



## YOU ARE WHO YOU LEAD

**S**havuos is the holiday in which we celebrate the Divine Revelation at Sinai. On this momentous day over 3,300 years ago, Moshe was the medium through which Bnei Yisrael began to receive the Torah. Due to this role, and his subsequent position as the transmitter of the rest of the Torah, Moshe is granted a unique title in our tradition: *rabbeinu*, meaning *our teacher*. Some of our leaders throughout history are given titles such as *kohein* (priest), *navi* (prophet), and *melekh* (king),<sup>1</sup> but nobody else is referred to as “*rabbeinu*,” with that epithet almost always added familiarly to his name. We have had so many great leaders throughout the millennia; why, then, is Moshe the only one given this special title? To go one step further, why was Moshe selected as the leader to transmit the Torah? In order to better appreciate Moshe’s greatness and uniqueness, we can compare him, perhaps surprisingly, to another great leader, Gidon, one of the Judges who

led Bnei Yisrael following Yehoshua’s death.

The Yalkut Shimoni<sup>2</sup> connects the stories of Moshe and Gidon by stating that Hashem and Gidon in fact communicated on the night of Pesach:

אמר ר' יהודה בר שלום ליל פסח היה אותו הלילה שאמר לו ואיה כל נפלאותיו היכן הם הפלאים שעשה האלקים לאבותינו בלילה הזה והכה בכוריהם של מצרים והוציא משם ישראל שמחים.

*R. Yehuda bar Shalom said: it was the evening of Passover the night that Gidon said, “Where are all His wondrous deeds?” Where are the wonders that God performed for our ancestors on this night? He smote their firstborn and took out the Jewish people as they rejoiced.*

According to the Midrash, Gidon is reflecting upon Hashem’s miracles of the Exodus under Moshe’s leadership, and wondering why Hashem is not performing miracles in his own time when Bnei Yisrael are likewise being

persecuted by a foreign enemy. Gidon is in effect comparing his own time to that of the Exodus, and may imagine himself in a similar role to that of Moshe.

Furthermore, the narratives of Moshe and Gidon share some common literary structure, settings, unique phrases, and other textual details. One specific detail relates to locusts. Famously, the plague of locusts was the eighth brought down upon the Egyptians.<sup>3</sup> Notably, the attacking Midianites, the enemy during Gidon’s time, are described as swarms of locusts.

וְהָיָה אִם זָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעָלָה מִדְיָן ... וַיַּחֲנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁחִיתוּ אֶת יְבוּל הָאָרֶץ עַד בּוֹאֲךָ עִזָּה וְלֹא יִשְׁאִירוּ מִחַיָּה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְשָׂה וְשׂוֹר וְחִמּוּה פִּי הֵם וּמִקְנֵיהֶם יַעֲלוּ וְאָהָלֵיהֶם יִבְאוּ [וּבְאוּ] כְּדֵי אֲרָבָה לָרֶב וְלָהֶם וּלְגַמְלֵיהֶם אֵין מִסְפָּר וַיִּבְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ לְשַׁחֲתָהּ.

*And it was, when Israel had sown, that Midian came up... And they encamped against them, and they destroyed the produce of the earth... They would leave*

no sustenance in Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor donkey. They and their cattle came up, and their tents, **and they came as numerous as locusts**; both they and their camels were innumerable. Thus they would invade the land and ravage it.

### Judges 6:5

A major difference in the stories, of course, is *who* the target of the locusts were. In the Exodus story, Hashem sends the plague of locusts upon the Egyptians, the enemy of Bnei Yisrael, as punishment for oppressing them. But in the Gidon story, the locusts, personified as the enemy Midian, are sent by Hashem as punishment to Bnei Yisrael for their having abandoned Him and His Torah. Accordingly, the description of a locust invasion in the days of Gidon actually highlights the low spiritual level the Jewish people had fallen to during his time.

Another similarity between the stories of Moshe and Gidon relates to how they are each charged with their mission; in both cases, it is through an angel. Hashem first speaks to Moshe from a burning bush<sup>4</sup> when he is a shepherd in the desert, and to Gidon when he is threshing wheat in the wine press.<sup>5</sup>

In both scenarios, Hashem speaks to the individual through an angel while the recipient of the message is busy doing daily tasks and the revelation is completely unexpected. However, Hashem calls to each of them in His Divine visitation in very different ways. When Hashem appears to Moshe, He uses Moshe's proper name:

וַיִּרְאֵהוּ ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים  
מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּהָה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי  
When Hashem saw that he had turned  
aside to look, God called to him out of  
the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered,  
"Here I am."

### Exodus 3:4

The repetition of his name, "Moshe Moshe," indicates not only the importance and the urgency of the message to follow, but also the close and endearing relationship between the two parties. In contrast, when the angel speaks to Gidon, he calls him a "gibur chayil," meaning a person of standing or a warrior (Judges 6:12). In the same way that calling an individual by name reflects familiarity and intimacy, avoiding the proper name, even while using a positive description, illustrates a certain distance.

Another striking difference between the two presentations is how the leaders react to Hashem's encounter; Moshe is humble, while Gidon is brazen.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא  
מִהֵבֵיט אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים.

And He said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look toward God.

### Exodus 3:6

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו גִּדְעוֹן בֶּן אֲדִנִי וַיֵּשׁ ה' עִמָּנוּ וְלָמָּה  
מִצַּאֲתָנוּ כָּל זֹאת וְאֵימָה כָּל נִפְלְאוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר סָפְרוּ  
לָנוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ לֵאמֹר הֲלֹא מִמִּצְרַיִם הֵעֲלָנוּ ה'  
וַעֲתָה נִטְשָׁנוּ ה' וַיִּתְּנֵנוּ בְּכַף מִדְיָן.

And Gideon said to him, "Please my lord, if the Lord be with us, why then has all this befallen us? And where are all His wonders that our forefathers told us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us, and He has delivered us into the hand of Midian."

### Judges 6:13

Moshe is timid, shielding himself from the Divine fire, while Gidon is sarcastic and even disrespectful, questioning the absence of Hashem's miracles.

But even though the initial

introductions are verbally different, the respective missions themselves are posed with similar expressions.

וַעֲתָה לְכֶה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל פְּרַעֲהוּ וְהוֹצֵאת אֶת עַמִּי  
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם.

So now **go**, and I will **send** you to Pharaoh, and take My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.

### Exodus 3:10

וַיִּפֹּן אֵלָיו ה' וַיֹּאמֶר לָךְ בְּכַחַךְ זֶה וְהוֹשַׁעְתָּ אֶת  
יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכַּף מִדְיָן הֲלֹא שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ.

And the Lord turned toward him and said, "Go, with this your strength, and save Israel from the hand of Midian.

Have I not **sent** you?"

### Judges 6:14

In both commands, the roots הלך (h.l.kh.) and שלח (s.l.ch), (verbs meaning "to send" and "to go" — both of which can describe the act of leading) are paired, illustrating that the leadership roles are similar and hence perhaps comparable.

In another similarity, both Moshe and Gidon initially refuse the command, yet they do so in quite different ways.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל  
פְּרַעֲהוּ וְכִי אוֹצִיאת אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should take the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

### Exodus 3:11

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים  
אֲנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשִׁים גַּם מֵאָז וְדַבַּרְךָ אֶל  
עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כָבֵד פִּה וְכָבֵד לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי.

Moses said to the Lord, "I beseech You, O Lord. I am not a man of words, neither from yesterday nor from the day before yesterday, nor from the time You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue."

### Exodus 4:10

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בִּי אֲדֹנָי בְּמֹה אוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל  
הִנֵּה אֲלֹפִי הַדֵּל בְּמִנְשֵׁה וְאֲנֹכִי הַצֹּעֵר בְּבֵית אָבִי.

And he said to Him, "Please O Lord, with what shall I save Israel? Behold, my thousand is the poorest in Menasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's household."

### Judges 6:15

In his refusal, Moshe questions his own self-worth, focusing on a physical speech impediment. Gidon, on the other hand, refuses based on his upbringing and background, focusing on his low social status as the youngest of the poorest tribe, a background that was quite different from that of Moshe, who grew up in the Egyptian royal palace.

Both Moshe and Gidon receive a sign from Hashem guaranteeing their success. But again, there are some significant differences. First, whereas Hashem offers a sign to Moshe unasked, Gidon demands a sign before he agrees to proceed.

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנִי  
שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן  
אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה.

And [God] said, "I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

### Exodus 3:12

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אִם נָא מְצִאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְעִשִׂיתָ  
לִי אוֹת שְׂאֵתָהּ מִדְּבַר עַמִּי. אֵל נָא תִמַּשׁ מִן־  
עַד בְּאֵי אֵלֶיךָ וְהִצַּאתִי אֶת מִנְחָתִי וְהִנַּחְתִּי  
לְפָנֶיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶשָּׁב עַד שׁוֹבֶךָ.

And he said to Him, "If I have gained Your favor, give me a sign that it is You who are speaking to me: do not leave this place until I come back to You and bring out my offering and place it before You."

### Judges 6:17-18

The sign given to Moshe relates to the presence of Hashem's name in the burning bush.<sup>6</sup> Gidon's sign, on the other hand, relates to the acceptance of the meal he offers;

If the messenger eats, he is human, and if not, he is superhuman. The messenger's refusal to eat the meal, the fire that comes forth from the rock, and the messenger's subsequent disappearance all attest to the fact that Gidon is a chosen leader to deliver Bnei Yisrael from the Midianites.

While the above comparisons between Moshe and Gidon award certain credentials to Gidon as indeed being similar to Moshe, the discrepancies cited highlight the differences in their status. These differences may also call deserved attention to the nature of the state of the people whom they are leading. In the book of Exodus, Bnei Yisrael are an oppressed slave nation. They deserve the strongest leader because, despite certain deficiencies, they are identified as the generation that is worthy to leave Egypt, to see Hashem's Divine hand, and to hear His Divine voice at Matan Torah. Besides Moshe's individual greatness, he was thus also a reflection of the people of that time and therefore succeeded in bringing them to the highest heights.

Gidon, on the other hand, leads a nation that is stuck in their idolatrous ways. The time period of the Judges is often characterized as "galgal chozer" — a wheel that turns and turns. A prescribed pattern occurs throughout the Book of Judges: the people forget Hashem/serve idols, Hashem sends an enemy, the people cry out, Hashem sends a judge, the people repent, the judge saves them from their enemy, and there is peace until the people leave Hashem again ... and the unfortunate cycle continues. Throughout his narrative, Gidon, while undoubtedly a great leader, does not measure up to Moshe's standard. This, however, is not necessarily a result only of who he was as an individual, but of the people he was leading, and thereby reflecting.

Comparing Moshe and Gidon can illustrate that leaders and their followers exist as partners. Moshe leads a nation of prophets<sup>7</sup> and Gidon leads a nation struggling with idolatry. Their personalities reflect the people. Moshe, referred to forever as "rabbeinu," is the chosen leader to give Bnei Yisrael the Torah because he mirrors the nation. The success of a teacher can often depend upon the level of the students; Moshe, the greatest teacher of all, was able to accurately reflect the people he was leading. Ronald Reagan once said, "the greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things." Let us celebrate Shavuot by learning Torah as a guide to help us strive to be a nation of prophets and a people worthy of great leaders.

### Endnotes

1. For example, Aharon HaKohein, Eliyahu HaNavi, Dovid HaMelekh.
2. *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:62. See also Rashi to Judges 6:13.
3. Exodus 10:4-19.
4. Exodus 3:2.
5. Judges 6:11. Some explain that Gidon was threshing wheat specifically in the winepress and not in the usual threshing floor because he was hiding from the Midianites. If they would have found the wheat they would have devoured it; Gidon was therefore hiding in the winepress, since grapes were not in season at the time of this harvest.
6. The commentaries debate the exact nature of this sign, discussing whether it was the burning bush itself or Hashem's name, and whether the sign was in the present tense or futuristic. See, for example, Rashi and Ramban to Exodus 3:12.
7. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* 15:2:2 states that *Kri'as Yam Suf* was a revelation of the internal secrets of the Torah, and that Bnei Yisrael then perceived even greater prophecy than the prophet Yechezkel, who had a famous prophetic vision of the "chariot" of Hashem.