

The Gemara (*Brachos* 32a) examines Moses's prayer to Gd to forgive the people for the sin of the golden calf. The Torah says “וידבר ד' אל משה לך רד” (Exodus 32:7). Rabbi Elazar interprets this verse as descend from your exalted status. Since Gd elevated Moses ‘status in order to lead the Jewish People, now that the people have sinned and are no longer the chosen people, there is no longer a need for Moses as leader.

Gd offers Moses the option to stand by and allow Gd to destroy the Jewish People and grow a new nation with Moses as the seed in their place. The Gemara uses the parable of a king who physically punished his son and said that if not for his close friend standing here he would surely have killed him. The friend of the king, realizing he had an opportunity to save the prince, immediately seized it and rescued him.

What forced Rabbi Elazar to interpret the word רד as anything other than a command that Moses descend the mountain? Why interpret it allegorically to mean descend from your exalted level? Perhaps Rabbi Elazar interpreted it that way since there was no need for Gd to explicitly tell Moses to descend the mountain. After all, Moses had just completed his stay of 40 days and nights and received the Torah. It was now time for Moses to descend the mountain anyway. Also, it says וידבר ד' אל משה – Gd ordered him to descend. Moses knew on his own that the time had come to return to the people. Apparently this led Rabbi Elazar to interpret that Gd was referring to Moses' status.

The Gemara says that Moses lost his ability to pray and protest when he was ordered to descend. The Gemara uses the parable of the friend of the king to indicate that Moses realized that Gd provided him, despite his diminished status, with an opening and an opportunity to pray on their behalf to prevent their annihilation. This parable requires explanation. There are people who recognize their uncontrollable temper and call out to others "Hold me back!" in order to prevent themselves from committing an inappropriate act. But how does this pertain to Gd? If the Jewish People were guilty of idolatry, then they deserved to be punished accordingly. What could Moses possibly do to change that? If they were not punishable, then why did Gd tell Moses to descend from his status as leader? After all, in the end we find that Moses

did not descend from his status, rather he became the greatest of all leaders and prophets of the Jewish People. Why was he told to descend?

Another difficulty is that the Torah adds some words to the narrative that on the surface appear extraneous. וידבר ד' אל משה and Gd told Moses to descend because his people have sinned. The Torah continues ויאמר ד' אל משה and Gd said to Moses ועתה הניחה לי, release Me, do not protest and I will destroy the people and instead turn you and your descendants into a great nation in their place. Why was it necessary to introduce this offer with ויאמר? After all, it apparently extended the previous statement of Gd ordering Moses to descend because of the graven image the people created.

We can answer these questions by analyzing Moses' prayer. Moses mentioned the promises made to the patriarchs. Let us ask the question: who was greater, the patriarchs or Moses? From the earlier פרשיות in ספר שמות, it would appear that the patriarchs were greater. Moses mentions them in his prayers, Gd chides Moses that the patriarchs never questioned Him, even though they never saw the fulfillment of the promises to make them into a great nation and give them ארץ ישראל. Chazal say that only three of our ancestors are referred to as patriarchs. For example, we only mention Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in שמונה עשרה, excluding Moses. On the other hand we say that Moses was the greatest prophet, including all prophets who preceded and succeeded him, including the patriarchs.

Let us compare Abraham and Moses more closely. Abraham sought Gd on his own, without receiving any help from Gd in his quest. The Rambam (*Hilchos Avoda Zara*, Chapter 1) says that the world was cascading down hill until the pillar of the world, Abraham, was born. At a young age, either 3 or 40, he began to question what controls the world. Even though he had no teacher to guide him and was part of a family and community of idolaters, his fantastic intellect led him to conclude that there is a God that controls everything.

The earliest recorded conversation between Gd and Abraham was when Abraham was 75 years old. In the intervening years he debated the idolaters and defended his belief in the one true God. During these years he was

mocked by many. He must have been asked many times "Abraham, you believe that there is a single, almighty God? Have you ever spoken with Him? Has he communicated in any way with you?" Yet he dedicated his life to spreading his monotheistic belief system, one person at a time. He received no assistance in this task from Gd. The Torah does not relate any supernatural miracles (in comparison with the miracles that occurred to Moses and the Jewish People) that were performed on behalf of the patriarchs. Even the miracle of Sarah bearing a child at the age of 90 was not as blatantly remarkable a miracle as the splitting of the Red Sea. Isaac and Jacob were not the beneficiaries of obvious, supernatural miracles either, even though events recorded about them suggest the guiding, hidden hand of Gd. The patriarchs attained their special status because they popularized the name of Gd without His help. They dedicated their lives to this task, despite all the hardships they endured. The term אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם is the possessive form. By Abraham searching for and finding Gd, who was rejected and discarded by the world around him, so to speak, Gd became the possession of Abraham, similar to one who claims an ownerless object. The possessive form is used for each of the patriarchs. In their own way, each patriarch searched for and found Gd, taking ownership of Gd in his own unique way.

Moses came to learn of Gd in a completely different way. Gd sought Moses at the burning bush, not the other way around. Moses debated with Gd for a week in an attempt to convince Gd to send someone else to redeem the people. When Moses finally agreed to go, he was given a scripted set of messages and signs to deliver to the people and plagues to visit on Pharaoh and the Egyptians, to convince the people and Pharaoh the time for their redemption had arrived. At the time of the Exodus, Moses did not win the right to be the leader of the people. Rather, Gd gave it to Moses because the situation demanded it. Moses did not have to go through an עֲקִידָה like Abraham did in order to attain his leadership. Moses is referred to as Eved Gd עֶבֶד ל' ה', the servant of Gd. Gd is the owner having made a קנין (acquisition) in Moses. Moses's experience was very different from that of Abraham, who made a קנין in Gd, making Gd, כְּבִיכּוּל, his property.

However all this changed when the people sinned with the golden calf. Gd tells Moses the עַרְבֵי רֶגֶל, the non-Jewish multitudes that Moses brought along from Egypt, caused this disaster. Moses, Gd says, you never sacrificed for the people, everything that you did as their leader was handed to you on a

silver platter. Abraham laid a foundation for the nation, but you inherited your position without any effort. You told Pharaoh to let the people go, and when he refused to recognize Gd and acquiesce, Gd supported you and sent the plagues upon Egypt. At the Reed Sea, you simply raised your hand and the sea split. You have expended minimal effort on behalf of the people. On the other hand, Abraham demonstrated leadership when he tried to reason with Nimrod and was hurled into the furnace and when he placed his own life in jeopardy and interceded on behalf of the people of Sodom.

At the episode of the golden calf, Moses forfeited his original leadership mission he was entrusted with at the burning bush to take the people out of Egypt. If Moses was unwilling to sacrifice himself on behalf of the Jewish People and accepted their destruction, he had to relinquish his leadership role. **עם בלי מלך** – there is no king without a nation. This message was delivered in a harsh tone, **וידבר ד'**.

To this point, the patriarchs were greater than Moses because of their dedication to building the Jewish nation and their willingness to persevere in that mission despite all sorts of hardships. Gd hinted to Moses that he could still save the people. **ויאמר ד' אל משה**, Gd said to Moses: you have lost a nation that you did not sacrifice for. At Mount Sinai Gd gave the Torah to the people. Moses, you have not taught the people anything yet. However, now Moses I have a new proposition for you. I offer you the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the patriarchs and work and sacrifice on their behalf. You have the opportunity to rebuild this people into the **עם ד'**. However, this time you will have to accomplish it without miracles, thunder or lightning. From now on you will have to travel the path of Abraham, a road riddled with obstacles and hazards that will require great sacrifice on your part. You will have to educate them and persevere through their complaints and tribulations. The choice is yours. You can educate your own children (Gershom and Eliezer) to eventually become the **עם ד'**, and sanction the destruction of this group. Or, if you are willing to follow the path of Abraham and shoulder the responsibility for this group of idol worshipers and educate them to be **שומרי תורה**, then you can be their true leader. If you are willing to teach Torah to each and every Jew and show future generations the correct path, like the patriarchs were willing to do, then you have a chance to save them. But to do that you will have to become **משה רבינו**, you will have to be their teacher.

When Moses realized that the fate of the people was in his hands, he immediately replied זכור לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל (Exodus 32:13), I am ready to emulate the patriarchs and sacrifice on behalf of the nation. At the first קבלת התורה, Moses had only to stretch out his hands and receive the לוחות. At the second קבלת התורה, Moses had to hew the לוחות himself and carry them up the mountain and carve their message into the hearts of the people. The first קבלת התורה was between Gd and all Jews, and was intended to make the complete Torah accessible to all Jews. The second קבלת התורה was between Gd and Moses and required Moses to become the teacher of the people. Chazal say that the first מתן תורה was to include all of Torah as תורה שבכתב. The second מתן תורה introduced תורה שבעל פה, which required a *Moses Rabbeinu* to teach to every Jew. Moses had to accept this new and difficult role in order to save and rebuild the nation.

The leaders of each generation are the Moses of their time, responsible to teach the people and continue the process of מתן תורה until the arrival of the Messiah. This is what Rabbi Elazar said: Moses descend from your exalted leadership role. After all, you never sought leadership, you never sacrificed for it, it was granted to you only for the sake of the Jewish People. Until the golden calf, Moses was amazingly successful. Once Moses heard about the golden calf, his strength was sapped. However, he heard the other part of the message, that he had the chance to regain his leadership by standing up and sacrificing himself on behalf of the people, emulating the patriarchs. Moses proved that he was ready for his new role by praying on their behalf 40 days and 40 nights. By grabbing on to the garment of Gd, so to speak, and refusing to release it until the people were forgiven (as Rabbi Abahu says, Brachos 32a). This was his initial test. Moses, if you are willing to give up easily, then you are no leader. You must be like Abraham, who was willing to take up the cause of Sodom. Gd told Moses: לך רד, relinquish your original leadership role for which you did not have to struggle and accept one fraught with difficulties.

Moses knew that in his new role he would never be included as a fourth patriarch, or called the father of the nation. He said if a chair of three legs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – cannot stand, then how could a chair with one

leg, Moses alone, stand. He said that he is interested only in saving this Jewish Nation.

We now understand the relevance of the story of the friend of the king. It is easy to be the friend of the king if one is in constant agreement with the king. However, sometimes true friendship demands a willingness to oppose the king when necessary, even when it entails personal sacrifice. The king punished his son in order to test his friend to see if he had the strength of character to oppose him. Moses answered, I am ready and willing to give up my own personal comfort and place in history, I am willing to sacrifice myself and my potential future greatness in order to save the Jewish nation.

After this act of sacrifice, Moses attained a status that was greater than the patriarchs. Only after Moses displayed his self-sacrifice did his face light up (קרן אור פניו, *Shmos* 34:29), after the third time that Moses descended from Mount Sinai after the second מתן תורה. Moses became the greatest of the prophets, אדון הנביאים, when he emulated the patriarchs. Chazal say that Gd did not retract the positive offer of making Moses into a great nation. The offer was fulfilled as all of כנסת ישראל became the children of Moses. He became Moses our teacher. Marriage, divorce, contracts are all formulated according to דת משה וישראל. Moses became identified with the entire Torah, because he sacrificed himself on behalf of the people. This was the way of Abraham.

After Moses showed his willingness to pray and sacrifice on their behalf, he became the fourth leg of the chair, the fourth father of the nation. Even though we have a principle that there are only three patriarchs, Moses was now in their class. After all, a father will sacrifice himself on behalf of his children.

The Jewish leader cannot inherit his position of leadership. He must build it. There were two Moses. The story of the first Moses ended with the episode of the golden calf. He was replaced by the new Moses, a compatriot of Abraham.

This summary is copyright 2019 by Rabbi Josh Rapps. Permission to distribute this summary for individual use, with this notice, is granted. Distribution through electronic or printed media without the author's permission is prohibited.