

Torah On One Foot Rabbi Matthew Berger



Where is Moses?

Over the weekend, I learned something new about this week's Torah portion, *T'zaveh*, which means "Command". It's the only portion in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that does not mention Moses' name. This is quite peculiar. Which led the sages of the Talmud to ask long ago, "Where is Moses to be found in the Torah?" (*Chullin 139b*) Of course, we know that Moses is found throughout the Torah. He's mentioned hundreds of times and, according to tradition, Moses even wrote the Torah.

In the Talmudic discussion, this question arises amidst a flurry of attempts to find hidden messages and clues regarding a number of biblical characters and their connection to Torah: Haman, Esther, Mordechai, and the like. This required some serious thinking, especially as the story of Purim doesn't occur until hundreds of years after the stories in the Torah. But Moses? Four of the five books are all about Moses and his leadership of the Israelites.

Nevertheless, the rabbis point to a text in the book of Genesis that presages Moses' arrival. Reflecting on the nature of humankind, God says, "My breath shall not abide in a person forever, since he is but flesh." (6:3) Looking closely at the Hebrew word for "since", the rabbis discovered it has the same numerical value as "Moses". Thus, Moses *appears* before the book of Exodus even begins.

As for the question of why Moses doesn't appear in *this week's* Torah portion, there are some interesting possibilities. Moses is our greatest teacher, leader, and prophet, but he is a reluctant hero. He doesn't like being the center of attention. In fact, probably would've been happy just being a shepherd. So perhaps God was giving Moses the gift of anonymity just this once. In another commentary, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (13th century) teaches that Moses was actually destined to become the first High Priest. Yet when he first refused to go back to Egypt at God's request, the priesthood was taken away from him and given to his brother Aaron. Thus not mentioning Moses' name in this Torah portion is a kindness God shows to him. Finally, some believe that the reading of this Torah portion almost always coincides with Moses' *yahrzeit* or anniversary of his death.

So whether we believe there was a hint of Moses' arrival in Genesis or he arrived just as scheduled in Exodus, let us celebrate the narrative of Moses. For his humility, for his courage, and for giving us a model to aspire to.