

# **Why God Chose Moses:**

## **Lessons in Leadership for our President-Elect and Nation**

*Parshat Shemot 5769*

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

This is an exciting and anxious time to be an American. At no time in recent history have the expectations of Americans been as great or the concerns as pressing as they are right now. I can't even imagine what it's like being Barak Obama. I wonder how he sleeps at night; if I were him I'd be just a bit worried about my capacity to address the overwhelming demands of the nation and the world that were about to be placed on my shoulders. Obama has been compared to John F. Kennedy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln; he has big shoes to fill and major issues to address from multiple wars around the world, a broken economy, and a nation deeply divided.

And then, add to all of that the fact that he is the first person of color to serve in our nation's highest office. Talk about expectations! Talk about pressure!

Of course, Mr. Obama exudes an air of confidence and calm; he is certainly one of the most intelligent and articulate leaders we've had in a long time. And he has the unique ability to inspire, as we saw during the election. But intelligence and charisma are not enough to make a great leader. Nor can one person change the world by himself or herself. Still, all America is holding its collective breath as we wait to see what will happen in the coming days.

I suspect that preachers of all denominations are addressing the challenges of the new administration this weekend. As a matter of fact, the National Archives has put out a request for sermons addressing the coming inauguration – they hope to publish a collection of such sermons. There is something about President-elect Obama that has captured our religious imagination so that people of all faiths and backgrounds are speaking in deeply religious terms as they think of our collective future. For the first time, in a long time, Americans are dreaming and hoping. 'Change' is in the air. We don't all agree about what changes are needed but we are ready to face the challenges before us. The one thing we all seem to agree about is that things must change... America feels as though it is on the cusp of greatness (or disaster) and that is an exciting thing!

So what can I add to the mix? I have no advice for our president elect on the issues. If I did, I'd be applying for a position in his cabinet. I do believe there is an important lesson that he can learn from the greatest of all national leaders. I am speaking, of course, of Moses.

How appropriate that we should be reading the opening chapters of Exodus, this Shabbat. If Genesis is about family, then Exodus is about building of a nation. Moses takes a ragtag group of slaves and out of this group he creates a nation of faith and vision; he brings the people to Mount Sinai, and carries them through the wilderness. Moses is a towering figure not only in Judaism but in human history. Of course, he makes mistakes along the way, as all leaders do, but from the very beginning God has unequalled confidence in *Moshe Rabbaynu* and believes in him. So what was it about Moses that inspired God to elect Moses as the first and greatest leader of our people? For that matter why did he elect Israel?

There's a story that we tell about Moses that does not appear in the Bible but has become so much a part of our national consciousness that most people do not realize this. I remember learning this story in religious school many, many years ago and repeating it at the Passover Seder as a youngster, even though the *Haggadah* never mentions Moses by name. The Bible tells us a great deal about Moses' sense of justice, his compassion for the weak, and his willingness to stand up for those who needed defending, but this story captures the essence of leadership best of all.

The story goes like this: Once when Moses was tending his father-in-law's flock, a lamb wandered off. Moses followed the lamb, fearful that it would become lost or injured. Finally the lamb came upon a stream and thirstily drank some water. "Little lamb," said Moses, "I didn't know that you ran away because you were so thirsty. Now you must be tired." So he hoisted the lamb on his shoulder and carried it back to the flock.

Seeing this, the Holy One said: "Because you showed such compassion in tending the flock of a mortal, as you live, you shall become shepherd of Israel, the flock that is mine."

God did not choose Moses because of his intelligence or charisma; he did not choose him because of his ability to wage wars or because he had great diplomatic skills. In fact just the opposite was true. Moses was slow of speech and tongue; he was a reluctant leader at best. So why did God choose him? God chose Moses because of his compassion and his kindness. It was his softness rather than his resolve that made him a great leader.

At first glance, this story is counter intuitive. Throughout the past year we've heard a great deal from the pundits about whether the candidates who were running for the presidency were strong enough and tough enough to stand up and "throw a punch." America likes Macho – even from its women candidates. And certainly it takes a strength to represent America in a world filled with danger and threat.

But this legend suggests another side of leadership. God chose Moses because of his ability to empathize and connect with others – even with a dumb and defenseless animal. God chose Moses because Moshe Rabbaynu had the ability to recognize the needs of the individual even while he was caring for the flock as a whole. It was not strength but goodness that made him worthy of God's mission. To paraphrase the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel whose Yurtzeit we observe today, what we need are not clever people but kind people, people who understand the hearts of the individual and are willing to carry each person in times of need and crisis.

It's no accident that the greatest leaders of Israel were all shepherds. Moses was a shepherd, as were David and Saul. And when the Bible wants to comfort us in times of darkness and danger, we speak of God by saying, "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." A good shepherd has to be soft and caring enough to be accessible but he must also be prepared to defend his flock from predators with his own body. All he has is a staff with which to defend his charges. (I wonder if that's Teddy Roosevelt meant when he said to walk softly but carry a big stick!) More important a good shepherd has to see the whole flock as each individual member of the flock. That's not an easy thing to do.

There's a beautiful meditation by Shai Agnon, the first Hebrew writer to receive Nobel Prize, about the Mourners Kaddish. Why do we recite the *Kaddish* when a loved one dies, he asks? Agnon writes that mortal rulers are not like the divine 'King of Kings.' When a mortal ruler sends his charges into battle he does not think of each individual. His concern is for the welfare of his nation; he thinks of the troops as a whole rather than each person. Not so with God, writes Agnon. Each soul is infinitely

precious. And the death of one person diminishes God's image in the world – therefore God mourns each death just as we do. And so Agnon says that we recite the Kaddish to comfort God. We say “Your greatness has been diminished; therefore, *yitgadal* ‘May you be magnified.’ Your holiness has been decreased; therefore we say *yitkadash*, ‘May you be sanctified.’”

The point here is most profound. Political leaders often don't focus on the individual. But, according to the Torah, truly great leaders do. They are shepherds; each life is precious and of infinite value to them, just as they are to God!!

This would be my advice to our President-elect. Don't forget who you are. Don't forget that you are *achad ha'am*, ‘one of the people.’ And don't forget that you were elected to represent and help each and every one of us. It may not always be possible but this is a time, I would suggest, when we need a president who is attuned to the hopes and dreams and worries of each and every American. And we need a president who understands that we do not live on an island, that we are part of a greater world. Most important of all, we need a president who understands the soul of the weak, the defenseless, and those who have no voice for themselves, whether we are speaking of the poor in our nation or the oppressed in Darfur.

But my message today is not just to our president-elect. It is to each and every one of us, No leader can affect change by himself or herself. When the Jews stood at Sinai they were worthy of receiving the Torah because they said, *na'aseh v'nishma* – we will do and we will listen. Only a nation that is prepared to make sacrifices and to act for the greater good will succeed!

That has been the message of our greatest leaders: from Franklin Delano Roosevelt who said that “we have nothing to fear but fear itself,” to John F Kennedy who's words still echo through the public arena: “Ask not what your nation can do for you but what you can do for your nation.” Barak Obama reminded us of this last year when he said, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change we seek!”

So as we prepare to inaugurate our forty-fourth president, my prayers go out to Barak Obama this morning. I pray that he will have the strength and the wisdom rise to the challenges before us and that he will be surrounded by good advisors and committed partners in fashioning our nation. I pray that Barak Obama and his family remain safe.

And I offer a prayer for our nation as a whole – that, for once, we can come together as a nation in the interest of the greater good to fashion a new society and a better world; to seek the change that we all need. And that we see ourselves as part of this great global village in which every life is precious.

Most of all I pray that while we need a good shepherd, none of us will remain passive sheep. The years ahead will demand sacrifice, commitment and generosity. We have a role to play in building a nation and fixing the world.

And the great expectations are on all of us!!!

Shabbat Shalom