

Insights into Moshe's Development

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Many of the central figures in the Torah narrative are not described in a static way. Instead, the Torah sketches the course of the character's development. This is done not only because it makes the story more interesting, but because self-development is an essential aspect of spiritual life. By charting the character's development, the Torah displays models of self-improvement – a behavior that is applicable to ourselves even within our own more limited spiritual levels. In the story of Moshe's early experience as a leader, we see a development of another kind.

One aspect of Moshe's development as a leader is seen from his encounters with Pharaoh. The Torah describes in detail only several meetings of Moshe with Pharaoh. By examining the dialogue of the encounters, specifically the first and the last, we see that Moshe has developed into a forceful speaker and a strong leader. His effectiveness as a speaker is demonstrated throughout his later career.

Although Moshe displayed significant reluctance in taking the position, God prepared Moshe for the first encounter with Pharaoh by scripting the request and its tone. The request is:

YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us – so now, pray let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness and let us slaughter (offerings) to YHWH our God! (3:18; Schocken Bible¹)

Besides this courteous request, God tells Moshe to threaten Pharaoh stridently, saying:

When you go to return to Egypt, see: All the portents that I have put in your hand, you are to do before Pharaoh, but I will make his heart strong-willed, so that he will not send the people free.

Then you are to say to Pharaoh: Thus says YHWH: My son, my firstborn, is Israel!

I said to you: Send free my son, that he may serve me, but you have refused to send him free, (so) here: I will kill your son, your firstborn! (4:21-23; SB)

Moshe's first speech to Pharaoh is similar to the content of the first request, but lacks the stridency of the second demand. Although Moshe begins the first encounter with Pharaoh confidently, he quickly crumbled at Pharaoh's rebuff. Moshe retreated from his first more strongly-worded statement into a more reserved one.

Moshe's first statement to Pharaoh announces:

Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel:

Send free my people, that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness! (5:1; SB)

This statement is a direct demand from YHWH, the God of Israel, to the enslaver of His people. This request identifies YHWH as the source of the statement, using the specific name of God and the noble name of Israel. Moshe gives no reason for the request – the mere fact of God commanding it is enough reason to obey.

Moshe's second request is more meekly worded:

¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (The Schocken Bible, Volume 1)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). Henceforth in this article, we will refer to the Schocken Bible as SB.

The God of the Hebrews had met with us; pray let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, and let us slaughter (offerings) to YHWH our God, lest He confront us with the pestilence or with the sword. (5:3; SB)

This is not a demand of Pharaoh, but a plea to his authority. It is not even clear that God is the author of this petition. Although Moshe does mention “the pestilence and the sword,” these words function less as a threat and more as a reason why Pharaoh’s compliance would be to his benefit (i.e. to prevent the diminishing of his work force that would result from a plague, or to spare the Egyptians the harm that also would affect them if Israel were decimated). Even assuming Rashi’s explanation, that Moshe is showing respect to the king, the words can hardly be called a threat and differ markedly from the brazen ultimatum with which God commanded him to confront Pharaoh. Moshe, reduced to being a meek petitioner to the throne, is now ignored by Pharaoh.

Pharaoh then referred to Moshe and Aharon in the third person—as if they were not there. There is no formal dismissal of Moshe and Aharon. Pharaoh belittled Moshe and Aharon by ignoring them. He turns instead to the business of increasing the Israelites’ oppression.

It is little wonder that Moshe is upset after his first encounter. Moshe’s distress at his failed first attempt is apparent in his strong words to God:

My Lord, for what reason have you dealt so ill with this people? For what reason have you sent me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has dealt only ill with this people, and rescued—you have not rescued your people! (5:22-23; SB)

God’s response to Moshe, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh,” is necessary not only for the Israelites but for Moshe’s own development as a confident leader.

Although God commanded Moshe to speak to Pharaoh before the first plagues, the Torah does not report those encounters. The next reported encounter between Moshe and Pharaoh comes during the plague of frogs when Pharaoh asks Moshe to pray that God will remove the plague. Moshe obviously has the upper hand in that encounter – with Pharaoh now entreating him. Moshe sarcastically toys with Pharaoh asking him:

You may have this triumph over me (*hitpa'er `allai*): for what time shall I plead in behalf of you. (8:5; NJPS)

The next two encounters reported by the Torah, during the plagues of ‘arob (flies or wild animals) and the plague of hail, continue the tendency, with Moshe becoming more powerful and Pharaoh becoming weaker.

The plague of locust represents an important milestone in the relationship. Pharaoh’s servants’ derision (“Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?”) caused Pharaoh to recall Moshe and negotiate even before he suffered the plague. The Torah’s account of this plague reflects the change, by reporting, for the first time, the pre-plague warning. Moshe abruptly ends the encounter by disrespectfully turning and leaving (“*vayyifen vayyesse*”) after describing, in detail, the devastation awaiting Egypt.

After Moshe and Aharon are brought back to the palace, Pharaoh agrees to let them worship but asks who will be going. Moshe’s semi-poetic response to Pharaoh’s question displayed a superiority that infuriated Pharaoh and caused him to suspect their true intentions of flight. Although Pharaoh did not capitulate to all Moshe’s demands, he conceded to Moshe by permitting (even commanding) the men (alone) to go. Pharaoh’s concession is, of course, not enough. Moshe and Aharon are chased away from Pharaoh, in a pretense of domination and

control. This supposed domination is shown to be baseless when Pharaoh is forced to rush Moshe back in order to rid Egypt of the locust.

Moshe's next encounter with Pharaoh, coming after the plague of darkness and before *makkat bekhorot* (the plague of the firstborn), is the last time Moshe speaks to Pharaoh (but not their final encounter). Pharaoh called Moshe and said to him:

Go, serve YHWH, only your sheep and your oxen shall be kept back, even (Hebrew: *gam* – “also”) your little-ones may go with you! (10:24; SB)

Even this more generous concession by Pharaoh is not accepted by Moshe. Pharaoh, in a show of astounding arrogance, thinks that he can still dictate the terms to Moshe. Moshe responds:

You yourself (Hebrew: *gam atta*) will provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to YHWH our God. Our own livestock, too, shall go along with us—not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of YHWH our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship YHWH until we arrive there. (10:25-26; NJPS)

Moshe sarcastically begins his response with the very word that Pharaoh used to emphasize his further concession (*gam*, “also”). Moshe's use of exaggeration in his rejection of Pharaoh's proposition displays his strength. Pharaoh is still very strong also – at least in his own mind – as he chases Moshe away saying:

Go from me! Be on your watch: You are not to see my face again, for on the day you see my face, you shall die! (10:28; SB)

Unfazed by this threat, Moshe sardonically responded:

You have spoken well, I will not henceforth see your face again. (10:29; SB)

Before leaving Pharaoh, Moshe receives another prophecy, or he remembers something which God had communicated to him earlier. God communicated to Moshe the details of the last plague, *makkat bekhorot* (the plague of the firstborn), that Moshe conveys to Pharaoh. Moshe ends with the following words:

“Then all these your servants shall go down to me, they shall bow to me, saying: Go out, you and all the people who walk in your footsteps! And afterward I will go out.” He went out from Pharaoh in flaming anger. (11:8; SB)

These are the last words that Moshe speaks to Pharaoh. He will go out when he is ready – after he has won over Pharaoh's servants, undermining Pharaoh's authority. Moshe underscores the fact that he is in control by leaving in anger. He left the palace when he wants, and he will leave Egypt when he wants. Moshe had the last word in this encounter, unlike the first encounter when Pharaoh has the last word.

The final (eighth, seventh in the context of the plagues), encounter with Pharaoh occurs at midnight, in the midst of the devastation resulting from the tenth plague. In this encounter only Pharaoh talks:

Arise, go out from amidst my people, even you, even the Children of Israel! Go, serve YHWH according to your words, even your sheep, even your oxen, take, as you have spoken, and go! And bring a blessing even on me! (12:31-32; SB)

Pharaoh is frantically urging Moshe and Israel out of Egypt. There are seven words in the imperative (command) form in these verses. The words “go out” (*sse’u*) and “go” (*lekhu*) recur several times. Pharaoh repeats the word *gam* (“even”) four times indicating his complete capitulation to Moshe’s position. The fact that Pharaoh had to retract his threat to not see Moshe again is humbling. Pharaoh’s request that Moshe and Aharon should also bless him illustrates Pharaoh’s absolute submission. In sharp contrast to his first words to Moshe, where he claimed he did not know God, he now sees that he is in need of His blessing.

What is surprising is that Moshe does not respond at all to Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s words have no consequence for Moshe, as he did not need Pharaoh’s permission to leave. Moshe and Israel were going whether Pharaoh let him or not. Moshe’s silence in the face of Pharaoh’s unconditional surrender shows that Moshe is not at all dependent on Pharaoh. Moshe’s final denigrating disregard of Pharaoh is the ultimate sign of Moshe’s triumph in the power struggle with Pharaoh.

At the burning bush Moshe answers God’s calling by saying:

Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not from yesterday, not from the day before, not (even) since you have spoken to your servant, for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I! (4:10; SB)

The precise meaning of Moshe’s excuse has been argued by Torah commentators. Rashbam explains that it means that Moshe was not familiar with the Egyptian language, having been away from Egypt for so many years.² Shadal found Rashbam’s explanation unconvincing, arguing that Moshe grew to adulthood in the king’s palace and was therefore very familiar with the Egyptian language and would not likely forget it. Shadal instead explains that Moshe was not an orator—gifted with rhetorical abilities. Moshe’s first encounter with Pharaoh, as analyzed above, supports Shadal’s position.

God answers Moshe by saying:

Who placed a mouth in human beings or who (is it that) makes one mute or deaf or open-eyed or blind? Is it not I, YHWH? So now, go! I myself will be there with your mouth and will instruct you as to what you are to speak. (4:11-12; SB)

Moshe’s inability to speak is seen by his weakness in the first encounter with Pharaoh. His subsequent speeches to Pharaoh, culminating in the final two encounters, are the result of God’s “being with Moshe’s mouth and instructing him what to say.” Moshe, with God’s help, has become an effective speaker, advocate and *nabi* (usually translated “prophet” is better understood as “spokesman.” See Exodus 7:1). This divinely bestowed ability is used throughout the rest of Moshe’s reign. It is used when Moshe deals with men (Qorah, Aharon, the Israelites) and, ironically, even in his dealings with God Himself.

²He cites Ezekiel 3:4-6 as proof. He also argues against the interpretation that says that Moshe had a speech impediment.