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The Leadership of Moses

With the kiss of God, Moses, the greatest Jewish leader in history, leaves this world, and the Chumash comes to an end. As a tribute to the person who brought us the Torah, let us take a closer look at what made Moshe a great leader and try to apply those timeless principles to our own lives.

To understand Moses' ascent to greatness, we need to refer back to Exodus: "It happened in those days that Moshe grew up, and he went out to his brothers and observed their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brethren. He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exodus, 1-12).

Since the previous verse (v. 10) already informs us that "the boy grew up," these two verse must be describing Mose's spiritual growth, with each phrase conveying additional insights into his trajectory.

"Vayeitzei - and he went out"

Moses grew up in the palace of Pharaoh, in the lap of luxury and royalty. By leaving the palace, Moshe pushed himself beyond his comfort zone. He transcended the familiar and had the courage and grit to wade into unknown territory that was replete with risks and challenges. It is never comfortable to be a leader, and if you do not consciously decide to forgo a life of comfort you will resent the burdens that leadership entails.

"El echav - to his brothers"

Moses was raised as Pharaoh's adopted grandson, yet he cast his lot with the downtrodden nation Pharaoh was enslaving. His ability to embrace these battered slaves as "his brothers" represents an enormous spiritual journey on his part, one that involved recasting his entire identity and transforming his vision of the world. Leaders need to be fiercely independent, to think out of the box, and to provide a compelling vision that will galvanize the nation and inspire change.

"Vayar besivlosam - and he observed their burdens"

Rashi explains that Moshe directed his eyes and his heart to feel distress over the Jewish people. It is an active choice to fight your natural self-centeredness and genuinely feel another person's pain. And feeling that pain is the linchpin that motivates you to act.

As an illustration, imagine it is 1941 and you find out that thousands of Jews are being herded onto trains and transported to a concentration camp. Would you drop everything you are doing and try to save some Jewish lives?

When this scenario is presented to an audience, invariably only a smattering of

people raise their hands. The vast majority would do nothing.

Now change the scenario slightly: Imagine it is 1941 and you are from a small town in Eastern Europe. Your parents have sent you to North America to study or work and you discover that your entire hometown – your parents, grandparents, siblings, neighbors – are all being herded onto a train headed toward a concentration camp. Would you drop everything you are doing and try to save their lives?

No question, of course you would.

What is the difference between the two scenarios? Objectively speaking, does it make any difference if the woman sitting on that train is your mother or some other Jew's mother? Jewish people are heading toward a concentration camp! The reality is exactly the same in both scenarios. The only difference is that when it is your family on the train, you feel the pain, and you lose sleep at night. The reality of the situation compels you to take responsibility and act.

The ramifications of this are sobering. If people do not put in the effort to transcend their self-absorption and feel the pain of others, they would, in all likelihood, turn their heads away from a holocaust and not do anything to help. They would just go about their lives, oblivious to reality.

In order to properly structure our priorities and accurately perceive reality, we must feel the pain of our brethren and truly care about their well-being, both physical and spiritual. Imagine it was your brother or sister engaged to a non-Jew – there is no question you would be motivated to act. Feeling another's pain is the key to leadership, because it means you have no agenda other than what is good for the people. This selflessness builds trust between you and others and determines the degree to which they will follow your lead.

“Vayifen koh vachoh - he looked this way and that and saw that there was no man”

Before taking decisive action, Moses first looked to see if there was anyone else tackling the job. He was prepared to move aside if someone was already on the scene, since he was not asserting himself out of a need to boost his own ego. His sole concern was ensuring that the problem at hand be dealt with effectively; his personal role was irrelevant.

Humility is the essence of being an effective leader, because it allows you to rise above your self-interest and do what Hashem demands from you. Since a person driven by ego is more concerned with his quest for power than with the well-being of the people he is ostensibly leading, it is only a matter of time before he loses the respect of the people.

Humility also enables a leader to tap into a power far greater than his own. The humble leader has the courage to tackle daunting challenges because he knows that ultimately, the outcome of his efforts hinges not on his power, but on Hashem's. And that courage, in turn, engenders charisma.

Many people entertain the misconception that humility means being meek and self-effacing. Imagine the most humble person in the world walking into the room. In your mind's eye, whom do you picture? Chances are it is a timid, anxious person that no one really notices. Yet the Torah tells us, "Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar* 12:3). Imagine Moses walking into the room. His incredibly powerful presence would cause every head to turn. It is no accident that the most humble of all people was also the greatest leader. When the ego is out of the way, a person can become a conduit for God's power.

"Vayach es hamitzri - so he struck down the Egyptian"

Moses took responsibility and acted boldly and decisively. He understood the true meaning of the Talmudic principle that each person must say, "*Bishvili nivra ha'olam* - the world was created for me" (Sanhedrin 37a). Each of us is responsible for the entire world; we are God's caretakers. If we see a problem, we cannot pass the buck. Leaders know that greatness comes through shouldering responsibility. As the cycle of reading the Torah comes to an end and we begin Genesis anew, let us turn our hearts and minds to the great challenges and opportunities Hashem has placed squarely upon each of us: "The hidden are for Hashem, our God, but the revealed are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah" (*Deut.* 29:28).



The Perpetual Blessing

As the name of the final Torah portion states: "This is the blessing—*V'zos haberachah*." It's significant to note that on the last day of his earthly life, Moshe imparted words of blessing

upon all of Israel. His blessing was the culmination of decades of selfless leadership. These heartfelt final words personified Moshe's vision, giving testimony to years of unwavering devotion. Equally profound is the stark realization that Moshe would not be accompanying the people into the Holy Land. Nonetheless, Moshe gave his all, his very best,

up until the end. What a finale!

This week's portion contains the fundamental verse "*Torah tzivah la'nu Moshe morashah kehillas Yaakov*—The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov." These words embody the essence of the Torah, so much so that the Talmud states they are to be taught to every child upon learning to speak.

Like all of the Torah, this verse can be understood on different levels— from a straightforward, literal reading to an in-depth exploration. Throughout one's lifetime, new insights can be revealed within the same verse. A child's understanding is limited. Over time, the developing mind can grasp broader, more abstract ideas. One wouldn't expect an adult to feel comfortable in child-size clothing. Likewise, how can one expect to function optimally with a mere childlike understanding of the Torah? It no longer fits or functions.

Just imagine being accustomed to poor vision. The first time you'd wear the correct lens prescription would literally be eye-opening. Suddenly, colors and blurred images appear crystal clear. Of course, you'd never

choose to go back to having blurred vision. The same is true about spiritual vision. To function optimally, a Jew needs to regularly upgrade his or her understanding of the Torah.

Only in Torah does the history, significance, and destiny of the Jewish People find its source. The Torah connects ancestors to descendants in an unbroken chain throughout the generations. Torah is the *morashah*, the legacy, of all Jews, regardless of background. As the enduring heritage of the Jewish People, each generation is entrusted to observe its precepts. But to effectively integrate the Torah's wisdom into your daily life, you have to be familiar with the Torah's teachings. With time and repeated study, these lessons will become a part of you.

I fondly remember four generations gathered around our weekly Shabbos table. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren enjoyed learning the Torah imparted by their (great-)grandparents. We all delighted in hearing the stories of what Jewish life was once like in a different time and place. Together, we joyfully sang the Shabbos melodies they'd taught us. This repeated itself every week for years. Now, that beloved elder generation is no longer with us physically, yet we still sing their melodies and repeat their stories. Testimonies of their self-sacrifice and courage resound within us. Such resolute commitment fortifies the foundation upon which each new generation builds spiritual strength. Today, we strive to apply their lessons to the challenging times in which we live.

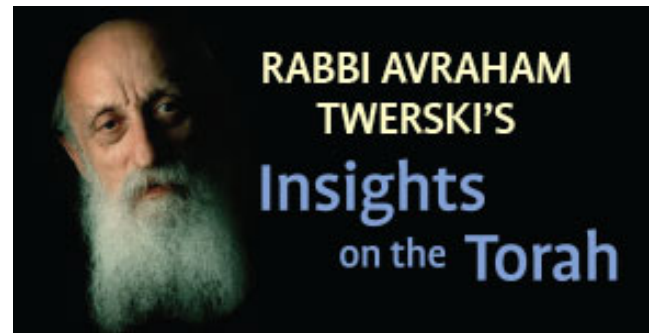
Many Jews don't have such memories. For various reasons, they didn't receive a *morashah* from their parents or grandparents. Nevertheless, they can seek out and embrace their *morashah* and make efforts to create and pass on an enduring Torah connection.

Torah is the wellspring from which enduring relevance overflows. As we grow, new insights within the Torah can be perceived. The more we learn, the more our vantage points expand, our understandings deepen. Indeed, we're blessed to have the merit to be nurtured and enriched by the source of all wisdom. Strive to integrate the Torah's teachings into your daily life. Just as you safeguard the Torah by keeping its teachings alive, so too, the Torah will safeguard you.

Making It Relevant

1. Rather than streaming a movie or spending time on social media, choose to uplift yourself spiritually. Read or watch a Torah- oriented article or video.
2. Think of a meaningful memory that you'd like to create. Make it happen.

3. Safeguard your Jewish identity by choosing one or two Torah lessons and integrating them into your life.
4. Explore new ways to enrich your connection to your *morashah*.



Never-Ending Torah

"And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel" (Deut. 34:12).

"In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

On Simchat Torah we conclude the cycle of the annual reading of the Torah and promptly read the first portion of Genesis, initiating the cycle for the coming year. There is no break in Torah. Torah is like a circle, without beginning and without end.

Torah is the wisdom of God. Rambam states that in contrast to man, whose wisdom is acquired, God's wisdom is one with God Himself (Hilchos Teshuvah 5:5). Just as God is infinite, with no beginning and no end, so is Torah without beginning or end.

The uninterrupted continuity of Torah also means that there can be no part of life that is separated from Torah. We observe Torah not only when we study Torah and perform mitzvot, but also when we eat, sleep, engage in commerce or in any other activity. Not only

are there guidelines in Torah for every facet of human behavior, but everything we do should be directed toward the goal of observance of Torah.

Torah is the heart of a Jew and is the heart of Judaism. There is no Jewish life without Torah.

The last letter in the Torah is *lamed*. The first letter of the Torah is *beit*. The continuity of Torah juxtaposes these two letters, *lamed* and *beit*, to form the word *lev* (heart). The continuity of Torah teaches us that Torah is our heart, individually and collectively.

Not only is the heart indispensable to life, but the heart also distributes nourishment to the entire body. Torah provides the spiritual nourishment that enables us to be spiritual beings rather than simply homo sapiens, hominoids with some intellect. It is the Torah that gives us the distinction and the dignity of being human.

Inasmuch as the Torah is a reflection of God, when one absorbs Torah, one introjects, as it were, God. Moses, whose entire existence was Torah, earned the title "the man of God" (Deuteronomy 33:1). When Rambam says that "every person can be like Moses," he means that every person can become Godly to the extent that one absorbs Torah.

In the blessing for the reading of the Torah, we say, "He implanted eternal life within us." We have the capacity to be eternal with Torah.



The Greatest Threat to Jewish Survival

The greatest threat to Jewish survival isn't found in Gaza tunnels or Iranian nuclear facilities. It's found in our own homes, synagogues, and communities. Throughout history, this enemy has proven more destructive than any external force—and it's entirely within our control to defeat.

In this week's Torah portion, the final portion of the Torah, we find a profound revelation about the relationship between God and the Jewish people. "Then [God] became King in Jeshurun (Israel), when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Israel together" (Deuteronomy 33:5). God becomes King amongst Israel specifically when the leaders assemble and the tribes come together. The revolutionary insight: God's kingship depends on Jewish unity. The Daas Zekenim, a 12th century commentary comprised of the disciples of Rashi, explains:

"When the Jewish people are truly united and relate to one another as true brothers, then God is truly King over them. When they quarrel among themselves, God cannot truly be seen as being their King."

Crowning the King of Kings

Why does God's kingship depend on our unity?

The Vilna Gaon distinguishes between two Hebrew terms for leadership: *Moshel* and *Melech*. A *Moshel* rules by force, imposing his will on the nation, while a *Melech* derives authority from the willing acceptance of the people. Throughout the Torah, God makes it clear that He seeks to be recognized as a *Melech* rather than a *Moshel* - "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19).¹

This distinction reveals why unity matters to God's kingship. If only half the nation accepts God as King, then God can only be half a *Melech*. Further, even when we all acknowledge God as our King, if we lack respect for one another, His Kingship is fractured. How can we claim to serve the same King while treating His other subjects with contempt?

with one heart." In this instance, unity led to the greatest Divine revelation in history.⁶

A true king's authority stems from the people's unified acceptance of His will, and their ability to live and work together to carry out that will. The Midrash on our verse explains this concept with a powerful metaphor: Picture two ships bound together, supporting a magnificent palace. As long as the ships remain connected, the palace stands firm. But if they drift apart, the palace cannot stand. So it is with the Jewish people - when we maintain our bonds of unity, we create a foundation for God's presence in our world.²

But there's another crucial dimension to this divine kingship: when we unite to crown God as our King, we activate His divine protection. The Ramban explains that when Israel fully accepts divine sovereignty, "their lives are not governed by nature at all...for God will bless their bread and their water and remove illness from their midst."³ When we stand united under God's sovereignty, we access a protection that operates beyond the normal

rules of history and politics.⁴

Together We Stand, Divided We Fall

Unity and division have shaped Jewish history with striking consistency.

What preceded the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai? The Torah describes the Jewish people's encampment using the singular form *וַיַּחַן* (*vayichan*) rather than the plural *וַיַּחֲנוּ* (*vayachanu*). The Talmud⁵ explains that their singular encampment meant they came to receive the Torah "like one person

During the Second Temple period, despite careful observance of Torah law, internal strife led to catastrophe. The Talmud ⁷ records how one Jew's public embarrassment of his fellow, with no protest from the

generation's leaders, ultimately led to the Roman siege and

destruction.⁸

In the story of Purim, Haman understood this principle all too well. When convincing Achashverosh of the Jews' vulnerability, he described them as "scattered and separate among all the nations" (Esther 3:8). Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz explains that "scattered" referred to their geographic dispersion, but "separate" described their internal discord and indifference. Haman recognized that a divided Jewish nation would be unable to access divine protection and plotted their destruction accordingly. Queen Esther's response was telling: she instructed Mordechai to "Go, assemble all the Jews"—through united fasting and prayer, God restored His protection, turning what would have been our darkest hour into a time of light and celebration.

Even in recent decades, this pattern continued. In 1987, the late Rabbi Nachman Bulman—a prominent American Orthodox rabbi and educator—witnessed violent clashes between religious and secular Jews in Jerusalem. He warned prophetically: "We are surrounded by tens of millions of Arabs, yet they remain docile. This peace is only due to brotherhood amongst Jews. The day a Jew raises a fist against another Jew, all our protection will be lost." A week later, the first Intifada erupted.

Most recently, the devastating Hamas attack of October 7th, 2023 struck during a period of intense internal division over judicial reform—a conflict that had brought Israel to the brink of civil war. Yet this tragic hour sparked an

extraordinary resurgence of unity across political and religious divides. Since achieving this renewed solidarity, Israel has systematically dismantled its enemies: eliminating Hamas and Hezbollah's leadership, toppling Iran's proxy network, and destroying much of Iran's military infrastructure. While these wars did cost Israeli lives, Israel's achievements and protection of its soldiers and civilians exceeded military experts' predictions by many orders of magnitude.

The pattern is unmistakable, and the Midrash beautifully illustrates the principle of divine protection through unity:

"Picture a man who had a bundle of reeds. One reed, he can break easily, but a bundle of them together, he cannot break. So too, the Jewish people. When they are united, no nation or people can harm them, but when they are divided, they can be destroyed, one by one."⁹

Standing United Today

Today, as antisemitism resurges worldwide, unity becomes more crucial than ever. We might not support every decision of Israel's government. We might disagree with fellow Jews on matters of politics or religious practice. We might even strongly dislike certain members of our extended Jewish family. But fundamental brotherhood must take precedence if we hope to ward off external threats.

This means making concrete choices: Defending fellow Jews publicly when they're attacked, even if we disagree with them privately. Supporting Jewish institutions and Israel, even when we question specific policies. Refusing to amplify Jewish voices that delegitimize other Jews or Israel. Choosing Jewish solidarity over political partisanship when our people face existential threats.

The pattern of history is clear: when we stand united, we access divine protection that defies

all odds. When we fracture, we revert to the natural vulnerabilities of a tiny nation surrounded by its enemies.

In these challenging times, let us choose to be 'like one person with one heart.' For when we stand together as one nation, we stand with the King Himself. And no force can penetrate the 'Iron Dome' of the King of kings.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. This concept finds its fullest expression on Rosh Hashana, when we collectively choose to engage in the spiritual act of coronating God as our King. The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 16a) explains that God requests: "Say before Me Malchuyot (verses of kingship) in order to coronate Me King over you." The Sages structured the entire prayer service around this divine coronation, explaining: "First make Him King over you, and then beseech Him for mercy so that you will be remembered by Him" (Sifrei Bamidbar 77). In this second quote, we see that God's mercy depends on us first coronating Him as our king.
2. Sifrei 346
3. Ramban, Commentary on Leviticus 26:11. Full quote: "When Israel in their multitudes are perfect in their Torah observance, their lives are not governed by nature at all. Not what relates to their bodies, nor to their land; not for the nation as a whole nor for individuals. For God will bless their bread and their water and remove illness from their midst.
4. Our Sages teach that even our daily recitation of the Shema—accepting God's kingship each morning and evening (Mishnah Berachos 2:5)—provides this protection. The Talmud (Sotah 42A) states: "The Holy One said to the Jewish people: Even if you have fulfilled no other mitzvah except reciting Shema morning and evening, you will not be delivered into the hands of your enemies."
5. Shabbas 88A
6. In Parshas Noach, we see Hashem react to the sin of the world's inhabitants in two very different ways. In the generation before the Flood, Hashem destroys the world because of their sins. In the generation that built the Tower of Babel, Hashem merely disperses them. Why the discrepancy? Rashi (Bereishis 11:9) explains: Which sin was greater: that of the generation of the Flood or that of the generation of the Dispersion? The former did not stretch forth their hands against God; the latter did stretch forth their hands against God to war against him (surely, then, the sin of the generation of the Dispersion was greater) and yet the former (the generation of the Flood) were drowned and these did not perish from the world! But the reason is that the generation of the Flood were violent robbers and there was strife among them, and therefore they were destroyed; but these conducted themselves in love and friendship, as it is said, "They were one people and had one language". — You may learn from this how hateful to God is strife and how great is peace. Rabbi says: Great is peace, as even if Israel engages in idol worship, but there is peace among

them, the Omnipresent says: 'It is, as it were, that I have no power over them, since there is peace among them,' as it is stated: "Ephraim is attached to idols, leave him" (Hosea 4:17). But once there was divisiveness between them, what does it say? "Their heart has separated; now they will be punished" (Hosea 10:2). You thus learn: Peace is great, and dispute is despised. (Genesis Rabbah 38:6).

7. Gittin 55B

8. In the Talmud, **Gittin 55b-56a**, we find the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, a tale illustrating the devastating effects of baseless hatred (sinat chinam) among the Jewish people. A wealthy man in Jerusalem prepared a banquet and instructed his servant to invite his friend, Kamtza. However, the servant mistakenly invited Bar Kamtza, an enemy of the host. Upon seeing Bar Kamtza at his feast, the host demanded he leave. Humiliated, Bar Kamtza offered to pay for his meal, and eventually, even the entire banquet, to avoid being expelled in disgrace. Despite these pleas, the host refused, expelling him in front of the guests, including respected rabbis who remained silent. Feeling deeply wronged, Bar Kamtza sought revenge by informing the Roman authorities that the Jewish people were rebelling against them, ultimately leading to the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem. This episode underscores how internal strife and baseless hatred can lead to catastrophic consequences.

9. Vayikra Rabba 26:2