

# MOSHE HAD NO CHOICE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Meshech Chochmah: We will be introduced to Moshe early in the *parshah*. Understanding his role and his uniqueness plays an important part in our relationship to all of Torah.

Know that Moshe's prophecy differed from that of all other prophets. We relied upon all other prophets because they established their credentials as speaking for Hashem through signs and miracles that they predicted and performed, or through a previously credentialed prophet certifying another *navi*, as Eliyahu did for Elisha.

As the Rambam<sup>[2]</sup> writes, belief that is born of miracles is ultimately deficient. The working of a miracle does not prove that the miracle worker speaks in the Name of G-d. (Chananyah ben Azur<sup>[3]</sup> demonstrates this. He was a proper, established *navi*, according to the gemara,<sup>[4]</sup> but later became a false prophet.) Rather, the Torah commands us to obey a prophet who has predicted and performed miracles on multiple occasions. It assigns legal credibility to such a person, even though what he tells us may not in fact be a message he received from Hashem.<sup>[5]</sup> He is presumed to speak the truth, much as we rely on two eyewitnesses, even though we realize that witnesses occasionally lie.

Moshe was the sole exception. Hashem elevated the entire nation at Sinai. They rose to the level of prophecy. In that state, they witnessed Hashem speaking directly to Moshe. This explains the causal relationship in a later *pasuk*:<sup>[6]</sup> "I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.' The end of the verse seems to be a non sequitur of the beginning. The plain sense meaning of all of this, however, is that because they all prophetically witnessed the conversation between Hashem and Moshe, his role as the Divinely appointed conduit of Hashem's wishes could never and would never be doubted. While all other prophets could be challenged by other miracle workers, no number of them would ever be able to cast doubt on a single letter of Moshe's Torah.

Actually, however, this does not follow! While the people knew of Moshe's reliability at the instant they saw him conversing with Hashem, how could they know what he would do or say in the future? Perhaps he would exercise his free will, and interject his own thoughts and ideas later in his career! Chazal<sup>[7]</sup> tell us that all is caused by Heaven other than the fear of Heaven – meaning that humans make free-willed choices without interference from Above. Even G-d's knowledge of the future does not interfere with the human capacity to make choices without compulsion.

We are left with an inescapable conclusion: After *ma'amad Har Sinai*, Moshe ceased to possess the

freedom to choose! He lived on in a state comparable to the angels, who exercise no choice between good and evil.

This is less surprising than it sounds. Chazal<sup>[8]</sup> speak of Dovid taking considerable pride when he finished writing his Tehillim. He believed that no one had ever done a better job. Then he encountered a frog, which claimed to indeed do the job far better than Dovid could. Every second of the frog's life was perforce a song of praise, in that he was incapable of anything but doing the bidding of his Master. Dovid, endowed with free will, could never match that constancy.

While Dovid accepted the *mussar* value of that encounter, we can still appreciate the advantage that the *bechirah*-endowed human being has over the frog. Our struggle to vanquish *bechirah* – to rise above the temptation to choose evil – affords us opportunities for spiritual advancement that no animal will ever know. (This was Chazal's intention in teaching<sup>[9]</sup> that if one who learns not with the intention of putting his learning into practice, it would be better if his embryonic sac had been turned on its face. In other words, there was no purpose for him to come into this world. We do not spend our time here in order to reach new levels of understanding. The *neshamah* comprehended far more than we do in its previous state, before it descended from Heaven. A person who learns for the sake of the knowledge alone, and not for the purpose of turning his knowledge into action, has gained nothing. Had his embryo's development been stopped, he would have had access to even greater knowledge! Our journey in this world has no purpose other than the vanquishing of our desires. Learning alone does not confer any advantage, unless it is the kind of learning (i.e. when pursued with the intent to implement it) that itself demonstrates a victory over the *yetzer hora*.)

Given that *bechirah*'s value is not absolute but instrumental, we understand that Moshe got to a point where it was of no further use to him. He had reached the summit of accomplishment in pushing back against the choice of evil. Having purified his physical nature to the full extent possible, he had turned it into a spiritual instrument through which Hashem and His truth could be discerned. *Bechirah* at this point would have been a distraction. It had served its purpose in facilitating his growth. Having achieved that growth, *bechirah* became irrelevant to his needs.

None of this applied to the rest of the people. They had been elevated to a level of prophecy, of clear understanding, only for the purpose of establishing the authenticity of Moshe's message so that it would never be doubted. They had not struggled up the mountain of human striving to arrive at the peak as Moshe did. Their absolute clarity at Sinai was not something they had earned, but was given to them in order to firmly establish the rule of Torah. (This clarity is what Chazal really meant<sup>[10]</sup> when they spoke of Hashem lifting the mountain over their heads to tell them that if they refused to accept the Torah, they would perish. The "mountain" means the incontrovertible understanding that without Torah, Hashem would have no purpose for the world, and everything would cease to exist. They understood so perfectly, that they rationally had no other choice but to accept it. Failing to do so would mean the end of existence.)

For all the people besides Moshe, *bechirah* remained the key element in their game-plan for growth. Their moment of sublime, angelic existence had achieved its purpose. They would now have to revert to their previous role of battling some of the options that *bechirah* would put on the table. Their experience at Sinai momentarily stripped them of their *bechirah*. They comprehended the nature and role of Torah so perfectly that their very understanding forced them to accept the Torah! But without *bechirah*, there is no opportunity for reward. The rest of the nation could enjoy their moment of angelic existence in order to establish the reliability of Moshe – but they needed to revert to ordinary existence thereafter.

This is what the Torah meant by "Return to your tents."<sup>[11]</sup> The tent is the body, together with the myriad forces, wants and desires that surround the *neshamah* that it hosts. This tent provides abundant room for *bechirah*, and for reward and punishment. Moshe, however, was told "You shall stand here with Me." He did not revert to the ordinary human state, but remained aloof from all physical needs and distractions. This allowed him to comprehend things with uncommon clarity – albeit, without *bechirah*. (Freed of any attachment to the physical, he separated from his wife.)

For all others, the brief moment of elevation at Sinai served to clarify what would be most important for the continuity of Torah – the role of Moshe as faithful conduit of the Divine Will.

<sup>[1]</sup> Based on Meshech Chochmah, introduction to Shemos

<sup>[2]</sup> Yesodei HaTorah 8:1

<sup>[3]</sup> Yirmiyahu 28:1-17

<sup>[4]</sup> Sanhedrin 90A

<sup>[5]</sup> Rambam, Yesodei HaTorah 7:7

<sup>[6]</sup> Shemos 19:9

<sup>[7]</sup> Berachos 33B

<sup>[8]</sup> Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 103

<sup>[9]</sup> Yerushalmi Shabbos 1:2

<sup>[10]</sup> Shabbos 88A

<sup>[11]</sup> Devarim 5:27