

# **Moses — Father of All the Prophets**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat B'haalot'cha* (Numbers 8:1-12:16)**

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*“B'haalot'cha et-ha-neirot el-mul pnei ha-m'norah ya'iru shiv'at ha-neirot.”*  
*“When you set up the seven lamps, let them light the area in front of the menorah.”*

Disaster strikes and many die. In this case the victims are the mixed multitude freed from Egyptian slavery, wandering in the wilderness, ungrateful to God at a time when God was a visible part of their daily lives. Moses knows about this tragedy before it happens because God remarkably speaks to him “mouth to mouth.”<sup>1</sup> Such was the intensity of Moses' closeness to God that, according to the Rambam, no other mortal has ever exceeded — or will ever exceed — the prophetic stature of Moses.<sup>2</sup>

Several times in this parashah God speaks to Moses. On one occasion, in Numbers 8:1-4, God tells Moses to speak to Aaron and instruct him how to make the menorah, but God does not speak to Aaron directly. In Numbers 9:1-3, God tells Moses exactly how to celebrate the Passover. When some Israelites have a question about a technicality, Moses replies, “stand by and let me hear what instructions Adonai gives about you.”<sup>3</sup> Rashi comments, “Fortunate is the mortal who is so confident, for whenever he wished, he could speak with the Shechinah.”<sup>4</sup>

In the wilderness, the Israelites observe God's constant presence in the form of a cloud over the Tabernacle during the day and the likeness of fire at night. When the cloud lifted, the Israelites would break camp until the cloud settled. “On a sign from Adonai they made camp, and on a sign from Adonai they broke camp; they observed Adonai's mandate at Adonai's bidding through Moses.”<sup>5</sup> According to Rashi, “when the Israelites traveled, the cloud ... did not move on until Moses declared, ‘Rise up, O Lord.’ The pillar of cloud ... would, not depart until Moses declared, ‘Return, O Lord, to the myriads of Israel's thousands.’”<sup>6</sup> Scripture lists the names of participants in the first such journey to see this interaction between God and Moses.<sup>7</sup>

At three locations during the wanderings in this parashah, God is angered. Moses plays an important role in each episode in ways that further reveal the extent of Moses' knowledge of God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tanakh*; Jewish Publication Society; First Edition; 1985; Numbers 12:8.

<sup>2</sup> *Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith*.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 9:8.

<sup>4</sup> *Sifrei Beha'alothecha* 1:22.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 9:23.

<sup>6</sup> *Melecheth Hamishkan* ch. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 10:13-28.

At Taberah, the mixed multitude provoked God.<sup>8</sup> “The people took to complaining bitterly before Adonai. Adonai heard and was incensed: a fire of Adonai broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to Adonai, and the fire died down.”<sup>9</sup> Here Moses directly intercedes to help sinners.

Next at Kivrot Hata'avah, the Israelites cry out for meat instead of manna, and whine, “Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt,” where we had all of the delicacies we desired<sup>10</sup> Distraught by having to deal with the chronic complainers, Moses tells God that the burden of caring for this entire people is too great for him. In his weakness, he pleads with God to kill him instead.<sup>11</sup> Responding to Moses' plea, God distributes a portion of Moses' responsibilities among 70 elders of Israel.<sup>12</sup> God then comes down<sup>13</sup> and prophesizes to Moses and, through Moses' spirit, to the seventy elders.

God's prophesy is that the people will have meat to eat for a whole month, “until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you.”<sup>14</sup> In frustration, Moses questions if any amount, no matter how large, could satiate the rabble rousers.<sup>15</sup> A wind then sweeps in far more quail than the multitude of 600,000 can possibly eat. While they gorge themselves, God strikes the gluttonous complainers with a severe plague.<sup>16</sup>

Feeling that he was an inadequate leader, Moses disassociated himself from the people. Moses begged for help or for death rather than continue to see himself as a wretched failure. In contrast, God was very angry with the people. Acting as a stern parent, God provided the meat in an exaggerated overabundance and then severely punished those who rebelled against Moses' leadership.

Further proving Moses' superior prophetic powers, God used Moses' spirit to enable the seventy elders to prophesize. The entire multitude then saw the prophesy come true with the miracle of sudden, massive amounts of meat and the rabble rousers' subsequent punishment.

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<sup>8</sup> Sifrei Beha'alothecha 1:42:1.

<sup>9</sup> Numbers 11:1-3.

<sup>10</sup> Numbers 11:4-10.

<sup>11</sup> Sifre Beha'alothecha 1:42:14.

<sup>12</sup> “This is one of ten descents recorded in the Torah,” [Sifrei Beha'alothecha 1:42:17].

<sup>13</sup> One of the ten times in the Torah that God is said to descend from on high.

<sup>14</sup> Numbers 11:10-20.

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 11:21.

<sup>16</sup> Numbers 11:10-34.

Finally, at Hazerot, God hears Miriam and Aaron speak *lashon harah*<sup>17</sup> about Moses. God calls Moses, Aaron, and Miriam together and tells Aaron and Miriam that with Moses, “I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of Adonai.”<sup>18</sup> Incensed at their behavior, God strikes Miriam with *tzara’at*<sup>19</sup>. Aaron pleads with Moses for help since as one with *tzara’at* she defiles those around her and “a relative may not examine plague marks [symptoms of *tzara’at*], and there is no other kohen in the world [who is not related to Miriam].”<sup>20</sup> Moses cries out, “O God, pray heal her!”<sup>21,22</sup> God heals Miriam after she is shut out of the camp for seven days, and all of the people wait for her miraculous recovery. Here all three siblings, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, speak to God. Yet, God specifically teaches Aaron and Miriam that Moses is at a level that surpasses that of all other prophets.

*Parashah B’haalot’cha* wonderfully illustrates the heights of Moses’ prophecy. God speaks to Moses more clearly than to any other prophet.

Amazingly, the communication is bi-directional. Not only does God instruct Moses, but Moses is free to request clarification. Not only does God use Moses as a channel of communication to the Israelites, but God tempers God’s harsh decrees based on Moses’ pleas. Not only does God signal when to break camp, but God also waits to proceed until Moses replies. God speaks and Moses listens. Moses speaks and God listens.

Moses’ spirit is so great that God uses it to prophesy to the seventy elders. Would they otherwise lack the capacity? To Aaron and Miriam, God enunciates Moses’ supreme prophetic powers.

The Rambam calls Moses the father of all the prophets before and after him and says that Moses achieved a greater knowledge of the Almighty than anyone before or since.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gossip or evil talk about another.

<sup>18</sup> Numbers 12:8.

<sup>19</sup> Snow-white scales; leprosy.

<sup>20</sup> Tanchuma Tzav 13.

<sup>21</sup> Numbers 12:11-13.

<sup>22</sup> “[This is one of only] four places Moses asked the Lord to answer him if He would accede or not.” [Sifrei Beha’alothecha 1:42:13].

<sup>23</sup> Maimonides’ 13 Principles of Faith.