

Why Was Moses Reluctant to Delegate?

By Yossi Ives



One of the more baffling stories in the Torah is that of Jethro, Moses's father-in-law pointing out that it was not viable for Moses to do everything himself, and that he would need to delegate. Everything about this story is perplexing.¹ The essence of the story is that after the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, Moses sits down to judge and guide the people. There must have been long lines², and Jethro noted that both Moses and the people were going to be exhausted by this arrangement. He therefore proposed a system of higher and lower courts to better accommodate the needs of the people. Moses accepted Jethro's advice, and with G-d's blessing instituted a comprehensive leadership system.

For generations, the commentators have struggled with this story³: Why would Moses not have come to this realization on his own? Even the most ordinary person would understand the need for

delegation. Surely a person of Moses's stature would not have needed help understanding that he would do well to have a support system in place. Moreover, Jethro was pointing out that the prevailing arrangement was causing great hardship for the people. Surely, as a compassionate leader, Moses would have been sensitive to this. And if the need for delegation was so blatant, why did no one else raise this issue?

Overwhelmingly, the efforts to explain this conundrum center on providing some reasoning for why Moses was oblivious to this seemingly obvious issue. The general sentiment has been that despite Moses's enormous greatness, he was still subject to some trace of lingering self-importance that rendered him blind to the consequences of his actions. Many recent scholars use this incident to demonstrate how we are all capable of subconscious drives that can subtly influence us. If a person of Moses's stature was capable of erring in this way, they say, all the more that ordinary people should be alert to potential distortions in their perceptions.

There is a major problem with this whole line of reasoning. The need for delegation seems so readily apparent that it is hard to imagine that, whatever invisible influences may have been at play, Moses could have got this so majorly wrong. Moses was not just an individual of towering intellect; he was also credited with unparalleled humility. It really does not stand to reason that he would have been subject to this level of distortion when it is hard to imagine a much lesser person failing to see the glaringly obvious. It strains credulity to imagine that whatever the supposed potential of unconscious influences that Moses could have failed in such a basic way.

The Rebbe does something striking, turning the whole matter on its head.⁴ The reason why Moses did not see anything wrong with what he was doing was because ... there was nothing wrong with what he was doing. Just like that we have the potential for a completely new perspective. Consider which would be preferable: to have your problem solved or to have the problem disappear? Moses's way of addressing problems was to raise the person to a level where the problem had no effect on them; in effect, it ceased to be a problem. This approach was entirely superior to any alternative, and it was one that only Moses was capable of.

Moses in a sense was right that what the people could get by hearing from him directly could not be replicated through delegating to others. The rabbis⁵ describe the unique way that Moses served as a vehicle for the Divine voice as "the Shechina speaks through his throat." Moses was able to elevate people to a level of connection to G-d that allowed them to transcend their issues.

In the long run, this would leave the people fundamentally elevated and transformed. Delegating to others would have denied the people the opportunity to be touched by the contact with pure holiness that only Moses could bring. Moses, at least, was not about to advocate withdrawing this unique phenomenon.

In fact, this was nothing new for Moses and the Israelites. At Sinai, the people asked not to hear directly from G-d, as they were finding the experience of hearing unmediated from the Divine totally overwhelming. Moses, the rabbis tell us,⁶ was greatly disappointed that the people turned down the most unique of opportunities to hear directly from G-d. But in the end, G-d agreed with the people and expressed Himself via Moses. Here, too, Jethro was saying that while the intensity of the revelation from Moses is greatly superior to receiving guidance secondhand, there is a case to be made that it would still be better for the people that way.

Jethro thought this new arrangement was a step down. He used an Aramaic term, *techze*, when advising that Moses look for suitable people to help him. He recognized that this meant that the people were going to get something less than what they would get when dealing with Moses directly, represented by a word from the Hebrew language. He felt, however, that when focusing on their worldly reality, they need to be able to operate and function on an everyday level.

Transforming people into angels was not the answer, argued Jethro. The people should still come directly to Moses to learn Torah, as this would afford them the most transportive experience into the "Wisdom and Will of G-d,"⁷ which is the true essence of Torah learning.

Jethro was a newcomer, a convert from a foreign land. He saw the people on the ground. He recognized that they needed to deal with their mundane squabbles or difficulties by working them out in accordance with Torah, but on the level of their own lived reality. We were going to make ourselves and the world better by resolving them correctly in this world, not by becoming elevated beyond their reality. G-d agreed that while in an ideal world what Moses could offer was immensely preferable, in practical reality this was not in the best interest of the people. Just like when the people requested an intermediary to hear from G-d at Sinai, so here G-d supported the position that "people need to be people."

A key reason was that Moses was not going to be around forever. Eventually, new leadership would emerge, and they would not be able to provide the special experience of speaking to Moses directly. Now they were in a cocoon, living in the desert under miraculous conditions, but

ultimately, they were destined for the Promised Land, where they would need to live an everyday existence. Moses needed to prepare the people for the reality that lay ahead, and if that meant compromising on the ultimate in spiritual revelation, so be it.

Jethro's idea was actually the one that was controversial. Imagine proposing taking advice from a tier-5 judge when you can speak to Moses instead?! What Moses could do was qualitatively superior, and nothing anyone else could offer came even close. Jethro was actually proposing a significant innovation. So here we have an entirely refreshing approach to this episode. We are done trying to explain how Moses erred to explaining how it could be that anyone would have thought that going to anyone but Moses could be remotely appropriate. The Midrash⁸ says that Jethro "added" (*yeter*) a new portion to the Torah. Jethro's idea was, in fact, that innovation here.

So here we have a powerful practical lesson. We are here on earth to develop wings to fly and reach the highest heights. Above all, however, we are here on earth to live our lives as full human beings who can grapple and overcome real-world challenges. Rather than escape our human struggles, we recognize that facing them is a key way we draw G-dliness into our lives and into the world—illuminating our individual lives and elevating the entire world around us.

FOOTNOTES

1. Exodus, chap. 18
2. [Exodus 18:13](#)
3. E.g. Akeida (1420-1494), Abarbanel (1437-1508) Shach Al Hatorah (1621-1662).
4. Likutei Sichot, vol. 17, pp. 203-10.
5. Shemot Rabbah 80:3.
6. [Deuteronomy 5:24](#) and Rashi thereon.
7. Tanya, vol. 1, chap. 4.
8. Mechilta (and Rashi) beginning of the parsha.

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