

And Moshe was Eighty Years Old: On Aging and Redemption

I.

The Torah's insistence on including the respective ages of Moshe and Aharon¹ immediately prior to the intensification of the narrative of redemption is a curious one. Of what significance is it that Moshe happened to have been eighty years of age, and Aharon, three years his senior, when they arrived on this historical scene to serve as the Divine agents of redemption?

The Ibn Ezra² assumes that the recording of their ages has to do with the unprecedented phenomenon of their receiving prophetic vision at an advanced age. And yet, if this is indeed the case, one wonders why the Torah did not first share this information in the previous sedra, when Moshe and Aharon both apparently received prophetic visions, as Moshe experienced revelation at the sneh, and Aharon was sent into the wilderness to greet his younger brother. Furthermore, as Netziv³ notes, strong evidence exists that Aharon received prophetic visions at a much earlier stage in his life.

Alternative rabbinic approaches include noting the inclusion of the age of Moshe Rabbenu as a way of gauging the total amount of time that the Jewish people spent in Egypt as two hundred and ten years. Still, according to these approaches, one wonders about the inclusion of Aharon's age altogether, as well as the placement in the text right before the quickening of the pace of the narrative.

Seforno⁴ presents a persuasive approach which concomitantly resolves all of these questions. Noting, like Ibn Ezra, the relatively advanced age of the brothers, but, deviating from his predecessor's focus on prophecy, Seforno notes that the ages are including specifically to impress upon us the alacrity of both of these brothers to fulfill the world of the Almighty as serving as his agents for the redemption of the Jewish people. As such, both ages must be recorded, and, furthermore, the placement in the text is perfectly logical, as the ages appear right before the onset of the plagues and the beginning of the redemptive moment.

¹ Shemot 7:7.

² *ibid.*

³ *Ibid*, based on Shmuel I

⁴ *ibid.*

Seforno's point of view seems to highlight how impressive it was that Moshe and Aharon, despite their ages, were willing and able to leap into the fray. And yet, his approach compels us to contemplate the halakhic attitude towards age more generally, and, ultimately, to consider whether Seforno's approach might be slightly modified to reflect a selection of Moshe and, by extension, Aharon, not despite their relatively advanced age, but because of it.

II.

In the halakhic system, reverence for age is an axiom.

While a veritable debate exists regarding the qualifications necessary to meet the halakhic standard for respect due to a *zaken* or *seivah*, the ruling is clear: even an aged boor is included, in accordance with the view of Issi ben Yehuda⁵. As R. Yochanan was wont to exclaim, even in the presence of an aged ignoramus⁶, 'כְּמָה הָרִפְתָּקִי עָדוֹ עַל־יְהוָה', the sense of life experience itself as engendering and commanding respect is itself a significant factor in reaching the aforementioned halakhic outcome.

Here, there is a recognition that much as wisdom is gained through Torah, thus mandating proffering honor even to the young but learned, *יָנוּק וְחָכִים*, in a very different, but authentic sense, the wisdom of life, contending with its vicissitudes and challenges, imparts a certain insight and perspective which commands respect in its own right.

And yet, even with the great reverence that the halakha demonstrates for age in this context, what we have is largely a reflection on the one showing proper respect and deference than anything approximating Seforno's assessment of the inclusion of the ages of Moshe and Aharon. We do not have, in these sources, a precedent for an elder statesman, worn by age, jumping into the full fray at a

⁵ See Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 33a.

⁶ See the discussion between Rashi and Tosafot (Kiddushin 32b). Part of the critique of Tosafot suggests that what requires honor even amongst the unlettered elderly is the sense of wisdom imparted, if not by formal knowledge, but by life experience itself.

critical moment. On the contrary, we have Abaye lending a hand to a teetering and aged fellow, while Rava sent his attendant to do much the same⁷.

III.

With respect to Moshe in particular, it would seem that age is far more than a number. As noted by Ramban, there appear, on the basis of our verse, to be roughly sixty missing years of Moshe's life. The young, idealistic Moshe who burst forth from the palace to save his beleaguered brethren was quickly disabused of his youthful altruism by embittered slaves. His arrival in Midian shortly before being impressed into Divine service, as noted by Ramban, militates in favor of decades of wandering the ancient world, concealing and protecting his identity, hiding from discovery.

At the very moment when Moshe's life finally begins to take some shape of stability, when he has a wife and child, and has rooted himself in the house of Yitro, the Divine charge upends everything. Moshe is cast back onto the historic stage, against his will, and, in his wake, Aharon is brought forth from Egypt to greet him, and, eventually, to serve as his mouthpiece, ואהרן אחיך יהיה נביאך.

The timing could hardly be coincidental. As long as Moshe wandered the ancient world, homeless and unmoored, there was no Divine edict calling him back to Egypt. And yet, once Moshe settled into a new life, and showed no desire whatsoever to try and rectify the injustices that had so distressed him as a youth, that had caused him to sacrifice a life of privilege, promise, and potential in the Egyptian court, the Almighty demands from Moshe that he return to Egypt, to his aborted mission.

In this sense, Moshe's return to Egypt is not merely a geographic one, but, far more significantly, the rekindling of a concern for the suffering of his brethren that years and decades of wandering had reduced to an ember, at best. When Moshe begs leave of his father law, and utters the words, אלקה נא ואראה את אחי אשר במצרים, he is restarting the fateful journey he began some sixty years prior with the words, ויצא אל אחיו וירא בסבלותם. As far as he ran, as many years had passed, the core of Moshe's being as deeply concerned for his brethren, filled with righteous indignation at the abuse of innocents, is immutable.

IV.

⁷ See Kiddushin 33a.

The story of the young hero, in his full prime, filled with vigor and strength, rushing to the rescue of the forlorn individual or collective is a ubiquitous one. But, quite deliberately, it is not the one which the Almighty sought to author in the redemption of his people.

‘And Moshe was eighty years of age, and Aharon was eighty-three years of age, when they spoke before Pharaoh.’ If the Seforno’s assertion is undeniably true, that the relatively advanced age of the brothers engenders great respect for their exertion on G-d’s behalf, and on behalf of His people, we might modestly add that it would appear that the Almighty chose Moshe, and by extension Aharon, not despite their ages, but because of them.

For, only in this sense, could the protagonist of redemption, the Divine agent himself, serve as a microcosmic representation of the redeemed people themselves. His was a story of a mission interrupted by long years of isolation and wandering, unmoored and unrooted, until the Divine call came once again to awaken him from a state of spiritual slumber. And so too with His people, the chosen family of His beloved Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who had entered a dark and extended period of senescence, but who were ready to receive the Divine call to redemption.

And, within Moshe’s story, and the people’s, as mirror images, redemption itself comes into clearer focus. Life defies linearity. The Jewish people rose to great heights in Egypt, **ויהי שם לגוי- מלמד**, and from there, they descended to the uttermost depths of degradation. Moshe was the heir apparent to Pharaoh himself, **ויהיגדל משה- הראשון לקומה והשני לגדולה שמינהו על ביתו**, the future of Egyptian royalty, who became a refugee, and then, a forgotten man, grazing sheep in the furthest reaches of the desert, **אחר המדבר**, before being reactivated. Like the people he was sent to liberate and redeem, Moshe’s story was one of a second chance, of reconnecting to a once glorious vision which had been lost.

In this respect, redemption is that much more potent and powerful. It is one thing for the Almighty to choose agents who have never known of disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. In his eighty years, fully two thirds of his life, Moshe has known all of these, and more, much like the people he is sent to extract, who suffer from a broken spirit, **מקצר רוח ומעבודה קשה**.

V.

For us, the merging of the personal redemption story of the earthly redeemer, who would go on to become the greatest of all prophets, and the national story of the redeemed reminds us that no matter how late the hour may seem, time still remains . Old, forgotten dreams of our youth may be rediscovered. Important, idealistic work abandoned in frustration may be resumed.

The experiences of failure, sometimes, repeated failures, and countless disappointments not only entitle more advanced amongst us to a respect born of wisdom and perseverance- כְּמִהָ הַרְפָּתָהּ יָעֵדוּ -עַלִּיהֶו but can be the best of all teachers when it comes to reentering the fray once more, armed with a steely resolve and disabused for youthful naivete. In the final third of their lives, Moshe and Aharon made their immortal legacy. Their precedent reminds us that the final chapters may indeed be the most magnificent in our own stories.