



The Wexner Foundation Electronic Beit Midrash Parashat Shemot

The Making of a Leader

By Dafna Siegman

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Parashat Shemot recounts Moshe's rise to leadership. After killing an Egyptian, Moshe fled to Midian. There he married a daughter of Yitro, a Midianite Priest, and became a shepherd of Yitro's flocks: *"And Moshe was a shepherd of the sheep of Yitro his father-in-law, the Priest of Midian, and he led the sheep past the desert, and he came to the Mountain of the Lord, to Chorev"* (Exodus 3:1). This verse is immediately followed by God's Revelation at the Burning Bush and Moshe's initiation as leader.

The Torah relates very few details of Moshe's personal life and experiences. Why might the Torah have included the "detail" that Moshe worked as a shepherd to Yitro's flocks? As we shall see, several midrashim suggest that shepherding was an important piece of Moshe's background, one which sets the stage for the subsequent scene at the Burning Bush and for Moshe's ascent to leadership.

At the end of Moshe's life, he returns to the theme of shepherds and shepherding. After forty years in the wilderness, Moshe's death is imminent. He is concerned about Bnei Yisrael's future and asks God to appoint a new leader *"Who will go out [to war] before them, and who will gather them in [from battle]... so that the Congregation of God will not be like sheep without a shepherd"* (Bamidbar 27:17). God appoints Joshua to succeed Moshe.

Why does Moshe compare a leaderless Bnei Yisrael to "sheep without a shepherd"? What can be learned by the comparison of leaders to shepherds?

Moshe is not the only leader with previous job-experience as a shepherd. Israel's first kings, Saul and David, both began their careers as shepherds/herders. So did the prophets Elisha and Amos. Is it merely coincidental that several great leaders first tended flocks, before taking responsibility for the Jewish people?



Later passages in Tanach also describe the relationship between Moshe and Bnei Yisrael as one of a shepherd and flock. In Psalms, Chapter 77, Assaf relates the miracles of the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea, and concludes *“You led your nation like a flock of sheep, by the hand of Moshe and Aharon.”* The prophet Isaiah also incorporates the image of Moshe as shepherd in one of his final prophecies (chapter 63).

What can be learned from the connection between shepherding and leadership? Clearly it is more than a metaphor, since Moshe and other leaders actually worked as shepherds prior to assuming the mantle of communal leadership. What qualities of a good shepherd might be appropriate for a future leader?

Midrash Shemot Rabba (2:2) suggests that God tested both Moshe and David to see if they were worthy of leading Bnei Yisrael. Both were tested as shepherds, and proved themselves worthy. Regarding David, the midrash relates that he penned-up the big sheep while letting the small sheep out to graze first (on the “softer grass”); next he sent the elderly sheep to graze (on the “medium” grass); finally, he released the strongest sheep to graze on the toughest grasses. When God saw this, He remarked *“Whomever knows how to lead the sheep to pasture, each according to its needs, let him come and shepherd My people.”*

This midrash continues with the “test” that Moshe passed as shepherd of Yitro’s herd: Once a small lamb ran away from the flock. Moshe chased and caught her near a shady spring. When Moshe saw the lamb drinking, he exclaimed *“I did not know that you were running away because you were thirsty! You must be tired.”* Moshe then carried the lamb on his shoulders back to the herd. God concluded, *“If you have compassion to lead a human being’s sheep, you shall also take care of My sheep, Yisrael.”*

These two vignettes highlight the special traits David and Moshe exhibited as shepherds: compassion, consideration of the individual sheep and its needs, and intensive effort of behalf of the flock. God commends David and Moshe for passing the “test” of leadership with flying colors, and views their shepherding experience as demonstrating their leadership skills and potential.

Another midrash, Midrash Tanchuma (Parshat BeShalach, sec.15), highlights several aspects of the shepherd-sheep relationship that parallel the way God and Moshe led the Jewish people. Firstly, a shepherd will always gather-in his sheep, even if they are wayward and run away. Similarly, God and Moshe never abandoned Bnei Yisrael during the forty years in the desert, despite the latter’s constant bickering, rebelling and complaining.

Midrash Tanchuma notes another parallel between shepherding and leading Bnei Yisrael. A shepherd with only one sheep can be attentive to each and every need of his sheep, whereas a shepherd of a large herd cannot provide individualized care. Likewise, God calls Bnei Yisrael a *“Seh”* (singular for sheep). God and Moshe tended to each individual in Bnei Yisrael as if they were the only sheep in the flock, and provided each person with his unique needs. The shepherd-leader parallel demonstrates God and Moshe’s great love for Bnei Yisrael.



Parshat Shmot highlights Moshe's previous job-experience as shepherd because it was critical to God's selection of Moshe as leader. Moshe the shepherd demonstrated to God that he was a worthy and successful leader of Bnei Yisrael. He proved that he could lead with compassion, pay attention to the needs of each member of the flock, and even put-up with "difficult" constituents. Having risen to the challenge as shepherd, Moshe was now ready to assume the mantle of leadership.

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