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## Can I Be As Great as Moses?

In most instances when Moses and his older brother, Aaron are listed together, Moses is mentioned first. In this week's Torah portion, Aaron is listed before Moses (6:26). A famous Torah commentary, Rashi, explains that Aaron is mentioned before Moses to tell us that Aaron is equally great. But this raises more questions. How can it be that Aharon was just as great as Moses? The Torah itself tells us that Moses was the greatest prophet that will ever live; only Moses

spoke to God "face to face." Aaron didn't lead the Jews out of Egypt, climb Mount Sinai and receive the Torah – it was Moses! How can it be that Moses and Aaron were equally great?

Lesson:

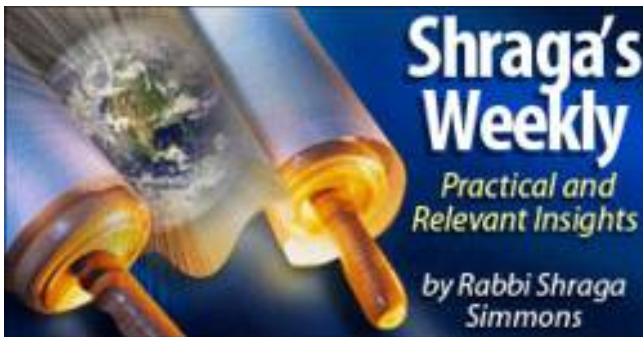
Our sages teach us that in God's eyes greatness is not measured by how much you accomplish. One who expounds noble, lofty ideas to halls full of people is not necessarily 'greater' than the stay-at-home-mom who cares for her children all day, or the garbage man who wakes up early every morning to ensure neighborhoods are clean. Greatness is determined by how much one fulfills their own unique potential. Since God created everyone with our own tailored set of talents, capabilities, circumstances, we all have unique potentials and customized missions in this world.

It is easy to get caught up with looking at someone else's accomplishments and feel discouraged. This person has a much better business sense and knows how to get ahead. This person's house is always so clean and organized. This person looks more put-together on a Monday afternoon than I look at a family wedding. This type of mentality is counterproductive to fulfilling our mission and focusing on our own virtues.

What someone else accomplishes is completely independent of us and what we can achieve. Our mission is completely tailor-made for us and when we stop looking at what other people do and focus on our own talents, we can truly shine. This is what the Torah is telling us: just as Moses fulfilled his highest potential, so did Aaron. Since fulfilling one's own, unique potential is the

measure of greatness, they were equally great... and in that sense, we can all be as great as Moses.

Exercise: Stop yourself when having a thought comparing yourself to someone. In that moment, think of at least one recent thing you have accomplished; this could be something as small as making a delicious and healthy meal for dinner despite having a busy week, or not losing your temper when something or someone upset you. Feel proud of yourself and know that all your accomplishments, no matter how big or small, are part of your unique mission - and fulfilling them makes you great.



## God? Who is God!?

The story is well-known: The Jews want to leave Egypt, so God sends 10 fierce plagues ... and Pharaoh's opposition is adamant.

How is it possible that Pharaoh could fail to recognize the obvious deeds of God Almighty Himself?!

Pharaoh epitomizes denial of God. This is evident from Exodus 5:1, the first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, where Moses utters the immortal words: "*Let My People Go!*" Pharaoh

responds with bewilderment: "*Who is God that I should listen to him? I don't know this God!*"

The purpose of the plagues, therefore, is to announce that God is running the show. Once and for all, loud and clear.

The 10 plagues are actually a progression, a process bringing Pharaoh to a recognition of God. Consider:

The first plague turns the Nile River into blood. Why? Because Pharaoh had been promoting himself as a deity who created the Nile, as he says, "*I am the river and I created it*" (Ezekiel 29:3). Pharaoh goes to such extents to preserve his godly image that he sneaks down to the river alone to relieve himself; hence God tells Moses to "*pay a call on Pharaoh in the morning, when he goes out to the water...*" (Exodus 7:15)

Moses turns the Nile into blood but Pharaoh is not impressed. His magicians are called in and they do the same. God might be a good magician, thinks Pharaoh, but He's not out of my league!

### God of Nature

As the plagues continue, Pharaoh is moved along a process of increasing recognition of who God is. When Moses brings the plague of lice, Pharaoh calls upon his magicians to reproduce the phenomenon, but they can't. "*It is the finger of God,*" say the magicians to Pharaoh." (Exodus 8:14)

Why were they unable to make lice? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 67) says because magic has no power over something tiny.

Like modern science today, Pharaoh's magicians can gather and manipulate existing energy, but they can't create the building-blocks of life itself. No matter how small a particle is discovered, there is always a foundation of smaller particles below that.

When Pharaoh's magicians say "*It is the finger of God,*" they refer to God by the name of *Elokim*, which represents the power of God acting through nature. (*Elokim* has the numerical value of 86, which is the same as "*HaTeva*" – nature.) Pharaoh and his men had advanced one huge step along the continuum. They recognized God as the force controlling nature. But this was not sufficient. Pharaoh still refuses to let the Jews go. He wants to play hardball with God.

### One Step Closer

The climax of our Parsha is the plague of hail, where Egyptian resources are totally wiped out. Every tree is smashed, and every man and animal caught outdoors is killed (Exodus 9:25). As Pharaoh stands amidst the rubble of a country in ruins, he now declares, "I am wrong and God is right." This time Pharaoh refers to God by the ineffable *YKVK* – the transcendent aspect of God that we cannot comprehend.

It took a lot of pounding over the head, but Pharaoh has finally matured in his recognition of God.

Yet somehow, miraculously, he still refuses to let the Jews go. How great is the human ego and the power of rationalization!

### God's Awesome World

In many respects, Pharaoh's process is our process, too. When we are children, we think we are the center of the universe. Then, through experience and trials, we become increasingly aware of things beyond our control. Whether earthquakes, cancer, the rise and fall of fortunes, even life and death itself... these can only be ascribed to a Higher Power.

In short, life is a series of such recognitions. But sometimes we get confused, we forget, and slip back in the continuum.

Why? Because with each technological advancement, we sense the unlimited potential of man. The 4-minute mile. A robot to Mars. Cell phones and the internet. We are in awe of what is humanly possible.

But where is our awe of that which only God is possible?! Gravity... eyesight... ant farms...

### Lessons Today

The commentators say that the 10 plagues were not only for the sake of Pharaoh. They were for the Jews as well. To watch and to absorb the lessons of who God is. That training is a prerequisite to the coming revelation at Sinai.

We've all got to reach that recognition. One way or the other, Pharaoh is going to acknowledge God and let the Jews go. The only question is whether Pharaoh's route to that end will be in cooperation with God, or in opposition.

The Talmud says that "each person must see himself as if he personally came out of Egypt." Our lives are filled with messages from the

Almighty, designed to teach us His ways and draw us near. He has a plan, and we have the choice: To fit in, or to be cut out. The choice is clear if we only open our eyes.



## Comfort and Consolation

God spoke to Moses and Aaron and commanded them regarding the children of Israel.... (Exodus 6:13)

It often happens that we find ourselves in situations in which we are called upon to extend comfort and encouragement to people who are in distress and feel they can no longer go on.

Finding the proper words on such occasions is never easy, but that was the challenge faced by *Moshe Rabbeinu* as he addressed his brethren who were suffering in Egyptian bondage. At the beginning of the *parashah*, God charged Moses with the mission of announcing to the Jewish people that the time of their liberation was at hand. Hashem used four different expressions in describing their redemption:

...I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall take you to

Me for a people, and I shall be a God to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem your God, Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt. I shall bring you to the land about which I raised My hand to give it to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I shall give it to you as a heritage – I am Hashem. (Exodus 6:6-8)

Despite this awesome promise, however, the Jewish people remained dispirited and incapable of absorbing the good news. The explanation for this reveals the nature of suffering and how one may best comfort those who are hurt. When someone is in pain, he does not have the patience or the ability to comprehend *that which will occur in the future*. His agony is so overwhelming that he is aware only of his present state. Therefore, the Almighty God instructs Moses and Aaron once again and commands them to bring the Children of Israel forth from Egypt,[1] teaching us that when someone is in distress, we have to extend *immediate help*. Thus, when encouraging those who have lost hope, let us not content ourselves with visions of the future. Rather, let us immediately do something concrete to relieve their pain and infuse them with faith and strength.

### PATIENCE AND FORTITUDE

In this same passage, God also instructs Moses to be gentle and patient with the people – a basic ingredient that is required of all leaders. The Midrash teaches that Hashem told Moses and Aaron: "My children are often stubborn and recalcitrant. They are quick to anger and are troublesome. It is under these conditions that you should undertake to accept leadership over

them ...." This teaching has relevance, not only for leaders, but for each and every one of us. In every family, there are situations in which one's patience is sorely tried. At such times, we must exercise patience and forbearance, remain calm and respond with strength and dignity.

## CONVERTING SUFFERING INTO BLESSING

The passage above has yet a third interpretation. It is written in the Talmud that it was at this moment of crisis for the Jewish people that God told Moses to command the nation regarding the emancipation of slaves that would take place once they entered the Promised Land. At first glance, this appears farfetched. The nation is in bondage, so what possible relevance can such instructions have? But the Torah is teaching us that it is precisely when you are in the throes of suffering that you must make a commitment to *banish* suffering – to convert that pain into a healing experience ... into a blessing. It is in this spirit that the Torah calls upon us to remember our bondage and the Exodus from Egypt. Again and again, our Torah connects our mitzvos to *Yetzias Mitzraim* – our experiences during the Exodus from Egypt.

One example of this connection is the verse, "And you shall love the proselyte, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." [2] Our suffering in Egypt enables us to empathize with the pain of others, to come to Sinai, and to become "a nation of *rachmanim* and *bnei rachmanim* – compassionate ones and descendants of compassionate ones."

One who has never suffered, who has never experienced pain, cannot relate to someone who

cries out in anguish. One who has never experienced the pangs of hunger cannot identify with those who are starving. Yet we all have options regarding how we respond to adversity. Suffering can render us cruel, bitter, and cynical – or it can make us sensitive, compassionate, and loving. By accepting the Torah at Sinai, we opted for the latter.

## HEARING GOD'S VOICE IN GOOD TIMES AS WELL AS BAD

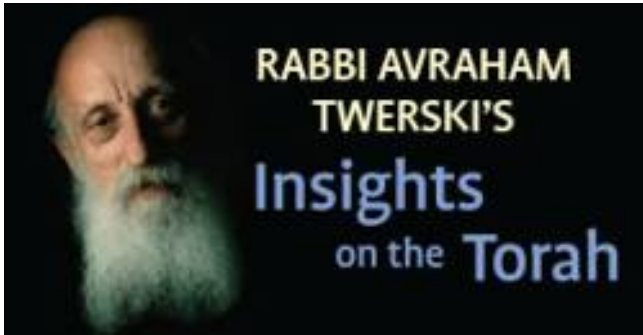
Pharaoh saw that there had been a relief [from the plague of the frogs], and kept making his heart stubborn. (Exodus 8:11)

The Torah teaches us a lesson regarding human nature. Under stress we feel impelled to call out to God and beseech His help. But no sooner does the crisis pass than we revert to "business as usual." Indeed, this obtuseness is the "Pharaoh syndrome"; with each plague, the affliction intensified, but Pharaoh refused to "get it," and fell back into his old habits.

Would it not be wonderful if we could maintain the promises that we make in times of distress: to be more charitable, to be more understanding, to be more compassionate, to be more committed to the observance of mitzvos, the study of Torah, and the attainment of genuine prayer. It is a well-known adage that there are no atheists in foxholes, but the measure of a man can be recognized by his ability to call out to God in times of plenty, when fortune smiles, and to recognize that all his blessings are gifts from God. Our goal is to *pray from inspiration rather than from desperation.*



1. Exodus 6:13.
2. Deuteronomy 10:19.



## Respectful Dialogue

*"God spoke to Moses and Aaron and commanded them the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus, 6:13).*

This verse appears redundant. Just two verses earlier, the Torah says, "God spoke to Moses, saying, 'Come speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, that he send the Children of Israel from his land'" (Exodus 6:10-11). Rashi explains that the second verse means that God told them to speak respectfully to the king of Egypt.

Is this not a bit strange? Moses was going to warn Pharaoh about the ten plagues that he would suffer. In the presence of all the ministers in the palace, Moses was going to speak harshly to Pharaoh. How can this be respectful?

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Chasman says that there was no way out of delivering the warnings to Pharaoh. However, although what had to be said had to be said, it could still be said respectfully rather than with indignation. Indeed, we see that when Moses

told Pharaoh about the plague of the firstborn, at which time Moses was angry, he nevertheless said, "Then all these servants of yours will come down to me and bow to me, saying, 'Leave – you and the entire people that follows you'" (Exodus 11:8). Rashi says that Moses really meant that Pharaoh himself will come and bow to him and plead for him to take the Israelites out of Egypt, but out of respect for the king he said "all these servants of yours will come down to me and bow to me" (Ohr Yahel, 2).

The Torah is teaching us that even when we must reprimand or punish someone, we should make every effort to avoid insulting him. This is so important in disciplining children. Obviously, children must be reprimanded when they do wrong, and sometimes it is necessary to punish them. However, we should be most cautious to do so in a manner that does not humiliate the child or crush him.

Children who were insulted when they were disciplined are likely to develop feelings of shame and worthlessness which may accompany them throughout their lives. If parents would realize how destructive low self-esteem is to their children, they would be much more careful in how they discipline them. Emotional abuse of a child is as serious an offense as physical abuse. Yet, parents who would never think of breaking a child's arm or leg may not give much thought to the words they use in a reprimand.

Children must be taught right from wrong, but they should be helped to retain their dignity.