

AND THIS SHALL BE THE SIGN THAT I HAVE SENT YOU: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INAUGURATION OF MOSHEH

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

Dear Haverim,

As of this past Motza'ei Shabbat, I've been podcasting a daily "mini-cast" (5-10 minutes) on the text of each day's "Aliyah"; such that by Friday morning, all 7 "Aliyot" of the Parashah will be "cast". You can find the podcasts at www.etshalom.com/podcast or post this line into your podcast subscriber: <http://www.etshalom.com/podcast/podcast.php> and receive the 'casts daily.

B'virkat haTorah,

Yitzchak Etshalom

I

"AND MOSHEH WAS TENDING THE FLOCK..."

Mosheh Rabbenu, to whom we are introduced in this week's Parashah, is the first Navi, properly speaking. Even though God had previously spoken with various individuals (Adam, Havah, Kayin, Noach, Avraham, Hagar, Avimelekh, Yitzhak, Ya'akov and Lavan) as documented in Sefer B'resheet, these were all "personal" communications. In other words, every one of these people received God's word (in some cases in a vision or via an angel) but they were never instructed to transmit that Divine communiqué further. N'vu'ah in the sense of Divine Agency, which continues to be the purpose of N'vu'ah throughout the rest of the T'nakh, begins with Mosheh. Mosheh is thus termed "Av laN'vi'im" - the father of prophets (Midrash T'hilim 90:8).

Mosheh's inauguration does not take place in his early years; rather, Mosheh is nearly 80 when God first speaks with him. The passage that includes the setting (three verses) and dialogue between God and Mosheh comprises one parashah, consisting of 39 verses (3:1-4:17). The scene takes place on Har Horev/Sinai, resulting from Mosheh's tending of Yitro's flock. He sees the wondrous vision of the enflamed bush that is not consumed - and turns to attend to this sight. At that point, God calls to him and he is inaugurated into N'vuah.

An in-depth analysis of the text demands significantly more space than this forum allows for. We will, instead, attend to the structural nuances of this inaugural passage, identifying patterns and utilizing that analysis to explain several macro-questions relating to the agency of Mosheh and his

career. The essay will span two issues; this first one will delineate the outline of the dialogue, observing the local use of those rhetorical tools that are commonly found in T'nakh. We will also point out several themes which course through the dialogue and identify the development and unfolding of those ideas. One of the central issues which we will address is the unique position of Mosheh among all N'vi'im, as elucidated in Bamidbar 12 (and as codified by Maimonides as faith-principle #7) - and his development to that unequalled stature.

Although we will quote the relevant passages in full, it will be helpful to peruse this study with Humash in hand.

II

FIRST OBSERVATIONS

Before even attending to the structure of the dialogue, a curious textual feature (which repeats in one other passage in T'nakh) appears here.

We are accustomed to thinking about this dialogue as geared towards the redemption of the B'nei Yisra'el from Egypt - and the confrontational nature of the process which will ultimately bring them home to Eretz Yisra'el. It is instructive to note that most of the dialogue is not directed towards Mosheh's task (i.e. the actual "Sh'lichut"), rather to various aspects of God's reassurance, support and assistance in the performance and success of that agency. There is a rhetorical device that, once we are familiar with its use, will help us identify the main theme of this critical selection.

The word that shows up most frequently in these 39 verses appears 14 times, which (as a multiple of 7) marks it as a leitwort or "key word" (Milah Manhah). We have observed, analyzed and commented on the use of leitworten in earlier essays and have consistently stressed that there is nothing "magical" or "numerological" about isolating the repeated word to identify its role as a guide to grasping the overall message or theme of the passage. The sevenfold repetition of words is an easily identifiable and recognizable rhetorical device - it demands no sophisticated machinery unavailable to Biblical man nor does it contain any secret messages.

It may be surprising, given the expectation that this prophecy focus on the redemption of the B'nei Yisra'el, to find that the leitwort is none other than "Mosheh". In other words, much as we anticipate (and assume) that the prophecy is about redemption - it is really about Mosheh - this is his inauguration into N'vuah, into leadership. I hope to support this claim with much more than the observation of 7 x 2 occurrences of "Mosheh" in this passage.

There is one other selection in T'nakh which mirrors this phenomenon. In I Sh'mu'el 3, a chapter made up of 21 verses, we read about the inauguration of Sh'mu'el into N'vuah. There are several elegant rhetorical devices at play in that chapter which the sensitive reader will notice; nonetheless, the text seems to be focusing on the prophecy of the downfall of the house of Eli. A simple perusal of the text - keeping the notion of the leitwort in mind - leaves us with a very different impression. In

this rather short chapter, the most common word (appearing 21 - 7 x 3 times) is "Sh'mu'el." Again, as the text hints at the beginning of the chapter (prophecy was rare in those days) and again at the beginning of Chapter 4 (the B'nei Yisra'el knew that Sh'mu'el was trusted by God), his inauguration into prophecy was really the key event of that chapter. The density of the use of his name bears this out - the sum total of occurrences of "Sh'mu'el" is just, as it were, icing on the cake.

Parenthetically, this may be the textual source for a mysterious Midrash about God's initial address to Mosheh, in which God speaks to Mosheh using the voice of Mosheh's own father (Sh'mot Rabbah 3:1). . >From the text in Sh'mu'el, it seems that God was speaking to Sh'mu'el in the voice of Eli, his mentor and, in a manner of speaking, father. In spite of the many differences between the scenes, there is an underlying parallel between the inauguration of these two giants (the text in T'hilim even ties them together: "Mosheh and Aharon were among His ministers, and Sh'mu'el was among those who call His Name" - 99:6). A full analysis of these two parallel selections must wait for another opportunity, but it may be the key, among other things, to understanding the aforementioned Midrash.

The second observation involves a careful look at the fragmented nature of the dialogue. The first fragmentation is normal - even expected. God speaks and Mosheh responds, asks, refuses etc. That is what makes this a prophetic dialogue as opposed to a Divine monologue.

There is, however, a pattern found in most of the Divine utterances here which is initially jarring without a proper understanding of the rhetorical device at work.

III

THE "VAYOMER" PROBLEM

If we were to divide God's words into separate speech-units, using Mosheh's interjections and responses as dividers, we would arrive at a total of 8 speeches. Some of these would be short as two words (#1: "Mosheh, Mosheh", #5: "MahZeh b'Yadekha") while others would encompass a significant amount of text (#4 includes verses 14-22). The speeches would be divided as follows: # vv. Theme 1 3:4 "Mosheh, Mosheh" 2 3:5-10 Purpose of agency 3 3:12 Goal of exodus 4 3:14-22 Interaction with Pharaoh 5 4:2 "What is in your hand?" 6 4:3-9 The signs 7 4:11-12 God's power over speech 8 4:14-17 Assignment of Aharon

This division is all well and good except, as noted, for a "linguistic disturbance" which appears in speeches #2, 4 and 6 - which we will refer to as the "Vayomer problem."

In conventional dialogue, each side speaks and then ceases while the other responds. In narrative writing (as opposed to a play), the text states "and he said", "and he asked" etc. to indicate that the previously silent party is now speaking. There is never a need to repeat "and he said" if the first party is going to add to his previous words - it clutters the text and leads to possible confusion as to whom is being addressed by who.

Nonetheless, there are countless times when this "clutter" appears in dialogues in T'nakh. One striking example is found in Bamidbar 32. When the members of Re'uven and Gad approached Mosheh to request land in Gil'ad, they began as follows:

And the sons of Re'uven and the sons of Gad had a very great multitude of cattle; and when they saw the land of Ya'azer, and the land of Gil'ad, that, behold, the place was a place for cattle; The sons of Gad and the sons of Re'uven came and spoke to Mosheh, and to El'azar the Kohen, and to the princes of the congregation, saying, Ataroth, and Divon, and Ya'azer, and Nimrah, and Heshbon, and El'aleh, and Shevam, and N'vo, and B'on, The country which Hashem struck before the congregation of Yisra'el, is a land for cattle, and your servants have cattle; (32:1-4)

At this point, there is a parashah petuchah (new paragraph), which begins with:

Vayom'ru - (and they said): If we have found grace in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession, and bring us not over the Yarden.

Since the Gadites and Re'uvenites were already speaking, what need was there for the text to add Vayom'ru?

This phenomenon occurs about a hundred times in the Torah, whereby a speaker is quoted directly and the narrative interrupts the speech with the word vayomer. The flow of speech is thus broken without any external party interfering. What is the point of this textual device?

Meir Shiloach z"l made an almost comprehensive collection of all of such instances in the Torah (Sefer Korngreen, Tel Aviv 1964), demonstrating that this technique indicates "a pause in the speaker's words; since thereafter he starts his words anew, the Torah needs to write again 'and he said,' as it would in the case of a person who has just started speaking."

Shiloach divides all the instances which he collects into seven groups, the first of which is when the speaker pauses because he "awaits a response or an action hinted at in the first part of his words." He lists eleven instances of vayomer...vayomer that occur for this reason, heading the list with the words of the tribes of Gad and Reuven noted above.

Evidently, they were hoping that Mosheh would respond to their veiled request - the "parashah space" indicates that there was a silence as Mosheh waited for them to commit themselves further. As such, the text begins their next speech with another Vayom'ru to identify this as a distinct speech, necessitated by the lack of response on the part of their audience (Mosheh).

Shiloach follows this example with a remarkably similar occurrence: the words of Yoseph's brothers to Pharaoh when they request permission to settle in the land of Goshen (Bereishit 47:3-4). In both instances, the speakers expect that the listener will fulfill their request without their having to make it explicit, and when their hints receive no response, they go on to make their request explicit.

Here is the third instance from that list:

And they said: Stand back. And they said: This person came [only] to sojourn; will he then judge? Now we will deal worse with you than with them (Bereishit 19:9).

The men of Sodom hint to Lot that he should move aside and allow them a free hand to 'deal with' his guests. It is only after Lot displays unwillingness to desert his guests, and they realize after a certain pause that he truly means to protect the people who have come under his roof, that they burst out: And they said: This person came to sojourn; will he then judge? And they approached to break the door

One other example of this phenomenon has been utilized to clarify an otherwise abstruse statement. In the presence of the Egyptian grainmaster, (Yoseph) at the onset of their "troubles", Re'uven turns to his brothers and states:

Did I not speak to you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? therefore, behold, also his blood is required. (42:22)

The Rishonim are bothered by this statement, as we never find Re'uven warning them in this manner. A careful look at the referent interaction between Re'uven and his brothers in Dotan, along with an appreciation of the rhetorical tool of Vayomer...Vayomer will help us:

And Reuven heard it, and he saved him from their hands; and said, Let us not kill him. And Reuven said to them, Shed no blood, but throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him from their hands, to deliver him to his father again. (37:21-22).

Note that v. 22 begins again Vayomer Re'uven, to indicate that he waited for a response which would have saved Yoseph from any harsh treatment. After their silence, Re'uven steps back to a less confrontational position, which the brothers accept - throwing Yoseph in the pit, ostensibly to let him perish on his own.

Now we are ready to reevaluate the division of speech-units in our passage.

This "linguistic disturbance" appears several times in God's speeches in this inaugural scene. During speeches #2, 4 and 6, God continues speaking without interruption, yet the disruptive "Vayomer" further divides His words into more speech-units.

By utilizing the Vayomer marker, we can discern 15 separate speech units in God's words to Mosheh. Once we have made this division, some interesting and curious developments come to light which broaden and deepen our understanding of the development of Mosheh's role throughout this scene, as well as the impact and significance of the entire "first stand at Sinai".

IV

THE TEXT

Here are the fifteen speech-units found in this passage. Mosheh's responses are in [brackets],

narrative notes are in (parentheses).

1) (And when Hashem saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said) Mosheh, Mosheh.

(And he said) [Here am I].

2) (And He said), Do not come any closer; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. 3) (And He said), I am the God of your father, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Ya'akov. (And Mosheh hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.) 4) (And Hashem said,) I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I have come down to save them from the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey; to the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And therefore, behold, the cry of the people of Yisra'el has come to me; and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people the children of Yisra'el out of Egypt.

(And Mosheh said to God,) [Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the people of Yisra'el out of Egypt?]

5) (And He said), Certainly I will be with you; and this shall be a sign to you, that I have sent you; When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.

(And Mosheh said to God,) [Behold, when I come to the people of Israel, and shall say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you; and they shall say to me, What is His name, what shall I say to them?]

6) (And God said to Mosheh,) Eh-yeh asher Eh-yeh; 7) (and He said,) Thus shall you say to the people of Israel, Eh-yeh has sent me to you. 8) (And God said moreover to Mosheh,) Thus shall you say to the people of Yisra'el, Hashem God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Ya'akov, has sent me to you; this is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations. Go, and gather the elders of Yisra'el together, and say to them, Hashem God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, of Yitzhak, and of Ya'akov, appeared to me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt; And I have said, I will bring you out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey. And they shall listen to your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Yisra'el, to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him, Hashem God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now let us go, we beseech you, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to Hashem our God. And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, if not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out my hand, and strike Egypt with

all my wonders which I will do in its midst; and after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall come to pass, that, when you go, you shall not go empty; But every woman shall borrow from her neighbor, and from her who sojourns in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and garments; and you shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and you shall plunder the Egyptians.

(And Mosheh answered and said,) [But, behold, they will not believe me, nor listen to my voice; for they will say, Hashem has not appeared to you.]

9) (And Hashem said to him,) What is that in your hand?

(And he said,) [A rod.]

10) (And He said,) Throw it to the ground. (And he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent; and Mosheh fled from it.) 11) (And Hashem said to Mosheh,) Put forth your hand, and take it by the tail. (And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand;) That they may believe that Hashem God of their fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Ya'akov, has appeared to you. 12) (And Hashem said furthermore to him,) Put now your hand into your bosom. (And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, behold, his hand was diseased, white as snow.) 13) (And He said,) Put your hand into your bosom again. (And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it from his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh.) And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe you, nor listen to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, nor listen to your voice, that you shall take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land; and the water that you take from the river shall become blood upon the dry land.

(And Mosheh said to Hashem,) [O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.]

14) (And Hashem said to him,) Who has made man's mouth? Who makes the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Is it not I Hashem? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall say.

(And he said,) [O my Lord, send, I beseech you, by the hand of him whom you will send.]

15) (And the anger of Hashem was kindled against Mosheh, and He said,) Is not Aharon the Levi your brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes forth to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. And you shall speak to him, and put words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. And he shall be your spokesman to the people; and he shall be to you instead of a mouth, and you shall be to him instead as a master. And you shall take this rod in your hand, with which you shall do signs.

V

MOSHEH'S "INTERJECTIONS"

As outlined in the previous section, Mosheh speaks seven times during this selection. His responses are symmetrically placed within the entire scheme - 3 within the first 7 speech-units of God, 3 within the final 7 and one in response to the central speech (#8). There is a further elegance to the schema of his responses, which can more easily be discerned by charting them out:

a) Hineni (Here am I) b) Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the people of Yisra'el out of Egypt? c) Behold, when I come to the people of Israel, and shall say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you; and they shall say to me, What is His name, what shall I say to them? d) But, behold, they will not believe me, nor listen to my voice; for they will say, Hashem has not appeared to you. e) A rod f) O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. g) O my Lord, send, I beseech you, by the hand of him whom you will send.

The first response is one of complete readiness and servitude. The final response is its direct opposite - what is referred to as "opposite parallelism"; Mosheh simply refuses to accept the mission, without even trying to support his (courteous) refusal with a reason.

The second and sixth responses are similarly linked. The second statement is phrased as a question, implying a request for support and help (see Rashbam ad loc.). The sixth (second to last) is an assertion, defining Mosheh's inability to complete the mission due to his poor oratory skills.

Mosheh's third and fifth speeches are also associated by apposition. In the third, Mosheh requests (again asking, not stating) to know God's Name, the most abstract and inaccessible knowledge which exists. . Indeed, God's answer may reflect that philosophic inaccessibility. He desires this knowledge in order to convince the people that he is truly a messenger of the one true God. In the fifth response - a one word answer to God's two word question - Mosheh defines (again no question here, although we would certainly not expect one) that which is obvious to anyone - he is holding a staff. As opposed to the third speech which motivates a response by God, this one is itself an answer to God's query.

As we have seen several times in this forum, the purpose of this type of literary structure - known as a "chiasmus" - is to highlight the middle occurrence. When the parallel steps are synonymous in theme and message, the "fulcrum" may serve as the apex or crescendo of the entire literary unit. When, as in our case, the parallels represent opposite themes that move away from each other, the middle occurrence usually represents the turning point. This point will clarify the reason for the turn from the earlier movement (in our case, towards acceptance of the agency) towards the latter movement (refusal - and, as we will see further down, a new formulation of that agency).

Several examples of this type of inverted chiasmus with a "turnabout fulcrum" can be adduced in T'nakh - the seven visions of Zekharyah (Zekharyah 1:7-6:8), the entire book of Esther (which turns at 6:10), and the entire "travelogue" from Egypt to Sinai (Sh'mot 13-18). This last example has been

presented, using the "inverted chiasmus", in V'shinantam 4/16.

Now we can look, with more sensitive eyes, at Mosheh's fourth response to God - the one which represents the turning point (turning from what towards what has yet to be defined).

Note that all other statements are self-referential - Mosheh's statement of readiness, questioning his own stature, a request for proof of God speaking with him, the simple declaration that he was holding a staff, his claim of poor oratory skills and his final refusal. Here is where the middle statement represents a significant departure from the rest: It focuses not on Mosheh but on the lack of faith of the B'nei Yisra'el. (How Mosheh knew this after decades of exile from his family and Egypt is unclear. Nonetheless, those are his words.)

Once we complete our analysis of the lion's share of these passages (i.e. God's speeches), we will return to this middle statement of Mosheh's and endeavor to identify its role as the turning point in the entire dialogue.

This analysis and the conclusions we draw from it will be covered in the next installment.

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