

Shmot Dvar Torah ~ Jeremy Kadden, January 2013

Chapter four of Sh'mot (Exodus) begins with the following words:

Moses answered "they will not believe me, nor will they listen to me; for they will say, The Lord has not appeared to you."

This comes in the midst of the dialogue between Hashem and Moses about whether Moses is going to lead the people of Israel and demand that Pharaoh let them go. Moses raises this objection – a statement, not a question: "they will not believe me, nor will they listen to me; for they will say, The Lord has not appeared to you."

There are many ways one could interpret this objection. The most obvious is that Moses is predicting the perfectly valid response that a rational person might have to Moses' reporting that he'd just finished a conversation with God in the desert: "Oh, you did, did you? That's nice. Go take your meds."

But I think there's a deeper level to Moses' objection, which goes back to the beginning of his life. Moses is just not really a Hebrew in the same way as the people he is going to be expected to lead.

- At the beginning of his life, he is saved by the Nile, whereas just about every other Hebrew baby boy was killed in the Nile.
- He then grew up in the lap of luxury in the Pharaoh's palace, living essentially as Pharaoh's grandson, while the rest of the Hebrews are out in the sun, performing backbreaking labor and adopting a damaging slave mentality.
- Moses is apparently completely sheltered from the enslavement of his people. When he finally goes out of the palace to look upon his brethren and their burdens (Ex 2:11) he is already a grown man, one capable of killing an Egyptian taskmaster with his own hands.
 - His reaction to the slavery is that of someone who has never seen it before. Had a grown up knowing about it, it would have been part of his life, something he might accept and be upset about, but not kill someone over. His bloodthirsty reaction suggests to me that he was almost completely unaware of what his people were going through during his entire childhood and adolescence.
- And his next step after murdering the Egyptian – running away to Midian – is perhaps the most un-Hebrew of them all. How many of the Hebrew slaves must have dreamed of running away? Moses, by contrast, seems to be able to do it without much hesitation at all.

So when Moses objects to Hashem and says "they will not believe me," he means "they will not believe I am one of them. They will not listen, because for all they know, I could be an Egyptian spy trying to rile them up and bring greater hardship on them."

Hashem's response is to give Moses three signs to take to the people.

1. He will turn his shepherd's staff into a snake.
2. He will give himself tzara'at, and then cure himself.
3. He will take water from the Nile and turn it into blood.

One could read these signs on a simple level and say "Moshe is performing miracles – any miracles – to show that he has the proper bona fides to represent God."

But I think these symbols are trying to say something deeper and answer that nagging question Moses has, that they won't accept him as one of them. So, how do these three signs help to answer that question?

1. **He turns his staff into a snake.** This is already miraculous, but then Hashem commands him to grab the snake by its tail in order to turn it back into a staff. This is near-idiocy. Anyone who has been seven years old and gone to a science museum and

seen a snake demonstration knows that grabbing a snake by its tail is extremely dangerous. If you must grab a snake, you do it from behind its head.

- Moses is grabbing the snake's tail to demonstrate that he is willing to put himself in harm's way. This palace brat, who never had to experience any danger while his brethren were out being beaten regularly, is now saying: I know the risks you've taken and I'm now willing to take risks of my own. I am breaking out of my cocoon.
2. **He gives himself tzara'at and then cures himself.** We don't know a lot about tzara'at – what it looked like, what caused it, or what cured it, but we do know one thing: it was the cause for exclusion from the community and great embarrassment. Whoever had it had to leave the encampment for the duration of the affliction and then even a few more days beyond that.
 - Moses is saying “I know I've been outside the community; I have excluded myself and I am greatly embarrassed, and I need to repent for that. I now want to return, cured, and be part of the community of Israel again.
 3. **He turns the Nile into blood.** This is in many ways the most obvious of the symbols.
 - Moses, who, as we said before, was saved by the Nile, is now stating what was completely obvious to the Hebrews: the Nile was flowing with the blood of their drowned boys. Moses says “I now know that the Nile – a salvation for me – has been a source of death and destruction for you.”

With these three signs, Moses demonstrates for the people that he is no longer the Moses they watched bitterly from afar, the Moses who could act with such impunity while they suffered so terribly. He now stands with them, as a part of the community, ready to suffer with them, take risks with them and see the world the way they see it.

These symbols are apparently successful at clearing this hurdle because the text says the people “believed” (Ex 4:31). This is a good first step, but it is interesting to note that – chapters later, at the Reed Sea – we see the famous passage that the people “believed in Hashem and in Moses his servant.” It is at this point, when Moses uses that same staff to turn the Reed Sea into the Red Sea, filled with the dead Egyptians, that the people really and truly believe in Moses, that he has demonstrably changed and is fully now one of them.