

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Va'era)

What makes a great leader?

Ask a large enough group of Israelis who they think of when asked to think of a Jewish leader, and someone will come up with the name Menachem Begin.

A leader of the Jewish underground Irgun in pre-State Israel, and later Prime Minister of Israel, famous for ordering both the bombing of the British Command Center at the King David Hotel as well as the decision to bomb the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, Begin was the most wanted Jewish underground commander in Palestine until the birth of the State of Israel.

Eventually he won international acclaim as the first Israeli leader to sign a peace accord with an Arab State (Egypt) in 1978, and became the first Israeli to win the Nobel Peace Prize that same year. What was the secret of Menachem Begin's leadership?

Some would say his fiery determination: he was a powerful orator and mesmerizing public figure. Others would say his adherence to his beliefs and principles.

He was the first conspicuously observant prime minister. It was said that he felt at home in both the Knesset (Israel's Parliament) and the Beit Knesset (the synagogue). He was strictly kosher, and felt comfortable with a prayer book. In fact, there is a story told regarding his famous weekly Torah study sessions:

Every Saturday night Begin hosted a Bible study discussion on the weekly Torah portion. Leading Bible scholars and archeologists, as well as their most talented graduate students were invited to give presentations. In the middle of one heated discussion about a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy, Begin received a message that the U.S. President was on the phone. Begin supposedly replied, "Tell him I'm in a very important meeting and to call back in two hours!"

But there was another character trait in which Begin excelled, which he actually shared with no less than Moshe himself.

There is a fascinating Midrash (*Tanhuma Vaera* 6) that suggests that the tribe of Levi was never actually enslaved. In fact, although this is not implicitly expressed in the Torah itself, it would certainly explain why Aaron was able to go out into the desert and greet Moshe. Many suggest that this elevated free status was afforded the Levites as they were the Priestly class and thus, even in Egypt, the Egyptians whose priests were considered the elite, afforded the Levites a special status. The problem with this approach is that the Levites seem to only have achieved priestly status after the debacle of the Golden calf.

Rav Yonosan Eybeschutz (1690-1764) in his *Tiferes Yonasan*, suggests that Pharaoh learned through his astrologers that the eventual savior of the Jewish people would be a descendant of the Tribe of Levi. But it was highly unlikely that a person who was never enslaved would lead a slave rebellion. After all, why would a person who was not actually oppressed risk his status quo to lead a revolt? (One might suggest this as part of the reason so many millions of Germans did not rise up against the Nazis during the Holocaust...) So Pharaoh cleverly let the Levites remain free.

Indeed, after Moshe kills an Egyptian (last week's portion) and escapes to Midian, one wonders why the Egyptians never pursued him and never attempted to bring him to 'justice'. Hunting down the enemies of the State is the hallmark of any good dictatorship, yet the Torah never suggests Moshe was hiding, and he seems to live at peace in Midian for forty years.

In fact, the last thing a fugitive wants to do is draw public attention to himself, yet that is exactly what Moshe does in confronting the Midianite shepherds at the well (*Shemot* (Exodus) 20:16-19) after his escape from Egypt. He does not even hide his identity to Yitro's daughters (ibid. v. 19) clearly allowing himself to be identified as an Egyptian.

So why doesn't Pharaoh find Moshe and try to kill him in Midian? After all, if you are trying to stifle any future potential leader, who more likely than someone who grew up as a Prince in the palace and is now identified as a Jew? Perhaps Pharaoh assumes that even a former prince living a peaceful life in Midian would be unlikely to come back to Egypt to lead a slave rebellion, much less be accepted by that same slave population.

Indeed, this seems to be borne out by subsequent events: When Moshe does return to Egypt to free the Jewish people:

"... they did not listen to Moshe because of ... hard labor." (Shemot 6:9)

But Pharaoh underestimated Moshe's greatest quality; the secret of a true leader: the ability to feel someone else's pain.

Moshe begins his journey as a leader when he "... went out to his brethren and saw their suffering..." (Shemot 2:11). Incredibly, despite growing up as an Egyptian Prince; he sees the Jews as his brethren, and feels their pain. And he risks everything to save one Jewish slave from an Egyptian taskmaster.

And you would think Moshe would have learned it's not worth it. (In fact, rabbinic tradition suggests that the Jew he saw beating another Jew who ultimately turned him in to Pharaoh was none other than the Jew he had saved from the Egyptian the day before!) And yet, when Moshe arrives in Midian, he does the same thing: he cannot stand by while the Midianite shepherds (ibid. 2:16-17) oppress Yitro's daughters though he does not appear to even know who they are!

In fact, when Moshe finally comes back down to Egypt, only to see Pharaoh deny his request for freedom and make it even harder for the Jews, he actually takes G-d Himself to task in defense of the Jewish people!

"Why have you made things even worse for the Jews? ... since coming to Pharaoh, you have made it worse for this people and have not saved them!" (ibid. 6:22-23)

It's only been a day, and Moshe is trying to get the most powerful empire on Earth to release a massive slave population, yet he cannot bear that another day goes by whilst the Jews continue to suffer....

Indeed, in Midian he becomes a shepherd; how painful it must have been for a prince of Egypt, raised in the palace as a grandson of the great Pharaoh, to find himself herding sheep. Yet no complaint escapes Moshe's lips. In fact, Jewish tradition (*Shemot Rabbah* 2: 2) suggests that it is not accidental that so many great Jewish leaders (Avraham Yitzchak Yaakov, Joseph and his brothers, King David...) were shepherds; the shepherd learns compassion for his flock....

Indeed, there is a deep lesson here about the nature of Jewish leadership: a true leader feels a sense of responsibility for those who are most vulnerable; and never gives up on his flock.

Perhaps because he himself was imprisoned by the soviets as a young man in 1940 (he was then 27) subsequently spending years in hiding from the British with a price on his head, Begin always maintained this sensitivity to the weakest amongst us. In fact, he was one of the very few world leaders who openly welcomed the Vietnamese "boat people" fleeing for their lives from the North Vietnamese Communist takeover of their country.

After the fall of Saigon North Vietnam finally over-ran South Vietnam and began a reign of terror. An estimated one million people were imprisoned without trial or charges, hundreds of thousands were sent to

're-education centers' where they were tortured and abused; executions and rapes were a daily occurrence and 165,000 people were murdered. Most of the nations of the world turned a blind eye.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese were desperate to get out and many attempted escape by sea. Often in overcrowded leaky and dangerous boats, and facing raging seas, Communist patrol boats, and merciless pirates, many perished at sea, disappearing without a trace if not captured by pirates and brutally robbed and raped and murdered. But for these hapless refugees there was simply nowhere else to go.

One group of refugees, crammed in a small boat for nearly a week, without food and water, lost and adrift in the South China Sea, was desperate. Ship after ship – from East Germany, Norway, Japan and Panama – passed them by, ignoring their desperate SOS signals, in violation of the most basic code of the sea.

Then on June 10, 1977, an Israeli freighter ship called the Yuvali, headed for Taiwan, saw the beleaguered refugee boat. Captain Meir Tadmor telegraphed Haifa for permission to take them aboard, even though his ship carried only enough life rafts and jackets for his 30-member crew. The refugees hadn't had anything to eat or drink for days.

There were sixteen children under the age of ten, and the group included doctors, nurses and businessmen, yet the Yuvali found no port willing to accept its surplus "cargo." Captain Tadmor made an unscheduled stop in Hong Kong to get the refugees desperately needed medical attention; authorities in the British crown colony refused to allow them ashore on the grounds that the Yuvali was not scheduled to call at Hong Kong. In Taiwan, the authorities put a police cordon around the ship to prevent anyone from getting off. The refugees were similarly denied refuge at Yokohama, Japan.



Menachem Begin welcomes Vietnamese boat children to their new "home," Israel. (June 1977)

But the story evoked strong memories for Begin who recalled only too well how many Jews were turned away from the shores of Palestine and the nations of the world and sent back to Nazi Germany in the Holocaust.

Menachem Begin had only just been elected, and his first act as Israel's new prime minister was to offer asylum and resettlement to the Vietnamese. Only then did Taiwan allow the group to disembark, where they were whisked to Sung Shan Airport for a flight to Israel.

Explaining his decision to then-U.S. President Carter he said simply:

"We have not forgotten the boat with 900 Jews [the St. Louis], having left Germany in the last weeks before the

Second World War... traveling from harbor to harbor, from country to country, crying out for refuge. They were refused... "

(Israel granted them citizenship, full rights and government-subsidized apartments.)

As we remember the miraculous story of the Jewish people's Exodus from Egypt replete with incredible miracles and culminating on the splitting of the sea, let us not forget that what made the greatest Jewish leader in history so great, more than his willingness to confront G-d Himself, was his ability to remain empathetic to the pain and challenges of every individual he cared for, down to the very last and even lost, sheep.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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