



PARSHAT SHEMOT - The Origins of Great Leadership

From Individuals to a Nation

'There are stars whose radiance is visible on Earth though they have long been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world even though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for humankind.' (Hannah Senesh, 1921-1944).

As we begin a new Book of the Torah, we observe a pivotal transition in the narrative, shifting focus from stories of individuals and families to the Jewish people as an emerging nation. Indeed, the Ramban, in his introduction to Sefer Shemot writes that the theme of the development of the Jewish nation and their redemption from Egyptian slavery lies behind not only the first few parshiyot of Sefer Shemot but also the later parshiyot, which discuss the building of the Mishkan as a place for Hashem's Presence to rest among the people. True redemption, according to the Ramban, can only be achieved when the people return to the original lofty status of their forebears. It is for this reason that the parshah opens with a list of the names of the children of Yaakov Avinu. Although these individuals play no direct role in the events of the Book of Shemot, their names are repeated here to underscore the idea that our ancestors are our paradigm of single-minded devotion to Hashem that is the scale against which we would need to measure our national success.

In a thought-provoking analogy, set out by Rashi at the beginning of the parsha, our Sages compare these great leaders to stars. The radiance of a great leader, explains the Kli Yakar, is felt long after their passing from this world, just as a star clearly exists in the

daytime despite the fact that it cannot be observed. Moreover, he continues, the true distinction of a leader is sometimes only really felt after they pass away. Just as stars become visible only at night, a person's greatness only truly shines after they have completed a successful life. Sometimes, a person can grow and inspire others throughout his or her life only to fail just before their death, but those who continue to shine even after their sun has set are true role models for eternity.

If we want to understand the true strength of our national story, therefore, we need to look at the stars of our people and examine how they navigated their own pathway to greatness.

Passionate Leadership

The Torah describes in great detail the circumstances surrounding the birth of Moshe Rabbeinu. Perplexingly, though, his parents remain anonymous: they are described merely as 'a man from the house of Levi who married a daughter of Levi' (*Shemot* 2:1). Clearly, a key point we are meant to appreciate about Moshe is his lineage from the tribe of Levi. What were Levi's unique characteristics that were so formative for Bnei Yisrael's first leader?

Looking back at Yaakov's final words to Levi himself, we discover that the tribe embodied a fierce passion for justice and moral courage. Yaakov's chief concern for this tribe was that these traits would manifest dangerously, as in the massacre of the town of Shechem in Parshat Vayishlach. Therefore, he 'scattered them among Yisrael and divided them among Yaakov' (*Bereishit* 49:7), not allowing them a unified portion in Eretz Yisrael. These very traits, however,

were also the foundation of the tribe of Levi's mission within the Jewish people as teachers and spiritual guides. Rav Hirsch points out that the dual expression used to describe Levi's dispersion among the other tribes reflects the merits of their traits as well as their liabilities. When Bnei Yisrael were at peace in their homeland, Levi was scattered among them, devoid of the ability to unite as a body in a way that could disturb the balance of the nation. When the Jewish people were in exile, however, Levi's traits were channelled positively to sustain Jewish identity and pride. They were divided among the nation, sharing their burning passion and devotion with the rest of the people. These traits make the identification of Moshe Rabbeinu as a descendant of the tribe of Levi essential to the story that follows.

Empathy and Compassion

The first episode that we are told about Moshe is characteristic of the empathy that would become the hallmark of his career as a leader. As explained by the Sages, shocked at the sight of an Egyptian taskmaster mistreating a Jewish slave, he utters the Ineffable Name of Hashem and the taskmaster dies immediately. The next day, however, this episode becomes a catalyst for a very different reaction. When he attempts to mediate between quarrelling Jews, they jeeringly ask him if he is going to kill them, just as he killed the Egyptian. Afraid that he will be arrested, Moshe then flees to Midyan, where he shepherds the flocks of Yitro and eventually marries Yitro's daughter. Strikingly, a word used repeatedly in this chapter is '*vayeishev*—and he dwelled.' This word, according to Rav Soloveitchik, denotes permanent residence, an inference born out, perhaps,

by the fact that forty years elapsed between his departure from Egypt and his return there to redeem the Jewish people. The implication here is that Moshe, upon hearing the way that the two quarrelling Jews rejected his intervention, gave up hope of redemption and sought to build a life elsewhere.

The key turning point in Moshe's leadership development occurred at the burning bush, where, after he had displayed compassion towards a helpless sheep, Hashem called upon him to lead the Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. In this dialogue, Moshe learns that Hashem's vision for the Jewish people surpasses human limitations. Where Moshe saw brokenness, Hashem saw potential. This shift in perspective encouraged Moshe to take up a leadership position with renewed faith in his people.

Fascinatingly, a cryptic Midrash (*Devarim* Rabba 2:29) suggests that towards the end of Moshe's life, he sang a shirah, a song of praise, when he designated the three cities of refuge on the eastern bank of the Jordan. These cities were to provide a safe haven for unintentional murderers against those who might be driven to take revenge. At this point, Moshe found that he was able to empathise with the pain of someone who kills unintentionally, as he remembered the pain that he had felt when he fled to Midyan after killing the Egyptian. This was the hallmark of Moshe's leadership: personal responsibility, deep-seated compassion and the ability to draw from his own experiences to properly empathise with those of his people in the lowest possible situation.

Next Week: Parshat Va'era:
Plagues & Perceptions: A Study
in Alternate Realities