

PARASHAT VEZOT HA-BERACHAH

Deuteronomy 33:1–34:12

Parashat Vezot ha-Berachah, meaning “This is the blessing . . .,” begins with Moses’ blessing of and his farewell to the people of Israel. He blesses each of the twelve tribes, noting that the Torah is “the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.” He concludes with the pronouncement: “O happy Israel! Who is like you, /A people delivered by *Adonai*, /Your protecting Shield, your Sword triumphant!” Then Moses climbs Mount Nebo, located in Moab just across from Jericho and the Dead Sea, from whose peak he sees the Land of Israel. He dies there at the age of one hundred and twenty years and is buried in Moab. No one knows the location of his grave. At the end of a thirty-day mourning period, Joshua assumes leadership of the people. “Never again,” declares the Torah, “did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom *Adonai* singled out, face to face. . . .”

OUR TARGUM

·1·

Moses speaks words of poetry and blessing in his last statement to the people of Israel. He recalls how God “came from Sinai . . . /Lightning flashing” at the people, and how they accepted the Torah as their heritage.

·2·

Moses blesses each of the tribes. He prays that “Reuben may live and not die”; that Judah be restored and aided against his enemies; that all the undertakings of Levi be blessed; that Benjamin continue to be protected; that Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, be blessed “with the bounty of earth and its fullness”; that Zebulun and Issachar enjoy the bounty of sand and

sea; that Gad be enlarged and rewarded for his leadership and courage in battle; that Dan “leap forth” to victory; that Naphtali be “sated with favor”; that the tribe of Asher “be the favorite of his brothers,” dipping “its foot in oil” and enjoying security.

·3·

Concluding his blessing, Moses declares that “there is none like God,/ Riding through the heavens to help you,/ . . . God is a refuge,/ A support . . . /O happy Israel! Who is like you,/ A people delivered by *Adonai*,/ Your protecting Shield, your Sword triumphant!/ Your enemies shall come cringing before you,/ And you shall tread on their backs.”

·4·

Moses climbs to the peak of Mount Nebo in Moab just opposite the city of Jericho near the Dead Sea. From there he can see the Land of Israel that is promised by God to the people. Moses, who is forbidden to enter the land, dies in Moab at the age of one hundred and twenty. No one knows the place of his burial.

The Israelites mourn his passing for thirty days. Afterwards, Joshua son of Nun succeeds him as leader of the Israelites.

The Torah concludes by citing Moses’ unique-

THEMES

Parashat Vezot ha-Berachah contains two important themes:

1. The significance of Torah to the Jewish people.
2. The role of Moses as prophet and leader.

PEREK ALEF: *Torah: “The Heritage of the Congregation of Jacob”*

In his farewell message to the Israelites, Moses again recites a poem. He recalls the spiritual experience of the people at Mount Sinai, declaring:

Adonai came from Sinai;
God shone upon them from Seir;



ness. “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom *Adonai* singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that *Adonai* sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel.”

Lightning flashing at them from the right.
Lover, indeed, of the people,
Their holy ones are all in Your hand.
They followed in Your footsteps,
Accepting Your pronouncements,
When Moses commanded us with the Torah
As the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.

About to die, the aged leader impresses upon the people their historic relationship to the Torah.

It originates in the “lightning flashing at them” at Mount Sinai. It is proof of God’s love for the people of Israel; following the commandments of the Torah is proof of the people’s loyalty to God. Torah is the unique “heritage of the congregation of Jacob,” of the Jewish people.



Rashi

In commenting on the meaning of Moses’ observation on the relationship of the Jewish people to the Torah, Rashi writes: “We have taken the Torah and will not abandon it.” For Rashi, the people have chosen to accept the Torah, and they are defined by their attachment and devotion to it. Torah forms the basis of Jewish tradition. There can be no Jewish people without it. Adherence to its wisdom, ethics, and rituals is essential for preserving the people. (Comment on Deuteronomy 33:4)

Rashi’s emphasis on defining the Jewish people by its relationship to Torah may be based on earlier comments by Rabbi Eleazar. In a rhetorical question, Eleazar asks, “What was the blessing Moses made before reading the Torah?” He answers his question with the claim that Moses said: “Be praised, O God, who has chosen the Torah and made it sacred and finds pleasure in those who fulfill it.”

“Moses,” Rabbi Eleazar stresses, “does not say ‘those who study it or meditate upon it.’ He claims that God ‘finds pleasure in those who fulfill it,’ who practice it by carrying out its commandments. It is the ‘practice’ of Torah that transforms it into ‘a heritage of the congregation of Jacob.’” (Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:6)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides widens Rabbi Eleazar’s claim to include both those who are born-Jews and those who convert to Judaism. He points out that Moses does not speak of the Torah as belonging

to the “house of Jacob” or to the “seed of Jacob,” which could have led to the assumption that Torah is “the heritage” only of those born to Jewish parents. Instead, he emphasizes that the Torah is “the heritage of *kehillat Ya’akov*, or the ‘congregation of Jacob.’” It is not an exclusive birthright but a legacy that can be adopted or chosen by any person. (Comment on Deuteronomy 33:4)



Hertz

On the meaning of Torah

The real Torah is not merely the written text of the Five Books of Moses; the real Torah is the meaning enshrined in the text, as expounded . . . and unfolded . . . by successive generations of sages and teachers in Israel. (Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, Authorized Daily Prayer Book, p. 35)

The purpose of the whole Torah is that each person should become a Torah. (Ba’al Shem Tov)

If not for Torah, the people of Israel would not at all differ from the nations of the world. (Sifre Deuteronomy 32:29)

Blessing before reading the Torah

Blessed is the Eternal, our God, Ruler of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot and commands us to engage in the study of Torah. Eternal our God, make the words of Your Torah sweet to us, and to the house of Israel, Your people, that we and our children may be lovers of Your name and students of Your Torah. Blessed is the Eternal, the Teacher of Torah to the people Israel. (Gates of Prayer, p. 52)

When two people meet to study Torah, God is present. (Hananiah ben Teradyon, Avot 3:6)



Rambam (Maimonides)

In his discussion of the importance of Torah to the Jewish people, Moses Maimonides observes that as soon as children begin to talk, parents must teach them the words: "Moses commanded us with the Torah as a heritage of the congregation of Jacob," and "*Shema Yisrael*, 'Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.'" Children must be taught the importance and the lessons of the Torah as soon as they can speak. Teachers, says Maimonides, are to be employed if parents cannot provide education. "Every person is commanded to study Torah, whether poor or rich, in sound health or sick, young or old . . . one must study until the day of death."

Maimonides even suggests how the time for studying Torah should be divided. One-third of the time should be spent on the Torah; one-third on commentaries and the Talmud; and one-third in "thinking and reflecting" upon what has been covered. One subject should be compared to another; questions should be asked; ethical rules should be inferred from the standards found within the Torah. Furthermore, the study of Torah may not be postponed with the excuse that one has no leisure time. "Should such a thought enter your mind," writes Maimonides, "you will never win the crown of Torah. Instead," he concludes, quoting *Avot* 1:5, "make the study of Torah a fixed obligation."

For Maimonides, no commandment "is equal in importance to the study of Torah. Indeed, the study of Torah is equal to all the commandments because it leads to the practice of Torah." He concludes, "Thus the study of Torah takes precedence over practice." In Maimonides' view, the Torah constitutes God's truth, given to the people of Israel. Deciphering that truth and understanding the commandments motivate one not only to fulfill God's will for justice, mercy, and peace but to make the Torah "the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer ha-Madah* 1-5)



Steinsaltz

Modern commentator Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz builds on Maimonides' emphasis on the importance of Torah study as a means of knowing what God wants from us. Defining Torah as not only the Five Books of Moses but also as all the works of the Talmud and subsequent commentaries, Steinsaltz claims that "the Torah of the Jews is the essence of divine revelation; it is not only a basis for social, political, and religious life but is in itself something of supreme value . . . it is the spiritual map of the universe . . . for the Torah expresses the divine will and wisdom . . . the intellectual study of Torah and the emotional involvement in its contents are a form of identification with the divine will, with what may be called God's dream of the existence of the world and the existence of human beings."

Knowing Torah is more for Steinsaltz than understanding what God wants for the world and its human beings. Torah is not just an "intellectual" document for study. It is also "Law." Torah compels people "to behave in certain ways." It "is a way of life, showing both how to relate inwardly and how to conduct oneself outwardly, practically. . . . One finds the Torah significant in every aspect of community, commerce, agriculture, and industry, in the life of feeling and love, in relations between the sexes—down to the most minute aspects of living, like buttoning one's shoes or lying down to sleep. . . ." Steinsaltz's view of the Torah as a "divine map of the world" and as God's Law, which "directs the conduct of one's daily business from waking to sleeping," represents a widely held view within Jewish tradition. (*The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, pp. 87-98)

The evolving Torah

Torah results from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The records of our earliest confrontations are uniquely important

to us. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis and teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia the creation of Torah has not ceased, and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition. (From Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective, CCAR, New York, 1976)

Differing with Steinsaltz and others who believe that the Torah is the product of a single revelation to Moses at Mount Sinai, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan maintains that the Torah is a sacred document that evolved through many centuries. He argues that "all the basic elements of human culture are represented" in the written Torah and in the later Talmud. As such, the Torah "contains folklore and a world perspective; it outlines a national policy; it prescribes ethical and religious conduct; it lays the foundation of a system of jurisprudence. . . . The Torah, especially as developed in life and interpretation, can, therefore, without exaggeration be regarded as the full equivalent of what we understand by a national civilization."

Kaplan, in terms of this evolving "national civilization," sees the Torah as "the embodiment of Israel's quest through the ages for the moral law that expresses the will of God." The Torah, therefore, "is not infallible." It contains errors and deals with matters that are no longer relevant, such as the dress of the priests or the sacrifices offered on ancient altars. At times, as in the case of capital punishment or the treatment of women, it presents ideas that are questionable. However, Kaplan maintains that, as the Jewish people quest for an understanding of what is morally right, the Torah, even with its errors, "when submitted to study and analysis, may prove instructive and enlightening. We learn the moral law, as we learn natural law, by trial and error."

Kaplan adds an important element to his view of Torah as an evolving, imperfect record of the Jewish people's search for what is morally right. He believes that while God did not present the

whole Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, God is the power continuing to urge the Jewish people in an ethical quest for love, justice, purity, and peace. For him, the Torah is a record of God's continuing influence upon them. "The Torah reveals the working of God in the life of our people, in that it articulates the earliest striving of our people to live up to the highest potentialities of human nature." (*The Meaning of God*, pp. 311–318; also *Questions Jews Ask*, pp. 167–168)

As the "heritage of the congregation of Jacob," the Torah holds the secret of Jewish survival. The people's devotion to and study of Torah guarantee the Jewish future. It has never become a static "literature" or "tradition." Commentators have constantly applied its ethics to the challenging realities of their times. Mystics and philosophers have explored its views of God, history, and the nature of human life. The rituals and festivals first described in its chapters have nurtured the flowering of Jewish celebrations. The Torah has evolved with the Jewish people and has remained its main source of historical identification and moral teachings. Jews are the people of an ever-expanding Torah.

Rabbi Leo Baeck captures the meaning and challenge of the Torah "as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." He observes that "Judaism did not affix itself to any particular period so as to finish up with it; never did it become complete. The task abides but not its solution. The old revelation becomes a new revelation: Judaism experiences a *continuous renaissance*." The ancient Torah of Moses continues to unfold.

PEREK BET: Moses "Whom Adonai Singled Out, Face to Face"

Parashat Vezot ha-Berachah refers to Moses as *ish ha-Elohim*, or a "man of God" (Deuteronomy 33:1), and as *eved Adonai*, or a "servant of God." (Deuteronomy 34:5) We are told also that, unlike all other prophets, Moses knew God with a special intimacy that is described as "face to face." Within rabbinic tradition, Moses is called *Moshe rabbenu*, or "Moses, our teacher." These various descriptions and names for the leader whose life

fills the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and who is known in Jewish tradition as the bearer of *Torat Moshe*, the “Torah of Moses,” dramatize his central place in both Jewish and world history. Today, his religious teachings and powerful political image continue to influence millions. Yet, this great man, who dies alone on Mount Nebo, outside the Promised Land of Israel, and whose burial place “no one knows to this day,” remains an enigma.

Commentators throughout the centuries have sought to uncover his motives, unmask his personality, and reveal the secrets of his greatness. Piecing together the fragments of his life collected from the Torah or using their imagination, interpreters have speculated about his origins, family relationships, complex association with the people of Israel, emotional stability, instincts for leadership, moral sensibilities, and his mysterious connection with God.

Each spark disclosed about this “man of God” brings us nearer to understanding what constitutes a “great” human being, a “servant of God.” Taken together, the critical elements become a powerful inspiration and model—a goal for the cultivation of character.

Who, according to our commentators, is Moses? What are the elements of his greatness?

In analyzing Moses within the context of great biblical personalities, early rabbinic commentators assert that he is superior to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Adam, they say, is created in God’s image but, failing to follow God’s command, is banished from the Garden of Eden. Moses’ loyalty to God is never diminished. Noah saves himself, but Moses saves himself and his generation. Abraham provides hospitality to passersby, but Moses feeds all Israel in the desert. Isaac glimpses God at the time Abraham is about to slaughter him on the altar, but Moses sees God face to face with eyes that never dim. Jacob wrestles with an angel on earth, but Moses takes on all the angels of heaven!

Moses’ greatness, however, is not only a matter of comparing his “powers” with those of others. He is also superior in deeds. Rabbi Isaac speaks for many rabbinic interpreters in underscoring the Torah’s portrayal of Moses as honest, pure

of motive, selfless, scrupulous about never taking advantage of others or of representing his own needs, and always acting out of justice, in defense of the people of Israel.

Other rabbinic commentators point out that Moses constantly seeks to bring peace between the people of Israel and God. When the time comes for Israel to receive the Torah, Moses willingly climbs Mount Sinai, enduring forty days and nights of hunger, cold, and frightening thunder and lightning. Later, each time God is about to destroy the people because of their complaining and disloyalty, Moses intervenes to save them. When he learns that he is about to die, he immediately selects Joshua to succeed him so there will be no lapse in the leadership of the Israelites. It is this character profile, says Rabbi Tanchuma, that “makes Moses worthy of transmitting blessings to others.” (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 11:2, 3; *Mechilta, Beshalach* 6; *Sifre Deuteronomy, Ha’azinu* 306; and *Sifre Numbers, Pinchas* 138; *Tanchuma, Chukat* 63b)

This rabbinic composite of Moses presents an ideal portrait. It is a Moses without faults, a larger than life “perfect” hero. Rabbinic commentators, however, are well aware that Moses had his faults. He was human and flawed like all people.

According to the Torah, he is forbidden to enter the Land of Israel because of his sins at the Waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. There, instead of speaking to the rock and bringing forth water as God requests, he loses his temper at the complaining people, insults them by calling them “rebels,” and strikes the rock with his staff. As punishment for his rage and his public demonstration of unfaithfulness to God, he is not allowed to enter the Promised Land. (See discussion in *A Torah Commentary for Our Times, Parashat Chukat, “Perek Bet.”*)

While Moses is portrayed by rabbinic commentators as a flawed but great hero, Nachmanides believes that the real clue to his unique place in history has nothing to do with his personality. What defines Moses’ uniqueness, says Nachmanides, is his relationship to God. Moses, as the last lines of Deuteronomy testify, was “singled out by God” who knew him “face to face.”

Nachmanides explains that “when two people

see each other face to face, they become acquainted with each other through that meeting.” That, however, was not the kind of acquaintance shared by Moses and God. The Torah says that “God knew Moses face to face”; it does not say that “Moses knew God face to face.” In other words, continues Nachmanides, “Moses knew God to the extent that such knowledge is possible.” Unlike other prophets or the people of Israel who knew God’s power, felt God’s hand upon them, sensed God’s Presence in the midst of the fire and thunder at Mount Sinai or in the cloud they followed day and night across the desert, Moses was “singled out” for special meetings of intimacy with God. Because of these moments of sharing, the Torah was given to Israel. This constitutes the greatness of Moses. “Never again,” concludes Nachmanides, quoting the Torah, “did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses.” (Commentary on Deuteronomy 34:10)



Hirsch

Nachmanides’ view is repeated by many interpreters and finds clear expression in the writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. “Moses,” explains Hirsch, “stands unique for all time. The direct contact in which God’s will is manifest to Moses in raising him out of the rest of humanity for the mission he is to carry out was not attained by any later prophet. . . . Moses alone receives every word of his mission face to face, and no word not received in a similar direct manner can ever shake in the tiniest degree that which is given so directly to Moses.” (Commentary on Deuteronomy 34:10–12)

Hirsch’s argument is meant not only to etch out the extraordinary quality of Moses but also to “prove” the superiority of his prophetic career over that of all other religious prophets and traditions. Such arguments and claims are common, but they are dangerous because they often lead to unwarranted assumptions about who possesses the authentic truth or word of God. In-

stead of accepting that God speaks to many prophets and peoples, that all human beings and nations are precious to God, and that there are many equally sacred and wise ways for fulfilling God’s will, human beings have often gone to war to establish the preeminence of their faith.

Hirsch’s intimation of the exclusivity and superiority of God’s relationship to Moses misses a very important point that the Torah text itself corrects. The Torah does not say “never again did there arise a prophet like Moses,” but it says “never again did there arise *in Israel* a prophet like Moses.” With that special emphasis, the Torah avoids a dangerous arrogance and remains open to God’s revelation to other prophets and other peoples.

Psychologist and biblical interpreter Erich Fromm sees Moses as a person “who, in spite of his extraordinary talents and genius, is aware of his inadequacy for the task he is supposed to accomplish.” Nonetheless, because of his experience with the suffering of his own people, Moses acquires “the necessary impulse for liberation.” As the first of the prophets, writes Fromm, Moses fulfills a fourfold function: (1) He announces that there is a God and that our human goal “is to become fully human; and that means to become like God”; (2) he demonstrates the alternatives that human beings can choose and the consequences of these alternatives; (3) he expresses his dissent and protest when Israel chooses the wrong road but never abandons the people; and (4) he does not “think in terms of individual salvation only but believes that individual salvation is bound up with the salvation of society.”

It is this unique role of first prophet that makes Moses so important a figure in history. He sets the standard for future Jewish prophets. It is Moses, Fromm emphasizes, who articulates the common themes of the prophetic tradition, especially “the establishment of a society governed by love, justice, and truth”; it is Moses who insists “that politics must be judged by moral values and that the function of political life is the realization of these values.” (*You Shall Be as Gods*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1966, pp. 94–95, 117–118)



Sarna

Nahum M. Sarna perceives other dimensions of Moses' greatness. Noting that "the advent of Moses marks a radically new development in the religion of Israel," Sarna underscores and defines his innovations. They include: "the concept of a national covenant between God and an entire people, the insistence on the exclusive worship of one God, the thoroughgoing ban on representing God in any material or corporeal form, and the emergence as a national institution of the messenger-prophet." Taken together, says Sarna, these innovations constitute nothing less than "a revolutionary religious phenomenon, a sudden and new monotheistic creation the like of which had not hitherto existed. . . ."

Sarna maintains that this revolution is the work of the outstanding creative genius of Moses. He is the powerful personality transforming his people. "Moses must be seen as the towering figure behind the . . . religious developments that took place in Israel . . . his role as the first and greatest leader of Israel, as the spiritual titan, the dominating personality that powerfully informed for all time the collective mind and self-consciousness of the community, is unassailable." (*Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, Schocken Books, New York, 1986, pp. 61-62, 148-157)

Loyalty to Israel

Author Elie Wiesel singles out Moses' loyalty to the people of Israel as a sign of Moses' greatness. While he occasionally became enraged with them, he constantly rose to rescue them. "If others spoke ill of Israel, he was quick to come to its defense, passionately, fiercely. . . . Moses defended them not only against their enemies but, at times, even against God. . . . In spite of his disappointments, in spite of his ordeals and the lack of gratitude he encountered, Moses never lost his faith in his people. Somehow he found both the strength and the courage to

remain on Israel's side and proclaim its honor and its right to live." (Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends, translated by Marion Wiesel, Summit Books, New York, 1976, pp. 199-201)



Peli

A *mentsh*

Many were the epithets and titles given to Moses in the course of his long career. Now, close to his death, he is referred to as *ish ha-Elohim*, "man of God." I believe that he was called this not to emphasize his relationship to God but rather to underscore his remaining a "man" even now. Being closer to God than ever before and about to leave this mundane world to embrace eternity, Moses was not concentrating only on himself, pondering his life in preparation to meet his Maker. His attention, even at this moment, was given to blessing the children of Israel. Intoxicated with godliness, he remains, to his very last breath, a man among men, a human being preserving that precious quality represented by the untranslatable Yiddish expression—to be a *mentsh*. (Pinchas Peli, *Torah Today*, p. 243)

Welding Israel together

I believe there was a Moses, that he played a central role in the life of the tribes that escaped from Egypt, and that his major achievement was not so much getting them out but the far more difficult task of welding a disparate group of tribes, a motley riffraff by the Torah's own account, into a community over the course of a long, punishing wilderness trek. . . . (Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Images of Moses*, Basic Books, Inc., New York, 1982, p. 16)

Yeshayahu Leibowitz agrees with Sarna's evaluation of Moses. He goes on to point out, however, that "the greatest deed that Moses accomplished was not the deliverance from Egypt nor

transmitting the Torah but that he shatters the tablets that had been engraved by God, when the people worshiped idolatry, and the holy words given on these tablets might have been desecrated.”

Leibowitz refers to the moment when Moses, on Mount Sinai, is receiving the tablets with the Ten Commandments. Below, the people, led by Moses' brother Aaron, build and then worship a golden calf. Hearing their shouts and wild enthusiasm for the idol they have molded out of gold, Moses throws the tablets against the jagged rocks of the mountain. He refuses to tolerate idolatry. His demonstration of faith in that crisis, argues Leibowitz, is the true mark of his greatness. For him, not even the tablets on which the Ten Commandments are inscribed are sacred. They are to be broken if the situation demands such radical behavior.

“To break idolatry, not to sanctify values that stem from human drives and interests—that is faith. The main thing in faith in God is not to believe in anything that is not divine, not to sanctify things that stem from the drives and interests and plans and ideals and visions of man, even if, in human terms, they are the most lofty of matters.” Moses teaches us that “when things are made into something holy, they are to be smashed.”

Applying the lesson to our times, Leibowitz warns against setting up false gods; of worshipping nation, land, leaders or cult, any thing or any object. Idolatry of any kind is forbidden, including the idolatry of stones containing the words of God! “The holiness of God alone—that is the content of faith. If one adds to it the holiness of the nation and the holiness of the land, in one breath and in the same context, the holiness turns into its opposite. And this great thing was shown to us by Moses when he smashed this counterfeit and distorted holiness.” (*Weekly Parashah*, pp. 206–208)

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver singles out this same strength and genius of Moses. “With Moses,” he reflects, “religion entered the nonrepresentational world, the inner world of thought, will, quest, and motivated conduct. It was one of the few radical shifts in the religious history of humanity—a new enlightenment that opened up

roads to new horizons. Religion became boundless and dynamic, a progressive revolution in humanity's quest for security in God. Moses, in his radical monotheism, and his uncompromising opposition to any form of material embodiment of the idea of God, not only spiritualized the concept of the divine for all time, but negated all forms of worship known to the heathen world of his day.”

Moses' contributions, however, go beyond his smashing of the idols of his time and his giving birth to a pure spiritual understanding of God. Silver also points out that it is Moses who transforms the tribes of Israel into the people of Israel. Though centuries elapse before they “would become a *people* in the true sense of the word . . . the events of liberation and escape into a new life had transformed them into a community of shared interests and a single purpose.” Moses, Silver insists, gives the people a soul; binds them together; and endows them with a pioneering spirit, task, and goal. Under his leadership, they become a “whole community” fused “to a spiritual and ethical purpose.”

And it is to that “whole community” that Moses devotes his life. Despite all the disappointments and rebellions, Moses never abandons his people. He battles for them, constantly arguing their case before God. As Silver points out, he endures unflinchingly . . . “ingratitude, rebellion, vilification, feuds, and rivalries. . . . He felt the gibes and stings to which all leaders come to be subjected. . . . Yet, compact of firmness and compassion, his heart was always full of concern for the people that so often failed him. It was the people that was at all times uppermost in his mind.” (*Moses and the Original Torah*, Macmillan, New York, 1961, pp. 16–38)

Aaron Wildavsky also emphasizes Moses' loyalty to his people, but his perspective is different from that of Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver. He maintains that Moses' unique leadership of Israel marks his greatness. “The genius of Moses lies in joining revolution with evolution. He leads the people out of Egypt, introduces them to new values, creates new institutions, yet he does so gently and with patience. He urges them to accept the commandments, but when they fail to do so, or fall into complaining about conditions on the

desert, he supports them, even defends them when God is ready to destroy them.

Moses the leader, Wildavsky points out, understands that change does not come easily to society. It requires patience, the willingness to risk new ideas and to fail. He stresses in his leadership "the ongoing necessity of learning from error" and the wisdom of "discovering new coalitions of interests" that can bring about desired ends. In Moses we see a leader using strength when the people require judgment, mercy when they fall into despair, and anger when they need to be punished for their selfishness and lack of patience. He demonstrates an ability to be both critical and constructive, to uplift and inspire with visions of a Promised Land, even to accept his death and the need to transfer leadership to another. Moses, concludes Wildavsky, "is politically productive. . . ." It is as a model of leadership that he achieves his extraordinary place in history. (*Moses as a Political Leader*, pp. 211–212)

The character of Moses continues to fascinate those who search for the secrets defining human greatness. Was it his humility, compassion, moral sensibility, defense of his people, organizing skills, ability to accept criticism, anger, articulation of law, formulation of monotheism, belligerence under attack, vindictive punishment of enemies, political leadership, or some special combination of all these traits?

No one answer or theory seems to satisfy our curiosity. Perhaps that alone is a clue to his greatness. There is a mystery residing in the human soul. It is beyond our understanding. We

barely sense it or comprehend its power. We encounter and know its presence in the lives and unique contributions of human beings who, like Moses, are said to have known God "face to face."

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Rabbi Meir teaches that every Jew should take time from business to study Torah. Moses Maimonides writes that every Jew, rich or poor, healthy or sick, young or old, is obligated to study Torah. Given the variety of meanings associated with Torah in Jewish tradition, why is the study of Torah considered critical to the survival of the Jewish people and its traditions of celebration and ethics?
2. Which view on what constitutes Moses' greatness makes the most sense to you? Why?
3. Rabbi Nachman ben Jacob teaches that "a leader must always show respect for the community." In what ways does Moses fulfill this qualification for leadership? In what ways does he fail?
4. Select four modern leaders, two of whom you respect for their successes and two of whom you judge as failures. How do their strengths and weaknesses compare with those of Moses?