

Moses in the Jewish Tradition

Rabbi David Rosen

Jewish Tradition views the purpose of the Biblical narrative as part and parcel of the revealed text as a whole – to serve as a guide to live in accordance with Divine Will. Thus I will not go in to the plethora of legends associated with the personality and activity of Moses the Prophet our Teacher in Jewish Tradition, but rather focus on what are seen as the essential message of the Biblical narrative.

Accordingly the purpose of the anecdotal material concerning Moses in the Book of Exodus is not seen as a preoccupation with Moses' biographical background, but rather to facilitate greater insight into the theological truths reflected in the Torah (the 5 books). While the Book of Exodus does introduce us to the context in which Moses is born and reared, it however then presents us in the second chapter of the book with three vignettes which are designed to do much more than provide biographical information.

Our biblical commentators have noted that while in Exodus Chapter 2 v. 10 it states "and the lad grew up", in the next verse it states "and Moses grew up". With some homiletical latitude, they suggest that whereas the former refers to Moses' physical development, the latter refers to his religio-ethical development. Undoubtedly this moral maturation is precisely the subject of focus in these vignettes that follow.

Moses has grown up in the security and insulation of the royal palace. His moral development becomes apparent with his exit from that detachment, as it is written "he went out unto his brothers". Perhaps becoming properly acquainted with their plight for the first time – certainly identifying with it with unprecedented intensity – Moses is immediately challenged by what he sees. Indeed, either (as the ancient midrashic homily would have it) in order to save the life of one of the Israelite slaves, or simply incensed beyond control by the inhumane treatment he observed, he smites and kills an Egyptian, presumably one of the taskmasters.

The next vignette in the next verse refers to the second day (which in Hebrew could mean "the next day", or "on another day"), when he comes across two Israelites fighting and seeks to pacify them.. Here Moses' moral growth is evident beyond the basic sense of identity with his people in the face of oppression. He perceives the destructiveness of internal dissent and rancor and desires peaceful and harmonious relations between members of the community themselves. However, in this episode, he discovers his personal jeopardy, flees Egypt and arrives in Midian, where we are presented with the third vignette. Moses springs to the defense of the daughters of Jethro tending their father's flocks, who are harassed at the well by local shepherds. Moses' sense of absolute justice is now revealed as not restricted only to his own people, but expressed in relation to all and especially the vulnerable. Indeed Moses' understanding of vulnerability, in particular that of the alien, is now his personal experience. When his first son is born to him and Zipporah Jethro's daughter, he names him Gershom, meaning "a stranger there" – declaring "for I have been a stranger in a foreign land" (Exodus 2 v.22).

Added to these vignettes is a homiletical (midrashic) exposition of the next narrative in the Biblical text. Moses is tending Jethro's flocks "beyond the desert" at Horeb, where he experiences a theophany at the burning bush. Here he receives the revelation which affirms the fundamental moral truths he has intuitively perceived. Inflicting suffering and persecution are wrong. There is a transcendent righteousness and its source, the One God, "I am that I am", that is the truth and essence of reality – declares it so; affirming deliverance and liberation of the children of Israel from such oppression.

The millennia old midrash paints a beautiful image in which the Rabbis seek to embellish this Biblical narrative and further emphasize the essential quality in Moses' moral growth that is at the heart of his understanding of the Divine Will and thus his suitability to be its agent. The midrash takes its cue from the phrase in Exodus 3 v.1 "and Moses led his flock beyond the desert". What was he doing so far away, asks the midrash? The explanation, we are told, is that Moses discovered that a lamb was lost and went to look for it and found that it had strayed looking for water and was now exhausted. When Moses found it he said "I didn't realize how thirsty you were and now you are exhausted" and he lifted it up onto his shoulders in order to take it back home. Upon seeing this the Almighty declared "such a compassionate one, is the appropriate person to take my people out of bondage"!

Returning to the Biblical text; at the heart of Moses' personal revelation is his perception of the Character of God. Indeed, therein lies the revolutionary nature of Biblical monotheism. The concept of one god, was not new. We know that such contention had previously been made for Akhenaton in Egypt, just as it was made in Babylon for Marduk and elsewhere for others entitled "supreme God of Gods". The revolutionary aspect of Biblical monotheism lies in its perception of the One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, as a moral God (cf. Deut. 10 v.17), of justice (Exodus 23 v.7), for whom all unrighteousness is an abomination (Deut. 25 v.16). Thus, for the first time, morality was represented as a prophetic revelation; as the supreme moral Will of God.

In this context the Bible reveals a new model in human history that Moses epitomizes – the messenger prophet. As opposed to former expressions of religion, religious authority is vested not in the form of a powerful magician; not even a priest, nor a conqueror, but a messenger of God. Such a thing had never been heard of before (Y. Kaufman The Religion of Israel p. 284) and set the paradigm for the prophetic and charismatic figures that emerged from the Biblical Tradition. Moses commences his vocation as such, with particular focus on his people and their liberation, revealing God's Nature and Will, not only as moved by compassion for His People's suffering, but also as dutiful and loyal to His Covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 6 v.3-8).

Yet the theological and moral ramifications of this understanding of the Divine character and Will are of course, of universal import. To begin with if this world is the domain of one supreme moral God, how was it that His Will was not universally observed? What was the source of all this struggle and tension in our world? The kind of mythological interpretation of a clash of divine forces that prevailed in the pre-Mosaic world outlook was no longer tenable. Instead a new understanding came into being – the historical-moral dimension expressed in human defiance of

God. History was conceived of as a struggle between the Will of God and the human will that chooses to disobey the former. There is accordingly in Mosaic Scripture, no principle of evil alongside the One Supreme Benevolent Power, but rather, evil is the necessary consequence of the freedom given to human beings, enabling them to defy God and choose sin. Accordingly, the confrontation in which God is involved at the dawning of Moses' career, is not the result of the opposition of other gods or invisible forces, but results from a human source in the form of a defiant pagan and immoral empire in the persons of Pharaoh and his magicians.

God controls all nature – there is no room for a “battle of gods”, but man does not yet know Him or refuses to heed His command. “Who is God that I should hearken to His voice”, “I do not know God” says Pharaoh in Exodus 5 v.2. This confrontation of the Will of God that Moses represents on the one hand, with the human evil personified in Pharaoh on the other, is the beginning of the Israelite struggle – the struggle of ethical monotheism with pagan immoral society.

The idea is expressed in an unparalleled myth! God revealed himself not to one visionary, a priest or a sage, but to a whole people. The word of God, the Divine Will, was communicated to a whole community. Morality was thus transferred from the realm of wisdom to the realm of prophecy, the realm of the absolute Divine Command. Accordingly, while the position of Moses as messenger-prophet transcends the tribal organization, going beyond the elders as the apostle of God; his purpose as leader, judge and legislator (Exodus 18 v.13) is to ensure that the Divine Will is expressed in the moral legal norms of the community; it is the people as a whole that is called to take up the burden of being “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”, as the vehicle for the struggle and triumph of the Divine Will – and bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth!

Moses' commitment to this ideal is evidenced powerfully in Numbers 11 v.16-30 on the occasion when two persons by the names of Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp and Joshua, Moses' servant, wants his master to stop them. “Are you jealous for me” is Moses' modest and inspiring response, “would that all the Lord's people were prophets”.

Indeed Moses' dedication to the role of the people as a whole goes so far as intervening with God when the latter is portrayed as contemplating the destruction of the people for its sinfulness (after the sin of the Golden Calf; the evil report of the spies; and the rebellion of Korah). For Moses, the destruction of the people, even if the people is sinful, ultimately undermines the struggle for the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth itself and he pleads with God accordingly (Exodus 32 v.10-14; and Numbers 14 v.12-20); and in the bold theology of the Hebrew Bible God Himself accepts and endorses Moses' position.

Nevertheless, the ultimate goal for which Moses aspires as reflected in the Torah – namely the sanctification of God's Name in the world – comes above all through the people's commitment to and practice of the Will of God as stated in Lev. 22 v.31 and 32, and also Deut 4 v.5-8 which is perceived as the very reflection of God's Character. Through the Exodus, God is revealed as the Lord of History (Exodus 6 v.3), truthful and steadfast in His word and promise (ibid v.8) and awesome in his destruction of injustice and falsehood (Exodus 3 v.20 and 12 v.12).

Yet above all, Moses knows the most profound Attribute in the Divine Character – as stated in Deut 4 v.31 “For the Lord your God is a compassionate God”. And just as He heard the oppressed people’s cry in Egypt (Exodus 3 v.7) he continues to respond to the cry of the poor and oppressed as stated in Exodus 22 v.22 & 26). Indeed, what Moses knows from his own experience, is clarified for him directly as the Divine Attributes, revealed in the theophany recorded in Exodus 34 v.6 (and also in Numbers 14 v.18), precisely in the context of his abovementioned interventions seeking forgiveness on behalf of the people:- “...God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness and truthfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin...”.

Note that out of all the Attributes that could be afforded to God, these are the ones that are portrayed as the quintessential attributes. Accordingly, the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud, undoubtedly echoing the most ancient traditional exegesis, understand the meaning of the Tetragrammaton, the name of God revealed with the Exodus, to denote the quality of Mercy, as opposed to the name Elohim, denoting the quality of Justice.

The attribute of Justice is fundamental to the Mosaic conception of God (cf. Exodus 23 v.7); so fundamental that when God is portrayed as contemplating an action that seems to defy natural justice, Moses confronts the Lord of Justice in Numbers 16 v.22 with the words “O Lord of the spirits of all flesh, one man sins and You would vent Your anger on the whole congregation?” With these words Moses echoes those of Abraham in Genesis 18 v.25 concerning the fate of Sodom:- “will the Judge of the whole world not do justice?” Indeed Genesis 18 v.19 describes “the way of the Lord” to be “justice and righteousness”. Moreover, Moses’ first preoccupation after the Exodus (in addition to guaranteeing provision and security) is the administration of justice to all (Exodus 18 v.13).

However as mentioned, the central Attribute that Moses recognizes in the Divine Character is that of Compassion, of mercy and love and forgiveness; and Justice and Mercy are not always in consonance with one another. Accordingly, the midrash anthropomorphically depicts the Divine prayer that the celestial quality of Mercy should triumph over the quality of Justice, in effect telling us that in our world in the tension between Justice and Mercy, it is Mercy that should prevail.

Thus the very commandment to sanctify God’s Name in the world, by being holy because He is holy (Leviticus 19 v.1) and the commandments to cleave to God (Deut. 10. v20) and to walk in His ways (Deut. 13 v.5) are understood to mean to emulate the Divine Attributes. As the second Century sage Abba Shaul puts it:- “Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so you be compassionate and merciful” (Mekhilta, Canticles, 3). Similarly in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sotah 14a, we are told “Just as the Lord clothes the naked, as He did with Adam and Eve, so you should clothe the naked. Just as the Lord visits the sick, as He did with Abraham (after his circumcision), so you should visit the sick. Just as the Lord comforts the bereaved, as He did with Isaac (after the death of Sarah), so you should comfort the bereaved. Just as the Lord buries the dead, as He did with Moses, so you should bury the dead.”

Indeed, the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus which begins with the injunction mentioned above “You shall be holy”, is overwhelmingly made up of social ethical commandments, reaching a climax with the Golden Rule in Leviticus 19 v.18 “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord”.

Yet while these ethical commandments emanate from the Divine Character itself that is revealed to Moses, they are supported by the insights of human experience, above all the experience of alienation and vulnerability, that Moses and the Children of Israel had experienced both separately and together.

As Exodus 23. v.9 declares “You shall not oppress the stranger for you know the soul, (the feelings) of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”; “...the stranger you shall not afflict...you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19 v.34. Similarly, Exodus 22, v.20; Deut. 10, v.19; 24 v. 18, 22). So important, apparently, is the memory of this experience of having been a stranger for ensuring moral conduct, that we are reminded of it time and again. According to the Talmud (BT), Bava Metzia 59b, thirty six times the reminder is reiterated in order to prevent the real danger that those who have been through the experience of victimization as aliens will seek to forget their experience and lose sensitivity for those who are now in such a position. Indeed, in Deut 23 v.8 the experience of having been a stranger is even called upon to expunge bitter feelings towards the nation of the oppressors themselves.

As opposed to the views of the Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, the Divine instruction that Moses conveys, envisions an ethical society in which all persons are capable of living up to the moral standards to which it aspires. The ancient Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo describes this society as a “democracy” in that “it honors equality and has law and justice for all (including) its rulers”. Aristotle on the other hand, does not believe that the populace at large is capable of the necessary self-restraint. Democratic societies he declares “have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention...incompatible with personal security or property rights...as short in their lives as they are violent in their deaths”.

The inevitable consequence of this Greek viewpoint however, is the permanent denial of dignity and opportunity to wholesale sections of society, i.e. some form of totalitarianism. The Mosaic code has a far grander view of human capabilities throughout all segments of human society. A view that Philo describes as democratic. Yet it understands full well the principle articulated by Erich Fromm in his study of the totalitarian impulse, that “freedom from” (i.e. license) cannot endure without “freedom to” (i.e. the self-discipline not to abuse lack of constraints). Indeed if the populace is unable to control itself, democracy is a recipe for anarchy. Thus the education of the people in discipline and restraint, necessary for greater awareness and respect, is essential if the society as a whole is to embrace a social vision for all its members. Accordingly, Torah – the Divine instruction of this way of life – while born out of the Divine Will, also seeks to generate a consciousness of that Will and the Divine Presence, in our personal and social lives. It does this through a comprehensive discipline, a way of life that requires our consciousness in all matters even the most basic down to the way we eat and drink.

The value of discipline for the establishment of the Kingdom of God would have been more than apparent for Moses. We may speculate as to what extent in retrospect, Moses did or did not consider his killing of the Egyptian taskmaster to have been a hasty action lacking in self-restraint. There are those modern commentators who have suggested that his remorse for such, had a profound influence upon him and his understanding of the Divine Will (C. Potok, *Wanderings* p.65). One way or another, he had certainly experienced first hand, the destructive degeneracy of unrestrained power and of the idolatry that enables one person or group to exploit and victimize others. In perceiving the evil of such, versus the goodness and value of humane behavior, Moses would have clearly recognized the relationship between discipline and morality. There is thus a profound link between the ritual and social-ethical, in the moral weltanschauung of the Mosaic code.

Undoubtedly Moses' personal experience growing up in the royal palace giving him a sense of self-esteem and then experiencing oppression and servitude prepared him for a comprehensive vision of moral liberation, ethical conduct and a religiously disciplined way of life.

Accordingly while the Bible presents Abraham Isaac and Jacob as the original ethical-monotheistic prototypes; Moses is the individual who is chosen to be the vehicle through which the fullness of Divine Revelation is brought down to humankind – revealing a comprehensive way of moral living and religious striving for the fulfillment of human potential and destiny.