

Shemini Atzeret – Simchat Torah 5774, 2013:

*The Greatness of Moshe*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom the L-rd knew face to face. (*Sefer Devarim* 34:10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Moshe is described in this verse from our Simchat Torah reading as the prophet who was different in kind and degree from all other prophets: “And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses.” In addition, he was the prophet, “whom the L-rd knew face to face” – a singular and unique appellation within the Tanach.

*Midrash Devarim Rabbah* 11:3 notes that Moshe was not only greater than all the other prophets, he also surpassed all other *Tzadikim* (Righteous Ones) for all time. In order to support this claim, the Midrash creates a series of beautiful literary devices (dialogues) between Moshe and Adam, Noach, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov. Allow me to briefly summarize each one:

Adam declared that his stature exceeded that of Moshe, since he was created in the image of the Holy One blessed Be He. Moshe, whose goal was solely to pursue truth, responded: “You are correct, at first you were on a higher level than myself. Yet, as a result of your sin, you lost your unique status. As for me, however, once Hashem

bestowed His divine splendor (*ziv hapanim*) upon me, it has always remained with me. Therefore, I have surpassed your stature.”

Noach proclaimed to Moshe that he was the greater party, since he had been saved from the Generation of the Flood. Moshe answered him in simple, yet profound, words: “It is true that you saved yourself. You, however, did not have the strength or ability to save your generation. In contrast, I saved both myself and my generation following the Sin of the Golden Calf. Indeed, I have exceeded your status.”

Avraham stressed his preeminence to Moshe as a result of his having ministered to the needs of numerous non-Jewish wayfarers. Moshe replied: “True, you took care of those people’s needs, yet I took care of the needs of both Jews and Gentiles.” Moreover, Moshe stated: “You took care of the travelers’ needs when you were safe and settled. I, however, provided food, clothing, and shelter for uncountable numbers of people in the harshest of all deserts.”

Yitzhak asserted his superiority over Moshe by noting that he was, after all, the *olah temimah* (purest of the pure sacrificial burnt offerings) and in doing so, saw the “face of Hashem’s Presence.” Moshe countered with the sad, but true, fact: “Yes, Yitzhak, you saw ‘Hashem’s face.’ Yet, subsequently you became blind. In contrast, I have constantly spoken ‘face to face’ with G-d, yet, my powers have never abated.”

Yaakov stated that he was greater than Moshe, since he had wrestled with an Angel of

G-d and emerged victorious. Moshe responded in turn and said: “True, you wrestled with an Angel in your domain (i.e. earth). In contrast, I ascended to the province of the Angels and they were afraid of me!”

Our Midrash concludes with the rationale as to why Moshe alone had the *zechut* (merit) to bless the entire Jewish people for all time: “The Holy One blessed be He said: ‘Since you [Moshe] are greater than everyone else, you will bless the Jewish people.’ Therefore, the Torah states: ‘This is the blessing with which Moshe blessed the Jewish people...’”

In sum, the Midrash views *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moshe) as indisputably greater than Adam, Noach, and the Avot (the Patriarchs). Little wonder, then, that the concluding three verses of the Torah describe Moshe in the following fashion:

And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom the L-rd knew face to face, as manifested by all the signs and wonders, which the L-rd had sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all his servants, and to all his land, and all the strong hand, and all the great awe, which Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel. (*Sefer Devarim* 34:10-12)

Moshe’s unparalleled greatness is a genuine beacon of light and truth in our troubled and confused world. While we cannot emulate his achievements per se, we can none the less look toward him and ask ourselves: “Are our goals, actions, hopes and desires congruent with the standard of truth established by the most prominent person who ever lived?” If our answer is “no,” we need to reconsider who we are and where we are going. If our answer is “yes,” however, we know we are authentically performing the Jewish people’s mission in this world. May this be so, soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach!*

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