

Last week we met Moses, one of the most complex individuals in our literature. In addition to leading the Israelites on their torturous path from slavery to freedom, with his brother Aaron and sister Miriam, he embodies a major paradigm shift in the family dynamics of our founding fathers and mothers. Although bitter sibling rivalry ends with Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menashe and Judah's twin sons by Tamar, it is the stories of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that best illustrate this new dynamic. From Miriam taking action to ensure that Moses would live, to the peaceful collaboration of Moses and Aaron, the siblings work together for the good of the people. Of course there are occasional disagreements. But when Miriam is punished with a skin disease for speaking ill of Moses' wife, it is Moses himself who earnestly prays for her recovery. Change is possible. The family of Moses are descendants of the impetuous Levi, who, together with his brother Simeon raged through Shechem causing undue tragedy. As Jakob prophesizes, they are indeed scattered. Simeon all but disappears, but the priestly family will descend from Levi. Moses too, undergoes a profound, and often difficult transformation. He could have enjoyed a comfortable life in Pharaoh's court, or he could have lived a quiet life as a family man and shepherd in Midian. But his deep sense of righteousness propels him to a calling he could never have imagined, and one he feels supremely unqualified to assume. Living in multiple cultures but never truly belonging in any of them, it is understandable that he has qualms about his ability to take on this momentous task. He is an Israelite, but having been raised as a prince by Pharaoh's daughter, he does not directly experience his people's suffering and he has scant knowledge of their history or culture. But something draws him to them as a young man, sparking his sense of righteousness. Midrash Shemot Rabbah offers a delightful little story: "... he saw that they had no respite. He went and said to Pharaoh, '... These are your slaves. If you do not allow them to rest one day a week, they will die.' He said to him, 'Go and do with them whatever you say.' Moses went and instituted the day of Shabbat for rest." But when he kills an Egyptian taskmaster and later tries to stop two Israelites from fighting, his interventions fail and he is forced to flee. No wonder he is reluctant to heed HaShem's calling. He has certainly not forgotten the angry accusation of one of those fighters, "Who made you a man, a prince, and a judge over us?" (2:14) With his background, how can he hope to gain the trust of a people so broken by slavery that they can't even begin to listen to him? Indeed, his first mission to Egypt is a failure, despite Aaron's reinforcement, and he continues to resist HaShem's renewed persuasion. Having already referred to his presumed speech impediment as "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue," (4:10), he now announces, "Behold, the children of Israel did not heed me. How then will Pharaoh heed me, seeing that I am of uncircumcised [closed] lips?" (6:12) Midrash Shemot Rabbah tells a story of Moses' early childhood in Pharaoh's court. "Pharaoh would kiss him and hug him, and he would take Pharaoh's crown and place it on his head, as he was destined to do when he grew older. ... The magicians of Egypt were sitting there and said, 'We are afraid of this one who takes your crown ... lest he be the one regarding whom we said to be destined to wrest your kingdom from you.' Some said to behead him, some said to burn him. Yitro (! See <https://www.frey-rabine.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/A-Few-Thoughts-on-Parashah-Balak-July-15-2022.pdf> ) was sitting among them and said, 'This boy has no intelligence. Test him ... with a bowl of gold and a hot coal. If he takes the gold, he is intelligent, and if he takes the coal, he has no intelligence and has no sentence of death.' ... he extended his hand to take the gold. [The angel] Gabriel came and pushed his hand. He seized the coal and placed it in his mouth, and his tongue was burned." Whatever the impediment, perceived or real, Moses is justifiably reluctant to return to Pharaoh and to deal with a people unable to recognize him as one of their own. He is not Egyptian enough to speak with Pharaoh, he is not Israelite enough to lead the Israelites, and although he has lived among them for most of his life, he is also not a Midianite. He is an outsider on all fronts, unable to communicate – except with HaShem. And here, he grows mightily, as we will read when we come to the story of the golden calf and later, to the story of the scouts. Awkward in communicating with his people, he is their bold, eloquent advocate before HaShem. His initial attempt to help the people resolve their differences by himself, and his occasional angry outbursts (the legacy of his ancestor Levi) when the people's actions drive him to the breaking point are poignant illustrations of his humanity, but he lives on a different plane. Aaron and Miriam are completely of the people, sharing their mentality, their history, and their suffering as slaves. These siblings, whose individual abilities complement each other, are the powerful triumvirate the people need at this juncture in their turbulent lives. Aaron and Miriam can relate to the people on their own level, leaving Moses free to be the conduit between them and HaShem. Just as he learned from his father-in-law Yitro how to delegate responsibility, he learns in the course of his long life to channel his passions and grow to become Moshe Rabbinu, our teacher. He found his voice at last, and we still listen.

Shabbat shalom!