

## **This Week in Torah *Shemot***

Do you want to see how to become a social action advocate? --- let us use Moses as our paradigm to do so. In this first *parasha* from the second book of the Torah, we meet Moses for the first time. In the second chapter and in 5 verses, Moses moves from baby to teen to mature adult to one who has a character of strength and justice to one who defends an individual to one who is destined to lead but with humility. For us, it becomes a model—

- a. **NURTURED:** Moses is nurtured in Exodus 2:9 when he is suckled at the breast of his biological mother. Midrash says that he learned who he was in this way.[Sforno]
- b. **ETHICS:** In 2:10 as he is given the name Moses, he is tied to water which is a metaphor for Torah, according to the Rabbis. His identity is fused with ethics. [RaSHI]
- c. **AWARENESS:** The next phase of maturation is his awareness of his own self and potential. According to Midrash Tanchuma, Rabbi Judah notes that the phrase “he grew” appears twice—once in v. 10 and once in v. 11. This shows that Moses matured physically and emotionally/intellectually into a “strong” soul. [RaSHI]
- d. **IDENTIFYING:** The 16<sup>th</sup> century sage known as the MaHaRaL believes that in v. 11, we witness indifference turning into observation which yields to empathy and then is transformed into identifying with the victim as his brethren.
- e. **DOING:** Seeing no one else would step in during a crisis, Moses takes action in v.12. [RaMBaN]
- f. **HUMILITY:** Jump ahead to chapter 3, v. 10 where Moses questions his worthiness to lead God’s people out from bondage. Moses has a critical eye for what is happening in Egypt and self-deprecation of his own worthiness. It is an invitation for God to map out expectations. [Rabbi Israel Salanter]

But, let's state the obvious—this isn't so straight forward. It is far more complicated. In Moses' case, there is the reality that he took an Egyptians life that has to be dealt with. But 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholar Dr. Umberto Cassuto writes: "The verb which means smite is used twice as a way to show that the Egyptian beat and then killed. It is the catalyst for the legal principle of measure for measure. By the act Moses showed the qualities of his spirit, the spirit of a man who pursues justice and is quick to save the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor, spirit of love of freedom and the courage to rise up against tyrants. A man possessed of these attributes was worthy to become God's messenger to deliver Israel from the bondage of Egypt and to smite their oppressors with ten plagues, which are literally smiting's."

Add to this the teaching of Rabbi Avigdor Zusia Friedman who died in a Nazi-operated death camp in 1943. He believes that Moses did not use a weapon to do the act, but invoked the name of God. He writes that a series of *Midrashim* claimed that Moses used either his bare hands, a shovel, or with the power of the Ineffable Name. That means, according to this Rabbi, that "we can conquer by mere force. Or we can overpower with tools we use for work. But the fact is that only with the help of God and faith in His Name can we overcome the many oppressors who try to smite us with their own weapons, like whips. With the Ineffable Name of God, both the fist and shovel would have no use."

How can we become a social advocate? Follow the steps above but also add God to the equation. For that inspires and protects us on our mission.