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MOSES: THE IDEAL OF A LEADER

*And I will give you shepherds after
mine heart and they shall feed you
knowledge and understanding
(Jeremiah 3:15)*

To talk about leadership in our times evokes the spectre of those leaders in the thirties and forties who led their nation to disaster, without any consideration for the cost in human suffering and moral degradation which their course involved. Yet, despite the distasteful association, we talk about the need for leadership in various domains of life—education, business, politics—and we look for individuals who are capable of providing such leadership also in civilizations which are committed to the principles of liberalism and democracy. Obviously, there is more than one sort of leader and more than one kind of leadership.

What are the qualities of a leader? What makes him attain a position of supreme power? What are his aims? What are the means he employs? What is his attitude to the people he leads? What is his lot—as an individual and as a national figure?

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Questions like these can be asked about various leaders, and, of course, result in different answers—depending on the social setting, the personality of the leader, and some of the fundamental principles and ideals to which a civilization is committed. The characterization of a Solon, a Pericles, an Alexander of Macedonia, a Hannibal, a Genghis Khan, a Napoleon, a Mussolini, a Roosevelt, a Churchill, will vary, if each is examined from these perspectives.

It is not the purpose of this essay to examine the nature of leadership in the abstract, nor to explore the peculiar characteristics of various leaders through the ages. Our objective is to explore the perception of leadership as conveyed in the personality and story of Moses. While the story of Moses and his role in the early history, or the pre-history, of Israel has many facets and ramifications, one can discern in it a certain notion of his image and role as the leader of a nation. It is this aspect which we shall try to understand.

As Moses is conceived in the Bible, and in later Judaism, as a man who came as close as a human being could to God, a man who went as far as humanly possible in performing a monumental task—the possible exception being the anticipated Messiah—his image could well be seen as the ideal of leadership in the Israelite and Jewish tradition. Thus, by exploring the personality of Moses as a leader we aim at understanding the Judaic idea and ideal of such a social and political role. In trying to answer the above questions in respect of Moses, we shall delineate the characteristics of his leadership and of the Judaic ideal of a leader.

REASON OF A CHOICE

One peculiarity which distinguishes Moses from modern contenders for leadership—whether in democratic or undemocratic societies—is that he does not run for office, nor does he engage in machinations and intrigues to obtain power. For that matter, he differs in this respect from the power seekers in any age, whose quest proceeded along established lines of constitution and custom, as in ancient Athens, or was a ruthless struggle, as among the contenders for a disputed, or not disputed, throne in many

a monarchy. Moses neither tries to usurp power, nor follows an established procedure—if there was one at that juncture of Israel's history—for obtaining it. He does not run for office; he runs away from it.

Typical in this respect is the story about the divine revelation to Moses through the burning bush. As is well known, God decided to deliver His people from the oppressive rule of Egypt and lead them “unto a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Moses is the man through whom the divine design is to be implemented. Alternatively, one could interpret the divine call as an inner voice in Moses, which, however, is not identical with his everyday personality and his own awareness of himself. What is the response of Moses to the great call? It is a reaction of doubt: “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (3:11). Moses' diffidence meets with encouragement from God, who promises to stand by Moses and assures him that the elders of Israel will follow him. Yet, the assurances do not allay Moses' misgivings, and he seems to voice the arguments of his disloyal opposition even before assuming the role of the leader: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee” (Exodus 4:1). God resorts to some miraculous measures to reassure Moses and to indicate his eventual success, but again Moses comes with a counter-argument. “And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent..., but am of heavy lip and heavy tongue” (4:10).¹ Even this attempt to extricate himself from the monumental task is rejected by God, who reminds Moses that He, the Lord, made man's mouth and will stand by Moses and instruct him what to say (4:12). Moses, apparently at a loss for an additional argument, just expresses his fundamental reluctance to assume the task and politely asks the Lord to entrust the mission to someone else (4:13). This meets with God's anger, and a compromise: the brother of Moses, Aaron, who is an eloquent man, will serve

¹ The King James' version reads: “but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.” We have preferred a literal translation of the Hebrew phrasing, which indicates some deficiency in speech, whether physiological or mental in nature.

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as a spokesman of Moses (4:14-15). This arrangement seems to be accepted by Moses.

It is significant that the biblical narrative expands this story, showing again and again the reluctance of Moses to listen to the divine call, or to his inner voice. If finally Moses takes upon himself the great task, it is not with an unshakable conviction that he is the man of destiny, that he is a born saviour, that he is a superman. He assumes the task full of doubts, but nonetheless assumes it: for the call of God and His arguments, or the command of conscience, outweigh the doubts. Indeed, even during the Sinai wanderings, when encountering complaints from the people about the dietary monotony of manna, Moses addresses God with acrimony about being chosen as the people's leader. "And Moses said unto the Lord, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me" (Numbers 11:11).

If Moses lacks the typical trait of leaders of self-assurance and eagerness to perform this role, he is also not endowed with the gift so necessary for all democratic—and some non-democratic—seekers of the highest political office, namely, the gift of eloquence. For, as we have seen, he is of "heavy lip and heavy tongue", or, as it is put in another passage, "of uncircumcised lips" (Exodus 6:12 and 6:30), possibly meaning "stammering". This would disqualify Moses not only from being a demagogue—whether in ancient Greek style or of a modern version—but even from succeeding as a reasonably decent politician.

If Moses neither believes in his capacity as a leader, nor has the eloquence needed to convince his own people, let alone his adversary, Pharaoh,² what does qualify him to lead Israel? The answer to this question may not be given quite explicitly by the biblical story, but it can be inferred from it.

One qualification which Moses has is his affinity to the Egyptian way of life, and to the court of Pharaoh in particular. While these circumstances are not mentioned as the reasons for the choice

² Moses himself argues his weakness with iron logic: "And Moses spake before the Lord, saying, Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?" (Exodus 6:12)

of Moses as a leader, the adoption of Moses at childhood by Pharaoh's daughter forms an important part of his biography and implies his familiarity with the behaviour and mentality of the eventual adversary. Moses, over the years, can be assumed to have collected all the intelligence about his future enemy. This is of crucial importance in the early stages of his leadership of Israel. Obviously, the conclusion can be reached that a leader has to be acquainted with the reality he and his nation have to confront.

Another qualification, stated clearly by the biblical text, is the choice of Moses for his role by God. But while this choice is related explicitly, there is no elaboration of the reasons for God's choice. Or, if we explain the choice as inspiration, it is not self-evident—indeed, not clear—what such inspiration means. The point is not clarified when, besides the divine revelation through the burning bush to Moses, God, in another dialogue with him, refers to “the spirit which is upon thee” (Numbers 11:17). What does such an endowment with spirit mean in the biblical context? Does God choose a man for a special task because he is endowed with spirit, or does the individual become inspired by being chosen by God?

The clarification of this point can be gained from comparing other passages in the Bible in which reference is made to inspired men, or to the spirit of God moving human beings. Thus, in the book of Judges there are several references to the Spirit of the Lord that came upon the leader and made him combat the enemy and succeed in his endeavours to free the oppressed tribes from alien rule. (See Judges 3:10, 11:29, 13:25 etc.) In another passage, referring to Saul as he was anointed the king of Israel, the text is somewhat more emphatic, as it makes Samuel announce to the new king: “And the Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man” (I Samuel 10:6). Here the transformation into a superior personality through the spirit of God seems more profound and comprehensive. If these examples suggest a supernatural inspiration, there are others in which the spirit of God comes closer to a naturalistic perception and seems to indicate exceptional human, but not more than human, endowments. Thus, Pharaoh says of Joseph, “Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?” And to Joseph he says: “Forasmuch as

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God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art” (Genesis 41:38-39). The attribute of wisdom is conceived as a divine gift, but it is also a quality of an exceptional man. The down-to-earth nature of inspiration is even more transparent when the spirit of God amounts to the endowment of a gifted craftsman (Exodus 31:2-5).

Thus, it seems that, broadly speaking, any outstanding capacity of man—which can be expressed by courage, vision, great intelligence, or even the artistic skill of a craftsman—is attributed to divine inspiration. This inspiration may be sometimes seen as a dramatic transformation of man by the descent of God’s spirit on him, and sometimes as a natural attribute of man, though its source is also divine spirit. Thus, while, strictly speaking, the biblical perception sees any outstanding human capacity as endowment with the spirit of God, this viewpoint reflects both the religious philosophy of ancient Israel and the practical recognition of the exceptionally gifted individuals. Theoretically, God chooses the individual whom He wants to inspire; in practice, there are those outstanding people who can be recognized as such, and thus assumed to have been inspired by God.

Moses is inspired. But what is the nature of his inspiration? What is his particular spiritual gift? There is no explicit answer to this question, but his life work provides a testimony to the nature of his endowment. According to the ingenious and persuasive interpretation of the famous Hebrew essayist, Ahad Ha’am, the dominant characteristic of Moses is the pursuit of justice.³ Indeed, not only the story of Moses, but also the main trait of the laws of the Torah—attributed to God, but inseparable from Moses who serves as the Lord’s spokesman to the people—is the quest for justice. Thus, it could be said that it is this steadfast commitment to justice that is the substance of the inspiration of Moses. He passionately wants to end the iniquity of national enslavement to Egypt and he strives to establish a community based on just and equitable laws and institutions. The ardent quest for

³ Ahad Ha’am (pseudonym of Asher Ginzberg), “Moses.” Available in English in *Selected Essays*, translated by Leon Simon, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912.

implementing just conditions for his people and just relations in their community, even to make them an example to other nations—“a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6)—is the spirit which dominates Moses.

The attainment of such an objective—notably the just community—requires not only imposition of laws, but also instruction and teaching. Therefore, Moses is not only a law-giver, or a spokesman for divine law. He is also a preacher and a teacher, as testified by the vigorous moralizing in the chapters of Deuteronomy. In this respect, he founds the great prophetic tradition of ancient Israel.

In later generations, when Judaism turned to a lower key of self-expression, and the scholarly interpretation of the law succeeded the impassioned address of the prophets, Moses became fondly referred to not as a prophet, but as *Moshe rabenu*, “Moses, our teacher”. Recognized as the first teacher of the law, he became the perennial symbol of the teaching of the ways of Judaism.

The qualities which inspire Moses also affect the people he leads. They may not always understand him, but they feel his greatness and essentially trust his judgment. He does not trick them, he does not persuade them by clever speeches of politicians, he does not excite them into fanatic ardour. He inspires awe in them. This is symbolically conveyed in the story describing Moses’ return from Mount Sinai with the second tables of law, that is to say, Moses at the peak of his moral leadership.

The story says that “the skin of his face shone,” even though Moses was not aware of it. When this was perceived by Aaron and the people, “they were afraid to come nigh him”. Yet, “Moses called unto them,” and made Aaron, the heads of the congregation, and then the people return to him, so that he could “command them all that God had spoken with him at Mount Sinai” (Exodus 34:29-32). The halo of sanctity inspires awe and fear. A gap is created between the leader and the people, including the elite. Characteristically, Moses, who is concerned about the implementation of his mission is not aware of the impression he makes. Significantly, the fear and the gap the people feel does not lead to alienation and rejection of Moses’ leadership. It is an awe-inspired fear, that is to say, deep respect for the incomprehensible, which is the opposite of rejection. Despite the gap

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and the misunderstanding, Moses maintains his leadership and his role, and instructs both the elite and the people about the ways of God, His laws and commandments.

OBJECTIVES

What are the aims of Moses? He is not a leader who wants simply to please his people, to make them happy, if we may use a hackneyed phrase. His ambition is much higher, as should have transpired from what was said about his quest for justice. It could be suggested that his objective is twofold: the protection and the perfection of the children of Israel. The point requires some further elaboration.

Whatever the social-moral goal which Moses sets for the tribes of Israel, he is not only a man of vision—far-sighted vision—but also a practical leader who has to provide survival for the people. He has to protect them from re-enslavement or physical annihilation, he has to find food and water for them during their wanderings in the desert.

Thus, we see Moses who, following divine instructions, is lifting his rod and stretching his hand over the sea to divide it and let the children of Israel go through on dry ground, and then repeating the performance to let the waters come again upon the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus, Chapter 14). Later on, when Israel is attacked by Amalek, while Joshua is the military commander, Moses overlooks the battle with “the rod of God” in his hand. “And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Exodus 17:11). The strategy ultimately led to Israel’s victory.

While these stories are clad in religious and mythical cloak and are open to various interpretations, it is significant for our inquiry that Moses is depicted as involved in two battles for the survival of Israel. His part—whether as the implementer of God’s commands, or the provider of moral support for Joshua and his troops—is depicted as significant. Even if not a military commander himself—unless the strategy at the crossing of the Red Sea was his—he is involved deeply in the critical moments of national survival.

Similarly, when it comes to the provision of food and water, the logistics of a nation on the move, it is Moses again who, on divine instructions, takes care of the people. He finds a way of sweetening bitter water (Exodus 15:22-25), he announces that God will provide manna and quails as nutrition (Exodus, Chapter 16), and again he makes water spout from a rock (Exodus 17:1-7).

It is noteworthy that the protection and provision which Moses, or God through Moses, provides is in response to the people's complaint and demand. While God, and Moses, are not always happy with these complaints which may turn quite bitter—"ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this entire multitude through starvation" (Exodus 16:3)—he always responds to the demands. In other words, the leader is concerned about the needs and the material demands of the people who, in turn, are not resigned to be mere passive and submissive followers. This is a far cry from a despotic leadership, as history has known it. This does not mean that the leader only responds to people's demands. It is his task to take the initiative and protect them and take care of their well-being, irrespective of complaints and demands.

This function of the leader is perhaps best expressed in comparing him to a shepherd—a characteristic analogy of the Bible. Thus, Moses himself, concerned about the succession of leadership—a concern typical of a good leader—seeks God's advice about the matter, so "that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd" (Numbers 27:17). For the people to be "as sheep that have not a shepherd" is a prophecy of doom (I Kings 22:17). The shepherd's—or ruler's—duty is to take care of the flock, not of themselves, points out Ezekiel: "Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" Addressing the bad rulers, he elaborates:

"The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them." (Ezekiel 34:2 and 4)

Evidently, the duty of the ruler is to take comprehensive care of

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the ruled—to feed them, to cure them, to protect them, a veritable motto of the Welfare State. A ruler who is self-seeking and derelict in these duties is a bad shepherd and ruler. The ultimate in the protective and providing performance of the shepherd—in this case God Himself—is expressed in the famous Psalm 23, which opens with the words, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

While, by and large, the analogy of the shepherd is used to set the example for the material functions of the ruler, it can be extended to the spheres of mind and spirit. Thus, the role of the ruler-shepherd to provide for the people can be used metaphorically to apply to other than bodily needs: “And I will give you shepherds after mine heart, and they shall feed you knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15).⁴ Similarly to this pronouncement, made in the name of God, the role of Moses is not only to protect and provide, but also to teach and perfect.

This function of Moses’ leadership is assumed on his, or God’s, own initiative. There is no clamour “make us good,” “make us perfect,” the way the demands for food, water, or protection are heard. Yet, the ideal of perfection is not imposed on the people tyrannically or autocratically. It is offered them as a part of an agreement, to which they consent. Moses, on behalf of God, tells the people:

“Now, therefore, if ye will obey me, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me of all the nations...⁵ And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6)

The obedience and keeping the covenant mean following in the ways of the Lord—involving the ten commandments and a strict moral code—which will transform Israel into a holy nation. The answer of the people is: “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). With these words, the people commit themselves to the new spiritual leadership and guidance. Once committed, they have no right to change or modify the agreement.

⁴ The second part of the verse could possibly be translated: “and they shall lead you in the way of knowledge and understanding.”

⁵ The King James’ version reads: “above all people.” “Above all the nations” is a more accurate translation.

They become the pupils who must be taught and directed onto the right way by the leader who is the spokesman of God.

In this sense, the function of the leader conveyed in the story of Moses is, broadly speaking, akin to the notions of Plato. Discussing oratory—a major tool in Athenian political life—Socrates (alias Plato) asks: “Do the rhetoricians appear to you always to aim at what is best, and do they seek to improve the citizens by their speeches, or are they too... bent upon giving them pleasure...?”⁶ And further on, while he admits that some of the old time statesmen, like Themistocles and Pericles, were better than their followers in providing the material needs of the state, they did not improve the moral quality of life. They are praised because they “feasted the citizens and satisfied their desires,” yet they “have left no room for justice and temperance.”⁷

The contrast between the biblical and Platonic notions of leadership on the one hand, and those widely spread in modern, as well as ancient, democratic states on the other, is clear and sharp. The former philosophies see as the primary function of the leader the provision of moral guidance and not the gratification of the wishes of the people, irrespective of the nature of such wishes. The duty of the leader is the absolute notion of right and his objective is the moral perfection of the people, and not the satisfaction of desires which may be trivial, unjust, or otherwise unworthy. In the sphere of moral perfection democratic will or public opinion poll must not count. In the case of Israel, the people, by accepting the leadership of God at Sinai, committed themselves to the pursuit of the road to moral conduct and social perfection, and the leader’s duty is to hold them to this obligation and not allow any change of mind. In fact, the leader’s task goes beyond that.

The task of Moses to establish “an holy nation” is monumental and the way to achieve the goal is long and arduous—apparently beyond Moses’ initial expectations. The episode of the golden calf—and the moral setback it symbolizes—is indicative of the difficulty in attaining the lofty moral objective. For Moses wants to create new attitudes, a way of life guided by a strict sys-

⁶ Plato, *Gorgias*, 502 (Jowett’s translation).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 518.

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tem of ethical values, a system often colliding with primitive passions and beliefs. The building of a good society, “an holy nation,” cannot be achieved by a declaration and an agreement. It not only has to be installed, but also taught and cultivated and repeatedly reaffirmed. It has to be nurtured and preserved and developed. It cannot be achieved in a single encounter at Sinai, nor in one generation.

This is not surprising, for the lofty goal is intended for the present and the future generations. Moses, in this sense, is not a leader for a term of a few years, or even for life. He is a leader intent on putting the stamp of the Lord’s ways on the character of Israel from the encounter at Sinai into eternity. In the words of Philo:

“Moses is alone in this, that his laws, firm, unshaken, immovable, stamped, as it were, with the seals of nature herself, remain secure from the day when they were first enacted to now, and we may hope that they will remain for all future ages... Thus, though the nation has undergone so many changes, both to increased prosperity and the reverse, nothing—not even the smallest part of the ordinances—has been disturbed.”⁸

While this image of a spiritual leader as idealized by Philo cannot be easily emulated, it remains the guiding principle of leadership in Judaism. The major task of leaders in every age is to improve the moral quality of their generation and, in doing so, add another link in the tradition of the quest for the just society, for moral perfection, for life of sanctity and piety. “And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15).

Thus, in summation, leadership is conceived as being only partially of a political nature, in the conventional sense of the term. The successful leaders in history, who have protected their nations against aggression and provided for their economic and social well-being, have fulfilled only a part of the role of the leader. Another part is the improvement of the moral quality of individual life and social relations and institutions, making people and the

⁸ Philo Judaeus, *The Life of Moses*, Book II, 14-15. Quoted from F.H. Colson’s translation of Philo’s works, Vol VI, Cambridge, Mass., The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press and London, William Heinemann, 1935.

community better in the ethical sense. Judged by these standards, few statesmen—whether in ancient Athens or in the annals of human history at large—will pass the test of leadership.

ETHICS AND POLITICS

Even though the role of Moses is a combination of a political function and a religious-moral role, the second proving to be more difficult to fulfil, there is no separation between the two. Not only that Moses is the chief figure in both domains, but he uses political means not only for political objectives, but also for the implementation of the spiritual and ethical ideal.

In this sense he parts ways with Christianity which, by and large, has not whole-heartedly and without reservations resorted to political institutions for achieving its religious goals. He also differs from Socrates, who deliberately avoided the political road in his attempt to improve the ethical quality of life, as he testifies before his judges in the *Apology*:

“Someone may wonder why I go about in private giving advice and busying myself with the concerns of others, but do not venture to come forward in public and advise the state... And do not be offended at my telling you the truth: for the truth is, that no man who goes to war with you or any other multitude, honestly striving against the many lawless and unrighteous deeds which are done in a state, will save his life; he who will fight for the right, if he would live even for a brief space, must have a private station and not a public one.”⁹

Moses fights for right and justice through political institutions. He addresses the public, the nation, rather than the individual. His design is a wholesale perfection rather than a slow indirect effort of adding one persons here and two persons there, in the hope of achieving the improvement of ever increasing numbers of human souls in this manner.

There are reasons for the bold method of Moses, as there are grounds for the courageous, but circumspect, tactics of Socrates. Socrates was born into a functioning mature polis, with its own established ways and institutions, which could not be changed.

⁹ Plato, *Apology*, 31-32 (Jowett's translation).

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He knew that the multitude, confronted through these institutions, would not be tolerant of someone with a profoundly different outlook about what is worthwhile in life. Indeed, eventually this multitude did not tolerate even Socrates' piecemeal, humble apolitical approach, and condemned him to death. Moses became the leader of Israel at a stage when these tribes, though forming a national society, were at an early, immature stage of cultural development, and seemed ready to adopt a more clearly defined way of life. The sociological reality seemed—perhaps deceptively—suitable for the establishment of an ethical polity. The multitude in this case may have failed to comprehend the nature of the message, a gap in communication which occasionally led to a critical confrontation, but Moses was too powerful a figure to be simply deposed or effectively opposed. He had a chance to lay the foundations of an ideal society.

Moreover, though Socrates might perhaps have achieved more if the Athenian public had been more tolerant, the very nature of his message concerned the individual rather than society. In his own words:

You, my friend,—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens,—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard of heed at all?"¹⁰

Christianity, though seeking the salvation rather than the improvement of the soul, and pointing to faith rather than knowledge and wisdom as a way for attaining its objective, is also predominantly concerned with the individual. Judaism, on the other hand, is primarily concerned neither with the wisdom of the individual nor with the salvation of his soul, but with a just and compassionate society. It is the relations among the individuals which are the primary concern of the Pentateuch. Such relations, by their very nature, can be regulated by public law and public institutions, though the commitment of the individuals to abide by the legal and moral code is obviously important. Thus,

¹⁰ *Apology*, 29.

the public and political institutions are resorted to by Moses to promote the social ideals.

Moses resorts to political means in a comprehensive and diverse manner. The foundation of God's *polity* is solemnly enacted at the foot of Mt. Sinai in a covenant between the Lord and the people of Israel, which is described as a most solemn occasion (Exodus, Chapter 19). It is in conjunction with this event that the Ten Commandments—the quintessence of the new ethos—are announced (Chapter 20). Characteristically, the political achievement of delivery from Egypt is mentioned on this occasion as an enticement for accepting the rule of God (19:4-5). The physical national salvation and the acceptance of theocracy, with its ethical implications, are all dealt with in political terms.

Then there is the elaborate system of God's commandments, laws and judgments, from the general principles like pursuit of justice (Deuteronomy 16:20) and the injunction "Love thy neighbour as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18), to specific cases, such as responsibility for a goring ox (Exodus 21:28-29) or the prescript to make a battlement for the roof in order to prevent an accident (Deuteronomy 22:8). Besides legislation, Moses fulfils the role of the people's judge, resolving their disputes and announcing "the laws of God and his instructions (teachings)" (Exodus 18:16). The judicial function, a major branch of government, fulfils its obvious role, and also serves as an educational means for instilling the moral code in the people, as the last verse indicates.

The deep concern about the acceptance of the Lord's way by the people is revealed in the instructions to hold a great public ceremony in the future, when the tribes reach the Promised Land, at the mounts Gerizim and Ebal, during which ceremony the Levites will proclaim a curse on a series of cardinal moral transgressions (Deuteronomy, Chapter 27). Here we have a farsighted political measure to reinforce the teaching and practice of righteousness.

Besides such momentous public occasions, intended to remind Israel of the ways of the Lord, there are other, quotidian measures—not, strictly speaking, political—to assure the people's adherence to the law and teaching of God:

"Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your

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soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes.

And ye shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates.” (Deuteronomy 11:18-20)

Here the reliance is on a continuous and persistent educational effort through which parents transmit the teaching to their children, besides being themselves constantly aware of the ways of the Lord. Perhaps this more than all the other measures shows Moses’ concern for shaping the ethos of Israel for generations to come, for binding Israel with the Lord’s ways, or, as it could be rephrased in later generations, linking Jews with Judaism.

Characteristically, the above injunctions, besides being accepted in the spirit they had been intended, were also translated into ritualistic symbols by rabbinical Judaism. “Sign upon your hand” and “frontlets between your eyes” have been interpreted as phylacteries, put on during morning prayers, while “thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house” has been formalized in the *mezuzah*. These venerated objects—which contain some passages from the Pentateuch—have served as a constant reminder in Jewish households of the commitment to the ways of the Lord and to the teaching of the Moses.

Moses’ leadership, as his story relates, was not free of setbacks and doubts. Sometimes we see him on the point of despair in the face of the people’s complaints. Thus he turns to God and argues:

Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?

Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nurse beareth the suckling child, unto the land which thou swearest unto their fathers?...

I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in thy sight; and let me not behold my misery.” (Numbers 11:11-12 e 14-15)

Yet, the characteristic trait of Moses is not despair, but determination and perseverance. Thus, though the people’s worship of the golden calf makes Moses break the tables of law—a most dra-

matic symbol of frustration and despair—this is only a temporary reaction. The first tables of law are replaced by another set. Moses perseveres.

Significantly, according to the biblical narrative, it is Moses—not God—who perseveres on this occasion. The divine reaction to the golden calf is the intent to wipe out the sinful nation and make Moses himself into a great nation (Exodus 32:10). It is Moses who intercedes on behalf of Israel and makes God repent “of the evil which he thought to do unto his people” (32:14).¹¹ Moses perseveres because he is committed to the ideal and because he has compassion for the people he leads. The two concerns become inseparable.

Another setback is God’s decision to postpone the entry of the people of Israel into the Promised Land by forty years, till the unruly generation dies out (Numbers, Chapter 14). Whether Moses was involved in this decision or not, there can be little doubt that it must have been hard for him to reach or accept it. A delay of forty years of the fulfilment of a major national aim must have been a great disappointment for Moses as a leader. It also must have been frustrating to him personally, for he probably had little hope of surviving this span of time. Yet, there is no indication of doubt or hesitation on the part of Moses. Nor is there a manifestation of impatience and anger as in the episode of the golden calf. Moses learned to confront setbacks and to persist in his commitment. If the good of the nation requires a delay of forty years, the delay must be accepted. If, as the biblical story has it, it is divine punishment, it must be accepted too. Forty years is a very long period when measured by individual life span. But Moses is a leader for generations to come: he must measure time by centuries and millennia. The road to the ideal is hard and long, but it must not be abandoned.

“ANAV... ANAV”

What is the attitude of Moses to the people he guides and leads? How does he see himself as a human being in comparison with them as such beings?

¹¹ Cf. a similar situation in Numbers 14:11-20.

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All too often leaders see themselves as head and shoulders above the people. The leader, by virtue of his role, attains an elevated position, which entails special compensation and privileges. Indeed, we are accustomed to it in economic, educational, social and political institutions. The last may involve various trappings and symbols, expressing the distinguished position of the official ruler.

In the case of Moses, with the possible exception of the rod—which is described more as a miracle-making device than a symbol of political power—there seems to be no external adornment to the authority he wields. Aaron, on becoming the high priest, gets his vestments—a part of a ceremonial cult. Moses is what he is and neither needs nor appropriates any symbols to express his role or to strengthen his authority. It is his face that shines—not his buttons or epaulettes.

Characteristically, at the beginning Moses is not conscious of the fact that his face shines. The sanctity and dedication emanate from him, but he is the last person to be aware of it. For he is only concerned about his public aims and the way of fulfilling them, and not about his public image.

As we have seen, Moses is concerned about the moral perfection of the people, as well as about their safety and well-being. In the exercise of his functions he occasionally loses patience and gets angry with them. Yet, he is also understanding and compassionate and intercedes with God on their behalf. In other words, he is aware of their shortcomings, but also is conscious of their humanity.

However, how does he see himself when compared with the people? Does his leading position give him a sense of pride, a feeling of self-importance? Even if he is not originally aware of the awe he inspires, when he becomes conscious of it and of the respect he awakens, is his self-awareness filled with pride?

Fortunately, the biblical story addressed this issue too—characteristically, through an indirect episode which seems almost banal in the context of the epic of the exodus from Egypt and the creation of an holy nation. It is Moses' sister and brother who on one occasion speak against Moses concerning the wife he had married. In this connection they say: "Hath the Lord spoken only and exclusively to Moses? Hath he not spoken also to us?" (Num-

bers 12:2). The contention implies a certain degree of haughtiness and pride in Moses. This allegation is emphatically rejected by the narrator of the episode and it is this rejection which characterizes Moses' self-esteem: "And the man Moses was very humble, the humblest of all the human beings on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3).¹² The statement sounds naively simple, if for no other reason, than because of its implication that all mankind has been examined for the assessment of the virtue of humility. Yet, it is not the scientific validity of the statement which is important here, but the assertion about Moses' character, and the perspective taken to assess Moses and humanity.

Significantly, the verse does not speak of Moses, but of "the man Moses." In other words, he is judged here as a man and not as a leader, a prophet, the Lord's spokesman. Moses is evaluated as an individual of the species *Homo sapiens*, or, as the text puts it, "all the human beings." The statement conveys an egalitarian perspective, as a man is compared with all the other human beings, without any regard to his achievement and excellence. Even when judged in this manner, Moses is the humblest.

There is another, almost imperceptible, nuance in this statement. It refers to "all the human beings on the surface of the earth." This phrasing relates humanity to the surface of the earth, the habitat of mankind. It implicitly humbles mankind, by emphasizing its geographical limitations. It seems to suggest that humility befits mankind, and Moses, the outstanding man and powerful leader, realises it and is actually the humblest of all—which, in its own way, is a mark of vision and, one hardly dares say, greatness.

It is noteworthy that, though in the present context the Hebrew word used in this verse, *anav*, means "humble," it also has

¹² The King James' version reads: "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth." We chose to use the word "humble" rather than "meek" for *anav*, though it conveys both and more, as explained further on in the text. The other significant departure from the accepted English text is stylistic: to be meek or humble *above* sounds somewhat paradoxical, so we preferred to repeat the word "humble" in the superlative, in the spirit if not letter of the Hebrew text. Finally, the Hebrew text refers to "the man (*ish*) Moses," but then compares him with "all the *adam*," another word for man, or humanity, reminiscent of Adam and stressing what we would call today "the species of man." "Human beings" conveys the idea better than simply "men".

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another connotation. It also means “just,” or “righteous,” as the following examples indicate. Thus, one of the prophets exhorts the people: “Seek ye the Lord, all the righteous of the earth, which have wrought his judgment” (Zephaniah 2:3). “Righteous” is here the appropriate translation of the Hebrew word *anav*, and not “meek”, as the King James’ version claims. Similarly, a passage in the Psalms uses the word *anavim* (the plural of *anav*) in the sense of the just and righteous: “For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be... But the righteous (*anavim*) will inherit the earth...” (Psalm 37:10-11). Clearly, it is the righteous, rather than the meek and humble, who are the opposite of the wicked, and thus provide the contrast in the typical manner of biblical poetry.

While it is outside the framework of this essay to explore the possible reasons and logical connections for using the same word to describe humility and righteousness, it is noteworthy that *anav* evokes both virtues. Consequently, the characterization of Moses as *anav*, besides the cardinal contextual meaning as being humble, also suggests the justness and righteousness of Moses. Nor is it surprising if Moses was perceived as the justest of all people: after all the *essence* of his message was righteousness.

If this additional interpretation of the meaning of *anav* is allowed, the further conclusion can be inferred that being just need not and should not make a man proud, but one can and ought to combine righteousness with humility. Such a combination of traits in a great national leader symbolizes the moral excellence of linking the two virtues, which are not, and ought not to be, detrimentally affected by a position of power. Power need not corrupt, and virtue can rule supreme.

Significantly, the Pentateuch, when addressing itself to the moral guidelines for the monarchs of Israel, combines the adherence to the commandments of the Lord, which are tantamount to the way of righteousness, with the requirement of an egalitarian attitude on the part of the king to his people—an attitude which implies a fundamental sense of humility. The king will “keep all the pronouncements of this teaching and these laws, to do them: That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren” (Deuteronomy 17:19-20). It is his brethren, not his subjects, that he rules. One can see in these injunctions an attempt to institu-

tionalize the example of Moses, a man both righteous and humble.

The humble feelings and egalitarian philosophy of Moses are revealed in connection with another episode related in the Pentateuch. The story itself, of no special interest in the present context, involves the delegation of some of Moses' powers to seventy elders, a transaction which involves the taking by God of the spirit which inspires Moses and putting it on them (Numbers 11:16-17). While this took place in the tabernacle, two of the seventy failed to arrive there and the spirit rested on them in the camp. Consequently, they started to prophesy there, which apparently indicates to preach in an inspired way. Joshua, Moses' servant, asked him to stop and prevent this activity. To which Moses responded: "Enviest thou for my sake? Oh that the entire Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit on them" (Numbers 11:29).

It is this reaction of Moses which reveals his basic humility and fundamental egalitarian philosophy. The grace of being inspired by the Lord is something for which man cannot account. To put it in naturalistic terms, the exceptional gifts of an individual—in this case the capacity of political and ethical leadership—have to be recognized as a fact and used for the benefit of society. However, such exceptional capacities do not entitle the person endowed with them to regard them as a personal privilege and keep them enviously as such a privilege. Moses wholeheartedly wishes that all the nation was inspired in the same manner, though obviously he is incapable of implementing such a wish, for inspiration is beyond human control. Belonging to the few elect, or being the most inspired, is conceived as the consequence of divine decision—or, as some may say, of chance. In both cases, it does not justify any feeling of superiority, or pride. Indeed, the sense of righteousness in Moses, if it does not rebel against the unequal endowment of men with divine gifts, aspires to the ideal of *universal* excellence and divine inspiration. He testifies here again to being *anav*—humble and righteous.¹³

¹³ Cf. also my essay "Democratic Elitism", *Judaism*, Vol. 27, No. 1.

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TWO INTERPRETATIONS

What is the personal lot of Moses? Is the leader of the people, who guided it for forty years, to have the satisfaction of bringing it to the Promised Land and see the fulfilment of his task, or one of his major aims? The well-known answer is—no! Surprisingly, he is told by God that he is to die on the threshold of the Promised Land, but will not be allowed to enter it.

Seemingly, this development could have been regarded as the coincidence of Moses' age and historical circumstances. According to the biblical story, he reached the age of one hundred and twenty—he had started his leadership at the age of eighty. If, however, we make allowance for the longevity of many biblical characters, this need not be the crucial factor.

Moreover, the biblical narrative does not intend to present the death of Moses at this peculiar juncture as coincidental, but as a deliberate decision of God. It makes us fully aware of the personal tragedy—or even iniquity—involved in this timing. It tells us that Moses himself interceded with God about his fate: "I pray thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that good mountain, and Lebanon" (Deuteronomy 3:25). Yet, God rejects Moses' plea and only allows Moses to see the land from the peak of a mountain, but not to enter it: "behold it with thine eyes: for thou shalt not go over this Jordan" (3:27). The task of leading the people across to the land falls on the shoulders of Joshua.

In this context there is an inkling of an explanation for this turn of events. Moses tells the people: "And the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not bear me" (Deuteronomy 3:26). This explanation is somewhat enigmatic, especially as the Hebrew word *le'ma'ankhem*—like the English phrase "for your sakes"—can mean "because of you," or "in order to do you good." The first, causal sense—which is the commonly accepted explanation—would indicate that Moses was refused permission to enter the land and incurred divine wrath which had been provoked by the people, even though he had been blameless. To give it a naturalistic interpretation, it would mean that the difficulties the people made in opposing Moses' judgement and leadership prevented him from accomplishing his task of leading them

to the Promised Land before his time came. The second, teleological sense would suggest that God prevented Moses from crossing the Jordan out of concern for the well-being of the people. This, indeed, would in a way be more plausible: if the old generation was doomed not to get into the Promised Land, it might be a consolation for them that their leader would share their bitter lot.

Nonetheless, Moses in the biblical story sounds saddened by his destiny, and the homiletic literature echoes Moses' disappointment, adding to it a sense of indignation at the iniquity of the Lord, or of destiny. It puts into the mouth of Moses the following argument:

“Master of the universe, You know well how I laboured and suffered to make Israel believe in you, how I toiled till I established for them laws and commandments. I thought: as I had watched their afflictions, I shall witness their good fortune. But now that it has arrived, you are telling me, ‘thou shalt not go over this Jordan’.” (Deuteronomy 3:27). “You turn your own teaching into a lie. For it is written, ‘at his day thou shalt give him his hire’.” (Deuteronomy 24:15). “Is this the payment for a labour of forty years that I have toiled to make a saint and faithful nation?”¹⁴

If the lot of Moses is usually perceived as historical irony, if not outright iniquity, one could also speculate that it is charity in disguise. As subsequent history shows, the entry into the Promised Land and its settlement by the tribes of Israel was not an instant fulfilment of the dream, but a laborious process of several generations with occasional serious setbacks. The book of Judges tells the story eloquently, and even the establishment of monarchy did not produce an unqualified political success. If we extend the notion of the Promised Land to encompass not only the political achievement, but also the moral transformation and perfection of the people, the reality again proved to be not a simple act of fulfilment. The tribes of Israel, the people of Israel, went through various stages of social-moral progress, strewn with failings and regressions. The quest for a true “holy nation” may well have proved a never-ending process and its full achievement an eschato-

¹⁴ Translated from the selection of legends in *Sefer Ha'agada*, arranged by H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitzky, Tel-Aviv, Dvir, p. 77a.

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logical expectation. Thus, by dying before crossing the Jordan, Moses may have been spared a bitter disillusionment. Viewing the good land from the peak of a mountain, or seeing the perfect society from the lofty summit of a prophetic plateau, spared Moses another confrontation with an imperfect reality.¹⁵

If this interpretation of the biblical story is accepted, it does not mean that the conclusion to be reached is that the work of a great leader like Moses is futile. For, being credited with consolidating an enslaved society into a free nation and laying the foundations for a just and righteous community, makes the achievement of Moses monumental. Only that the final objectives of his leadership are of such dimensions that they cannot be attained within a generation or two, and so the leader, whose life is limited to one hundred and twenty years, cannot possibly see his dream come true. To imagine that it is about to be fulfilled just across the Jordan is, for the leader as an individual, a consoling illusion.

Curiously, the biblical story, briefly mentioning the burial of Moses in a valley in the land of Moab, adds: "And no man has known the place of his burial to this day" (Deuteronomy 34:6). This anonymity in death is in stark contrast to the Israelite—and virtually universal—usage of marking the grave, usually imprinting the name of the dead on such a durable material as stone to establish a permanent reminiscence. The more prominent the deceased person, the greater is likely to be the monument put up in his memory. Yet, Moses' place of burial is deliberately and emphatically stated to be unknown.

The meaning of this peculiar circumstance—if it is not deemed accidental—could be twofold. One reason for the deliberate oblivion could be the intent to prevent a hero or a saint worship, which in the case of a man of the stature of Moses might have bordered on idolatry. Such a cult would not have been in line with the rigorous monotheistic tradition of Israel. It would also have been offensive to the memory of Moses, "the humblest of all the human beings on earth." Thus, the ignorance of his burial place saved him the posthumous perversion of his teaching and

¹⁵ Cf. Lincoln Steffens, *Moses in Red: The Revolt of Israel as a Typical Revolution*, Philadelphia, Dorrance & Co., 1926, pp. 143-144.

profound feelings—a lot not spared to some other great religious teachers.

There may be another—contrary—interpretation of this conclusion to the story of Moses. A leader of this nature and stature cannot be confined to a grave and a monument of stone. The monument he established is a new nation striving at moral perfection. Compared with this living monument, a stone marker is insignificant and trivial.

That two opposite interpretations can be given to the same episode need not be surprising: it is characteristic of the suggestiveness of the terse biblical narration. Nor are the two interpretations contradicting, for the monumental achievement of Moses is compatible with, or even complementary to, the intent to prevent a cult—which, indeed, would have undermined this achievement.

While Moses' tomb remained unknown, he was given an epitaph, a succinct evaluation of his personality and role, in the concluding verses of the Pentateuch. The central statement here is: "And there arose not another prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10).¹⁶ Thus, Moses is judged to be the greatest of prophets—the shapers of Israel's soul. The justification for this evaluation is in the directness of contact with God, which the phrase "whom the Lord knew face to face" seems to indicate. In other words, Moses, above any other man, was close to God, and therefore his message to Israel was closest to the intent of God. If the notion of God symbolizes the absolute right, Moses came closest to have conveyed it and instituted it in the life of the community of Israel of his time and across time, on to the future generations. Isn't this the quintessence of the biblical perception of leadership?

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¹⁶ The King James' version reads, rather clumsily: "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses."