but basically in the family background of Moshe and Aharon. Therefore, although beginning with a brief account of Reuven and Shimon, there is a detailed discussion of the household of Levi, with a comprehensive account of Moshe and Aharon.

This observation however, does not solve our problem. It merely redirects it. Why was it crucial to trace the yichus (lineage) of Moshe and Aharon at this specific point? Why not inform us of Moshe's "yichus" at the beginning of chapter 2? Why is Moshe first introduced to us anonymously as the child of a mysterious "man of the house of Levi" (2:1)? Why is Moshe's full identity revealed to us only in mid-dialogue with God?

The interruption in mid-discussion, which forced the Torah to repeat Moshe's statement in order to pick up the thread of the story, is so odd and out of place that it bears witness to the absolute necessity of

noting Moshe's family background at this particular juncture. The Torah is transmitting a subtle message to us. We, for our part, are obligated to attempt to decipher this message.

I believe that a close examination of the verses in question will reveal a sharp difference regarding the role of Moshe Rabbeinu, as described at the beginning and the end of the chapter. Furthermore, I will try to show that Moshe's lineage is critical specifically for the role described at the end.

God's command to Moshe which elicited the first statement (verse 12), differs slightly from the demand which precedes the repetition. Initially, God orders Moshe to speak to Pharaoh "to allow Benei Yisrael to leave his land" (verse 11). However, in verse 29 Moshe is commanded to "speak to Pharaoh all that I say to you." It is interesting that while verse 11 emphasizes the content of Moshe's assignment - to free Benei Yisrael, in verse 29 the purpose is entirely absent. All that is mentioned is the formal and general demand to speak whatever God will command.

At first glance, this might be taken as support for the thesis that verse 30 is merely a repetition of verse 12, so that an abridged version of the command suffices. However, a sensitive reading of verse 29 clearly reveals that not only brevity is at work here. There are additions introduced that are not found in verse 11. The demand of God, as described in verse 29, is followed by the superfluous clause, "all that I say to you." More strikingly, it is preceded by the declaration, "I am God."

These elaborations seem to indicate a basic difference between the two verses. The initial command is pragmatic in nature. Moshe, functioning as a political leader of Benei Yisrael, is charged with a defined task: freeing the people from bondage. In contrast, the significance of the second command is unrelated to any practical outcome vis-a-vis Benei Yisrael. "I am God! Speak to Pharaoh in My name. Tell him all that I say to you." Moshe is ordered to be the mouthpiece of God, to deliver to him a divine message, to represent, as it were, God Himself. To speak in the name of God is not merely a hollow abbreviation of the previous task. Rather, it is the essence of a distinctly different role that was thrust upon Moshe Rabbeinu. The disregard of the pragmatic agenda highlights the religious nature of his mission.

The twofold response of Moshe Rabbeinu corresponds to his dual role. Verse 12 is comprised of a logical argument: just as Benei Yisrael didn't listen to me, so will Pharaoh ignore me. This should be contrasted with verse 30, where the proof is absent. Within the pragmatic context, the issue is one of results. Will Moshe be successful in his political assignment or not? However, the demand placed upon Moshe in verse 29 raises an entirely different issue. How can a frail, finite human being possibly be a representative of God? How can one with uncircumcised lips possibly speak in the name of Pure Holiness? The issue is not whether Pharaoh will agree to free Benei Yisrael. The problem is the absurdity inherent in the role itself.

As a matter of fact, the second account of Moshe's argument is followed by an explicit description of the Divine nature of Moshe's task. "Behold I have made you a 'God' to Pharaoh, and your brother Aharon shall be your prophet" (7:1). Furthermore, it should be noted that, until this point, Moshe and Aharon have not performed any signs or miracles in Pharaoh's presence. They merely demanded the temporary release of Benei Yisrael. It is only from this point on that they begin to perform miracles. (See 7:8-13.)

For the task with which Moshe was initially charged, there was no necessity to delve into his family background. Even the son of the anonymous "man of the house of Levi" is capable, due to his extraordinary personal abilities, of assuming a role of political leadership. His unique qualities, coupled with the singular circumstances he experienced as a child, were sufficient reason to choose him to lead Benei Yisrael out of bondage.

However, the role of Divine representative cannot be accomplished by any human being, no matter how great. It is impossible for any finite individual to fulfill such a role. The mandate to represent God was not and could not be given to anyone on the personal level. Rather, this Divine role was reserved for an entire nation, chosen to be a "kingdom of priests and a sanctified nation." Therefore, prior to introducing the second aspect of his argument, there is a prerequisite of rooting Moshe Rabbeinu firmly within the context of Knesset Yisrael. Moshe, the talented son of the anonymous "man of the house of Levi," is charged with the task of leading Benei Yisrael out of Egypt. However, it is only Moshe the son of Amram, the grandson of Levi, who is appointed by God as a Divine representative to speak to Pharaoh in the name of God.

At the end of the genealogical listing, Moshe and Aharon are introduced twice.

a) "These are Aharon and Moshe who were told by God, 'Take Benei Yisrael out of Egypt...'" (6:26). This verse refers to the political role, as leaders charged with the task of practically freeing Benei Yisrael. At this level, Aharon and Moshe are equals, and Aharon the elder is mentioned first.

b) "They are the ones who SPOKE to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, ... they are Moshe and Aharon" (6:27). When referring to the representative role of speaking to Pharaoh, Moshe is primary. "Behold, I have made you a god to Pharaoh, and your brother Aharon shall be your prophet" (7:1).

Moshe Rabbeinu was both chosen as political leader of Benei Yisrael, and elected as messenger of God. In his first role, Moshe's leadership expresses itself in clearly defined political categories; together with Aharon, he is charged with leading Benei Yisrael out of bondage. He is unsure how he can possibly convince Pharaoh and fulfill this task, since even Benei Yisrael ignore him. In his second role, Moshe, as a manifestation of Knesset Yisrael, is messenger of God, charged to speak to Pharaoh in His holy name. He alone is given the impossible role of Divine representation. Hence, he questions the paradoxical nature of this task thrust upon him.

Nevertheless, the inscrutable will of God prevails. Moshe, as leader, rooted in his unique individual qualities, successfully leads Benei Yisrael to freedom, while Moshe, as a manifestation of Knesset Yisrael, speaks to Pharaoh in the name of God.

This understanding of the complex role with which Moshe was charged casts an illuminating light on the purpose of the ten plagues. From the pragmatic perspective, which fulfills itself in achieving the result of freedom, the comprehensive constellation of the ten plagues seems superfluous, if not absurd. Is it necessary for the Almighty to batter Pharaoh with ten separate plagues in order to emerge victorious? Was the Omnipotent unable to overpower Egypt immediately? "For now if I would stretch out my hand, I could smite you and your people with pestilence, and you would perish from the earth" (9:15). Evidently, the plagues had an additional purpose. "However, for this have I sustained you, in order to show you My power, and so that My name shall be proclaimed throughout the earth" (9:16).

The dramatic battle between Pharaoh and Moshe was waged on two fronts. One front concerned itself with political sovereignty over Benei Yisrael. The issue of freedom or slavery hung in the balance. On the second front, Benei Yisrael were only incidentally involved. The subject was of a cosmic-religious nature: who controlled the fate

of Benei Yisrael? In the haftara, we read: "And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste, and they shall know that I am God, because he (Pharaoh) has said: The river is mine, and I have made it" ([Yechezkel 29:9](#)). Pharaoh deified himself. He considered himself not only master of the Israelite slaves, but their lord as well. He demanded their worship along with their labor. The phrase, "Thus says Pharaoh" (5:10), in response to "Thus says God," is both striking and instructive.

Until chapter 6 of Shemot, the main focus is the issue of slavery. Moshe and Aharon, the leaders of the people, demand a limited form of freedom. They are met with scorn and abuse, both by Pharaoh as well as by Benei Yisrael. In the following chapter, a new front is opened in the Moshe-Pharaoh confrontation. Benei Yisrael are demoted to a secondary role, as God begins to smite Pharaoh and Egypt. Moshe is charged with speaking to Pharaoh in HIS name.

At this point, the plagues begin. They are not meant to overpower Pharaoh or to conquer Egypt. Rather, the purpose is to prove beyond a doubt the absolute existence, omnipotence and omniscience of the Lord, God of Israel. "Thus says God: With this you will know that I am the Lord" (7:17). "So that you should know that I am God in the midst of the earth" (8:18). "So that you should know that there is none like Me in all the earth" (9:14). (See Ramban 13:16.)

Moshe's subsequent career should be viewed from this dual perspective. We find that Korach's attack on the authority of Moshe is automatically translated as a rejection of God. "Therefore you and your company are gathered against God" ([Bamidbar 16:11](#)). Moshe did not serve only as the political leader - "And he was a king in Yeshurun" ([Devarim 33:5](#), see Ibn Ezra) - but was a prophet as well, who delivered the infinite word of God to Benei Yisrael. Moshe's unique level of prophecy was rooted in his special status as divine representative. As the Torah concludes,

"And there never arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe, whom God knew face to face, in all the signs and the wonders, which God sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants, and in all the mighty hand and great awe that Moshe performed in the sight of all Israel."

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

1. See the concluding verse of the genealogical section of Va'era (6:28) - "And it took place on the day that God spoke to Moshe in the land of Egypt." What is the meaning of this verse?
 2. See 7:7 - "Moshe was eighty and Aharon eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh." What is the purpose of this verse and why does it appear at this place?
 3. The incident of the staff that turns into a serpent follows the section discussed above and precedes the first plague. What is its meaning?
 4. See also Rav Y. Medan's article in Alon Shevut #81.
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