

kol chovevei TORAH

PARSHA PONDERINGS

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Kol Chovevei Torah is a publication of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. YCT's mission is to professionally train open Orthodox rabbis who will lead the Jewish community and shape its spiritual and intellectual character in consonance with modern and open Orthodox values and commitments.

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Upcoming Events

° Tues. Oct. 17th
Henry Guttman memorial
Lecture: Rabbi Dov Linzer
"Halakha and Science:
Strategies and Sympa-
thies" at the Hebrew
Institute of Riverdale, NY

° Wed.'s Oct. 18th–Nov.
1st Rabbi Dov Weiss
"Different Concepts of
God: An In-depth Explo-
ration" at the Latin Upper
School in Chicago, IL

Moshe's Unique Prophecy

By Rabbi David Almog and Lisa Bennett Almog

"V'lo kam navi od b'Yisrael k'Moshe asher yedao Hashem panim el panim."

'Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses -- whom the Lord singled out, face to face." (*Devarim* 34:10)

At the end of the Torah we read about the uniqueness of Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy. Most members of our community are familiar with this concept, representing one of the commonly understood fundamental doctrines of our tradition recited regularly in the liturgical poem *Yigdal*. Classically, the idea of Moshe Rabbeinu's unique prophetic abilities has been interpreted as a corollary to the uniqueness of the content of his prophetic experiences, namely the Torah itself. In other words, we needed a very special prophet to reveal the Torah to Israel. Clearly, this concept is one way in which we guard our tradition; much like other faith traditions' claims that their central texts were composed by whomever their faith holds to be the greatest of prophets. Perhaps though, apart from maintaining doctrinal integrity, it is equally if not more important that our basic beliefs shape the character of Jewish spirituality in a manner relevant to how we live our lives as Jews today. For that reason we ask the question: What does it mean for us as Jews that there will never be another prophet like Moshe?

In *Bemidbar* 12, the Torah describes the incident in which Miriam and Aaron, Moshe's siblings, speak ill about him in regards to his wife. Oddly, the content of their conversation seemed to have little to do with marital concerns, instead we see that they said "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" (12:2). God responded to their criticism saying,

..."Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. ⁷ Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. ⁸ With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!" (12:6-8)

God proceeded to punish Miriam with *tzara'at* as a result of her *lashon harah* or "evil speech."

Our Sages of Blessed Memory, in *Sifrei Zuta* (12:1 *Va'tidaber*) described the event as follows. After Moshe had just appointed the Elders, Tzipporah, Moshe's wife, overheard Miriam saying 'how joyous for these men and how joyous for their wives!' Tzipporah responded harshly stating "woe unto their wives." She explained that from the moment he began speaking with God, Moshe separated himself from her. It was for this reason that Miriam and Aaron spoke ill about their brother, saying that they too were prophets, but felt no need to abandon their spouses. Indeed, we see that Moshe was not only an absentee husband, but it appears that he had difficulties as a father as well. In *Shemot* 19 the Torah teaches that Moshe's father-in-law Yitro had to bring Moshe's family to him.

How can we understand Miriam's criticism? Alternatively, how can we understand Moshe's shortcomings as a family man? *Shemot Rabbah* (1:13) records a story of Miriam's passion to the commitment of marriage and the future of Israel. When Amram, Miriam's father, heard of the Pharaoh's decree to throw all newborn boys of Israel into the Nile, he made

the decision to leave his wife. As a leader of the people, his actions inspired the multitude of Jewish men to separate from their wives as well. Miriam decried the divorce as being worse than the decree of Pharaoh, saying "Pharaoh only decreed [the destruction] of the boys, you have decreed [the destruction] of the boys and the girls."

The midrashic presentation of Miriam's criticism must be viewed in this context. Miriam had already experienced what was potentially both the personal and national calamity of her own father and leader of Israel leaving his wife. The question is what was different about Moshe's decision as opposed to his father Amram's?

In *Gemara Yavamot 62a*, the *beraita* states that Moshe came to the decision to separate from his wife, and that God agreed with this decision. The reason given is that, before the giving of the Torah, the people were told to separate from their spouses for three days ostensibly to become ritually pure (*Shemot 19:15*). Moshe reasoned that, just as the people would be receiving this revelation from the God at a set time and that they had to refrain from physical intimacy, therefore in his own case, when God could call out to him for personal communication at any moment, he should refrain from such intimacy at all times. Moshe was in a unique situation where he was constantly in contact with God and therefore needed to maintain a type of personal spiritual purity beyond the call of the average prophet. Miriam's criticism was based on her projection of her own past experiences and her lack of understanding of Moshe's situation, leading to misplaced anger and condemnation. As we learn in *Pirkei Avot (2:4)* "Al tadin et chavercha ad shetagia l'mkoma." "Do not judge your fellow until you reach his place." Despite the truth of Miriam's convictions in regards to family commitment, Moshe was in an extenuating circumstance that she could not judge.

Nevertheless, the stories of Moshe and Miriam do not end there. A brief glance at what became of the families of these two great Jewish leaders is telling. According to *Shemot Rabbah 1:17*, Miriam married Calev and that through their union, she became the matriarch for the *malchut*, the line of kings starting with David and ending with the future *mashiach*. Moshe Rabbeinu's descendants fair much worse. In *Shoftim 18:30*, we are presented with an incident of idolatry practiced by the tribe of Dan surrounding the idol of Micah. "The Danites set up the sculptured image for themselves; and Yehonatan son of Gershom son of Menashe, and his descendants, served as priests to the Danite tribe until the land went into exile." There is a curious scribal tradition that, in spelling the name Menashe, the *nun* is superscript, written at a level higher than the rest of the word. Rashi, and indeed many classical commentaries, record that

the reason it is written that way is because the *nun* did not belong and that the name of the priest's grandfather was Moshe who indeed had a son named Gershom, but out of respect for our greatest teacher, we call him Menashe in this instance. Whereas the long line of descendants of Miriam were kings of Israel and will eventually culminate in the redeemer of the world, the long line of descendants of Moshe Rabbeinu were idolatrous priests.

Perhaps the reasoning behind the idea that there will never again be a prophet in Israel on the level of Moshe is based in our Torah's deep sense of spiritual realism. The model of Moshe's relationship with the divine transcendent God is amazing and inspirational, but, in the end, Moshe's uniqueness was a *chesed* to *Am Yisrael*. In order to receive the revelation of God, Moshe was asked to sacrifice his basic worldly responsibilities. The greatness of his spiritual encounters in no way preserved him from the true consequences of this sacrifice. His inability to be a good husband resulted in his children turning away from his teachings. Miriam's model, while not resulting in the type of direct spiritual awakening that normal people can only dream about, was the only means that would allow true Jewish continuity. This is emblematic of the basic 'this worldly' ethic of Jewish spirituality, as opposed to the type of asceticism Moshe practiced. *V'lo kam navi od b'Yisrael k'Moshe* is not saying Moshe was inherently better, but rather that our task in the world is not to purify ourselves of it, but to live in it responsibly, drawing Godliness into the mundane. In that way, we must be aware of the realistic consequences of our choices in this world, even when we feel that they bring us closer to God.

Rabbi David Almog is a YCT graduate and the Campus Rabbi of the Columbia/Barnard Hillel. His wife, Lisa Bennett Almog is a Drisha Scholar and a teacher at the Heschel High School in NYC.



Yeshivat Chovevei Torah
The Henry Gutman Memorial Lecture

**"Halakha and Science:
Strategies and Sympathies"**
with Rabbi Dov Linzer
Rosh HaYeshiva, YCT Rabbinical School

When:
Tuesday, October 17th, 2006
7:30pm

Location:
Hebrew Institute of Riverdale
3700 Henry Hudson Parkway
Bronx, NY 10463

Admission is free and open to the public.

The lecture is a program of the Henry Guttman Memorial Lecture Series on Modern Orthodoxy at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School established through the generosity of Henry's friends.