

# THE UNLIKELY STORY OF HISTORY

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

This week's portion records for us the beginning of the career of the great teacher of Israel, and in fact of all of civilization, Moshe. We are told of his miraculous salvation as a child from the River Nile and of the fact that he was raised by the daughter of the pharaoh in luxury and security. However, when he reaches an age of maturity, he realizes that the Egyptians are enslaving the Hebrews, and his sense of justice overwhelms him. When he sees an Egyptian taskmaster unmercifully beating a Jewish slave, he kills the Egyptian.

The next day however, when he sees that Jews are beating Jews themselves, he becomes rapidly disillusioned. And he's forced to flee because the Egyptian authorities are looking to arrest him and kill him for murdering the Egyptian taskmaster. He disappears from our radar screen for decades and becomes a shepherd for the high priest of Midian. When he reemerges in our story, he is called to his great mission by the Angel of God and is entrusted with the task of taking the Jewish people out of bondage and in fact of elevating them into being a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, a special group of people that would influence all of civilization from that moment onwards. If we think about this, it is a very unlikely story.

Why would God choose someone with as checkered a past as Moshe to be the leader of the Jewish people when his brother Aaron, whose background was spotless and holy and who stayed with the Jewish people for the entire time that Moshe was gone, apparently is overlooked? And why would God choose the Jewish people if they were guilty of murderous faults and, according to the opinion of the rabbis, were even pagans during that period?

It's a question that the Moshe himself asked of God. "Who am I, that you should send me?" And then he asked, "And who are they," meaning the Jewish people, "who are worthy of being saved?" The Lord did not answer him. The Lord speaks in mystery. The Lord says, "I am who I am. I will be who I will be. Just do what I say, and go forth with the mission, and don't try to fathom me. Don't try to know my name. Don't try to understand me. Your job is to obey me."

This becomes the matrix and pattern for Jewish life, in fact, for all civilized human beings throughout their history. Unlikely things always happen. Things never happen the way we think they should happen. The people who lead us are not always the people who we think we should lead us. And the events that occur are sometimes so unlikely that we cannot fathom as to why they happened and what we should do with them, yet it is the will of the Lord that pervades all human history. Human beings have freedom of choice; they can do whatever they want. However, there is a broad

parameter that surrounds all human history, and that is the guiding force of Heaven that dictates events.

The rabbis and the Talmud succinctly put it in a metaphor. They say that human beings are like fish that are caught in the great net. I remember that once I saw how tuna fish were being captured by the fleets off the California coast. There is a net that is spread mechanically for miles, and in that net are thousands of fish. They are all swimming around, unaware that they're in a net. Only when the net is full, and the boats draw the net up to the decks of ships, do the fish realize that they are truly in the net.

Similarly, with human beings and with human events and, if I may add, especially in Jewish history and with Jewish events. It is very strange as to who leaders become and how events evolve. When we look at the whole pattern, we realize that it is only the story of the fish that are trapped in this great wide net, which heaven has set for us, which becomes the story of the Jewish people.

I think that this narrative that we read in this week's portion is a great example of this for it sets the scene for everything else that will occur in Jewish life throughout the centuries. It is the lesson that Moshe himself learns and attempts to communicate to us through his immortal words and through the events that he himself will experience and that will guide the Jewish people throughout their existence.

Shabbat Shalom.  
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