

After several months of talking exclusively about Israel, this first Shabbat after the official "disengagement" of hostile forces, permit me to return to a simpler, less pressing, less dramatic theme -- but one of ongoing importance, and one which reveals some of the beauty of Judaism. That theme concerns the question of Jewish sensitivity, the Jewish posture of greatness.

Indeed, especially at a time when Jewish leadership is being questioned throughout the world, both in Israel and in the Diaspora; and when leadership as such is <sup>in</sup> ill repute in the whole of the world, from the United States to Great Britain to the Vatican, at a time of this sort the figure of Moses beckons to us to turn to him for instruction.

The Rabbis saw the beginning of this morning's Sidra not as the start of a completely new episode, but as the continuation of the previous Sidra, that of Shemot. There, at the end of the portion, we read of the complaint of Moses:

למה הרעות לכם הזה, למה זה שלחתני ומאז באתי אל  
פרעה לדבר בשמך הרעלעם הזה והצל לא הצלת את עמך.

"Lord, wherefore hast Thou dealt ill with this people? Why didst Thou send me? Since I came to Pharoah to speak in Thy name, he hath dealt<sup>11</sup> with this people; and Thou hast not saved this people" (Ex. 5:22,23).

**God responded to this challenge as follows:**

ועתה תראה את אשר לעשה לפרעה.

"Now thou shalt see what I shall do unto Pharoah" (Ex. 6:1).

Immediately thereafter, in the beginning of this morning's  
Sidra, we read וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶל יִצְחָק וְאָבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק  
וְשָׂמִי ה' לֵאמֹר וְיִצְחָק

"I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob with My Name El Shaddai, but My true Name I made myself not known to them" (Ex. 6:3). This means that the Patriarchs only perceived of God as the One who made them a promise, and they lived under that promise; but you, Moses, will witness the fulfilment of that ancient oath.

The Talmud (Sanh. 111a) combines the end of the previous Sidra with the beginning of this morning's Sidra, and comes to

an interpretation which is seemingly surprising. God, they say, was annoyed with Moses. He accused him of infidelity when he complained and when he persistently asked God for His Name. God compared Moses to Abraham Isaac and Jacob -- and found him wanting.

אתה הרהרת על מדותי לא  
כאברהם... לא כיצחק... ולא כייעקב...

You, Moses, constantly question Me, you reveal your own infidelity, so unlike Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. With them I was happier: I asked them to do so many things which brought them pain and expense and frustration, yet they never complained and never demanded more of Me than I was willing to reveal. But you ask for My Name and you complain that I have not kept My word. Therefore,

ועתה תראה את אשר אעשה לפרעה

"Now, thou shalt see what I shall do unto Pharoah" --

ולא העשוי למלכי שבועה עמים בשאביאם לארץ

You will witness the victory over Pharoah, but you will not live to see the victory over the seven Canaanite nations, because you will not enter the Promised Land. And as a climax, God cried out

חבל על דאבדין ולא משתבחין

"Woe to me, what a pity, for those (the Patriarchs) who were lost, and the likes of which are no longer found!"

So, Moses comes out a poor second in comparison to the Patriarchs of our people. He makes God miss the Patriarchs all the more!

This poses a problem: Moses, the אדון הנביאים, the chief of all prophets, is pictured as wanting in faith! Can we really accept this?

Of course, there are some who are satisfied that this is indeed so. They find a certain comfort in whittling down the gestalt of biblical giants. At all such occasions, they proudly proclaim that Judaism and the Bible do not "whitewash" our heroes. That is certainly true. But often what they really mean is that if Moses can be found faulty, then we do not look so bad. This so-called "humanization" of great biblical figures is often a disguise for a self-serving debunking process. People normally fear and even hate the truly superior person, especially the one who is morally superior. George Bernard Shaw has made that point most poignantly in the prologue to his play Saint Joan. Even more: the contemporaries of Moses both feared and hated him, and I dare say that we too reflect a bit of that attitude three

thousand years later, when we seem so anxious to "cut him down to size."

Of course Moses had faults. He was not divine. He was punished for his sins. But of all possible faults we may discover in Moses, the lack of faith is the most unlikely, most uncharacteristic, and most unreasonable to ascribe to him.

We therefore must again wonder at this interpretation that the Rabbis gave to the dialogue between God and Moses.

The answer I suggest involves a moral dimension of greatness, an obligation of leadership: the Jewish posture of greatness.

Instead of describing it directly, let me show how the same quality (which can best be termed "shrewd saintliness") reappeared much later, in the form of a modern Jewish giant, a leading rabbi of the end of the last century. He was Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor, the rabbi of Kovno, one of the greatest Talmudists of all time.

About ninety or a hundred years ago, there was a learned and pious rabbi who served in a small community in Lithuania. He was a learned man, burdened with a large family, and very poor. In his town there were a number of yeshiva students who were his opponents, and whose ambition it was to catch him in some error and to prove that he is an ignoramus. Try as they would, the rabbi successfully escaped the various traps they laid for him. Once, however, it happened that a question was brought before him and he offered the decision that it was kosher. A few days later, he changed his mind and said it was non-kosher. This provided the opening that his opponents were looking for. They embittered his life, sullied his reputation, and declared in public that a man who can change his mind on an important issue must be a third-rate scholar.

The rabbi felt that his patience had come to an end. In desperation, he wrote a letter to Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor, the acknowledged halakhic authority of the whole world, simply telling of the incident, not asking for help, but just pouring out his heart in his letter, and concluding that if only he were able to afford it he would leave that town.

Three or four days later, a telegram arrived in the small town -- and in such towns, telegrams soon became public

knowledge -- to the local rabbi. The cryptic and mysterious telegram read as follows: "With regard to the question you posed, my decision is that it is permissible. (Signed) Isaac Elchanan Spektor." The local rabbi did not know what to make of it, since he had asked no she'elah (question). Two days later, another telegram came, and this too became public knowledge very quickly. It was addressed to the same local rabbi and read as follows: "With regard to the question you sent to me, please disregard previous cable. Have changed my mind. My decision is: forbidden. (Signed) Isaac Elchanan Spektor"...

And so, the reputation of the local rabbi was restored when everyone learned that the great Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor himself could change his mind on a vital halakhic decision. Truly, an instance of shrewd saintliness!

Here you have the posture of Jewish greatness as taught and exemplified first by Moses. Moses felt that his people were possessed of inadequate faith, that God may consider them unworthy for redemption; that they may look bad when compared to him. And so he spoke to God as if he lacked faith, he acted like other Israelites, he identified with the spiritual weakness of his people in order to avert from them the divine wrath.

The author of "תורה ומצוות" points out that Moses was later to behave in a similar manner when he smashed the Tablets at the foot of the mountain. He displayed anger so as to show his own emotional weakness and therefore bridge the gap between himself and his people.

So now too Moses was willing to risk invidious comparisons to the Patriarchs, as long as he himself would not be the cause of unfavorable comparisons of the Israelites to him. Moses' questioning and complaining were an act of חסידות, of piety and moral heroism, of spiritual altruism and self-sacrifice.

That is a posture of greatness. Great is he who is willing to bear the burdens of the small and the weak!

Moses teaches us that a leader must not only be responsible for his subordinates and their misdeeds in the legal and moral sense, but he must be prepared for altruistic and sacrificial actions on their behalf -- and not the reverse, expecting to sacrifice them and their reputations and their jobs in order to protect and enhance himself. The true



leader must be prepared to give everything for his people.

This interpretation of the Rabbis' view of Moses is reasonable and consistent with what the Bible tells us of his personality. Professor André Neher has pointed out that Moses is the only individual in history to whom God made the offer that he would, in his case, abandon the people of Israel forever, and create a new chosen people out of the descendants of Moses. But Moses refused, because he loved this people too much. So Moses is above all a man of אהבת ישראל, of the love of Israel.

It may sound strange to find this quality preeminent in Moses. This uncompromising prophet who scolded and criticized and reprimanded and reproached and scorned his people so devastatingly -- he was their greatest friend, their most loyal lover! He was willing to appear trivial in comparison to the Patriarchs, to be responsible for God's plaintive cry of חבל על דאבדין ולא תשתכחין -- "now that I see the way you act, I begin to miss the Patriarchs" -- all because of his sensitivity and sympathy for his own flock.

Moses' quality of leadership here comes to the fore, and it is most instructive. It is complex, full of contradicting inclinations that are carefully balanced.

The Jewish leader, he wants to tell us, is not one who gives up on his Jews, who willingly consigns them to spiritual oblivion. But the Jewish leader is also not one to flatter his Jews, to massage their egos, to rise up in the pulpit and storm against God on their behalf and thus assuage their guilt and make them feel that they were right all along.

Moses abjured either view -- that of the self-righteous pietist who loves his people insufficiently and that of the demagogue and popularity-seeker, who plays to the balconies.

Moses loved his people and had contempt for the cheap tricks that come from letting them know how much he loved them and championed their cause.

He loved them, and did not care if they knew it or not. He sacrificed for them -- his very reputation in God's eyes -- and did not care if they appreciated it or not.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (in his essay, "Self-Reliance") writes, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness independence of solitude."

This is the posture of greatness. The bigger the man, the lower can he bend. The great Jewish leader is one who can love his people without condoning their foibles; who knows their blemishes and identifies with them nonetheless; who is willing to suffer for them.

It is told of the great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, that he once prayed to God as follows: "O Master of the World, I know that when I die I will not be worthy to enter the Garden of Eden. Probably you shall condemn me to Gehinnom. But if so, O Merciful Father, only this one favor do I ask of You. You know how much I dislike sinners and evil-doers. Please, therefore, take all the sinners and wicked ones and evil-doers out of Gehinnom and send them to Paradise so that when you bring me into the fire of Gehinnom, I will not have to be next to them..."

Of such stuff is great Jewish leadership made: a tradition of shrewd saintliness that connects Moses with Rabbi Elimelech with Rabbi Isaac Elchanan and with many others -- but not enough others.

חבלי עג דאבדן ולא משתכחין