

Moses, Water, and Reflections
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Thirteen years ago the American writer David Foster Wallace began a commencement speech with the following parable: *There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the heck is water?”*

Wallace explains, “The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.” This parable can be about anything significant that can fly under the radar. It’s certainly *not* about water.

Today I want to speak about something in the Torah of critical importance that readers might miss: the water!

Beginning last week in Parshat Shmot and ending at the Torah’s conclusion, we follow the life and times of Moses. It’s possible to distill Moses’ life into seven pivotal events. And notice what punctuates every last one of them - water.

Consider these seven defining moments for Moses:

1. Moses’ birth.

Moses is born and placed in a wicker basket to float on the *Nile River*. His mother leaves him there out of desperation because Pharaoh declared that Israelite boys were to be *drowned*. Instead, he is rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter, who names him *Moshe*, which means, “I drew him from the *water*.”

2. Moses in Midian.

Moses runs away from Egypt to Midian, where he goes to a *well*. He intercedes to protect strangers, including a woman who becomes his wife, and *draws water* for their animals.

3. Moses in Egypt.

Moses returns to Egypt, confronts Pharaoh, and activates the Ten Plagues. The plagues commence with turning the *Nile River* into blood.

4. Moses liberates the Israelites.

He splits the *Red Sea* as the Israelites march through on dry land with *walls of water* to their right and left.

5. Moses at Mt. Sinai.

He leads the Israelites to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai, where Moses goes 40 days without eating or *drinking water*; the same Torah is later compared to *water* as both provide life-sustaining nourishment.

6. Moses's undoing.

Incensed by the Israelites' complaints for lack of *water*, Moses defies G-d's command and strikes the rock twice instead of speaking to it to procure *water*. He may no longer enter Israel.

7. Moses' death.

Moses ascends Mt. Nebo before dying, where G-d shows him the Promised Land in all its glory and splendor; it brings him unbridled pain that he cannot cross over the metaphoric finish line, the *Jordan River*.

Consider all the different things water did for Moses:

- it protected him;
- validated his commitment to social justice;
- introduced him to his wife;
- cemented his authority as a leader to Pharaoh and the Israelites;
- liberated his people physically from Egypt and spiritually at Sinai;
- caused his downfall as a leader;
- marked his failure to enter Canaan.

Seven times in all. For the Torah, seven is a perfect ten. It's a complete set, like the days of the week. It's the Torah's way of underlining this pattern.

Water was there at every crucial moment. Now what does this mean?

I believe it means that whenever we encounter the water motif, we must focus on the characters' choices. Let me explain: water represents the predictable course of nature. Water in motion never departs from rigid rules. We know water moves from areas of higher elevation to lower, from areas of higher concentration to lower. It always takes the most direct path. Knowing these rules, we use this knowledge to accurately predict how water will move in the future.

The opposite of all this is people. By glaring contrast, human beings are unpredictable. We can follow logic and expectations or we can defy them. Sometimes we take the most direct route to reach an outcome, and sometimes we stray far from this path. People, both individually and collectively, are sometimes unpredictable. Water follows logic. People sometimes do, sometimes don't. Water serves as a literary foil to people.

When I see water in these stories interacting with the characters, I consider the question, 'what is the natural, logical, water-like move for the character to make here?' Sometimes we see the character respond in kind. But often we see the characters defy expectations, for better and for worse. Like my 3 and 5 year old boys on a daily basis!

Take a closer look at the surprising choices the characters make in three of these seven scenes. Realize the chutzpah of each of their choices and how enormously different the story would be had any character chosen a different path. To clarify, the other four scenes do highlight crucial choices but are more conventional.

1. Moses' birth.

Consider the exceedingly courageous choices five women made:

- Shifra and Pua, the Hebrew midwives, choose to defy Pharaoh's genocidal decree and save the Israelite boys.
- Yocheved and Miriam, Moses' mother and sister, choose to put the baby in a basket and follow it in the hopes a rescuer would come.
- Pharaoh's daughter chooses to defy the tyrant and her own father by raising an Israelite boy as her own.

Each choice defies expectations. Without any of these choices, Moses never even takes the stage.

2. Moses in Midian.

Moses chooses to act to defend strangers at the well. When women approach the well to draw water, men harass them and shoo them away. Until Moses confronts them and wins the showdown. This is unexpected because he is alone, outnumbered, and completely removed from royal protections. Without this risky intercession, Moses does not meet his wife Tzipora.

4. Moses liberates the Israelites at the Red Sea.

G-d does something surprising here. The Israelites are perched at the edge of the water with the Egyptians closing in fast. When Moses proclaims that G-d will save them, G-d says, "Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Israelites and let them journey forward!" Here G-d chooses to have the Israelites take responsibility for themselves too, miracles included. For all of them, the consequences of their choices rippled outward like when a rock pierces a pond.

These water scenes involve consequential character choices, often but not always unexpected. Repeat readers of any book, including the Torah, tend to condition themselves to the idea that the character must take a certain path because we know how the story ends. This extends to viewers of all stories too.

For example, what if Aaron Burr had decided to use his fists on Alexander Hamilton instead of his gun? Or done nothing at all? We have an entirely new story! Lin Manuel Miranda doesn't rap out a hit musical about the Founding Fathers, and the rest of us save a lot of time in line and money by not seeing Hamilton. (By the way, seeing *Hamilton* in Chicago is not the same as seeing it in New York). But Burr chooses to shoot, Miranda makes magic on the stage, and for us it's worth all that time and money to see. Remember that Burr was not preordained to shoot. He chose to do so among other options.

We must catch ourselves and snap out of thinking that people are destined to do this or that. In the moment, the character doesn't know what is coming. The outcomes are not obvious.

Let's return to the fish in our opening story.

I think for us one critical-but-sometimes-invisible-as-water part of life is our choices. Life is the sum of the choices we make, along with some elements that are out of our hands. Some people are the fish swimming unaware of the water itself. The older we get, the stronger becomes the undertow-like pull of habit. The more we might be tempted to follow the patterns of our past behavior. Yet Judaism reminds us that we should all be the old wise fish, keenly aware of the water and the fact that it provides life. Our choices are *real* choices. Though we may have repeatedly turned in one direction in the past, we are fully free to turn the other way now. This makes us human.

My parents each grew up with minimal family involvement in Jewish living. When they were older, they became convinced that they wanted more for themselves and me, so they sent me to day school and attended shul every week. They made a choice as adults that was fundamentally different from how they grew up. It wasn't easy but it was worthwhile. Then their kid became a rabbi and that was too much. Just kidding!

The High Holidays serve as the most prominent Jewish reminder of our real capacity to choose. They serve as an annual reflecting pool for Jews to examine our deeds. January 1st presents a similar opportunity for us as Americans. This is another property of water as a motif. It allows us to see our reflections. Perhaps the Torah places water in these places to prompt us to reflect on Moses as a character. When we examine him at these different moments, we find that he grows

over time and matures tremendously as a leader. For example, the man who tells G-d “I am not a man of words” is the same man who speaks the entire Book of Deuteronomy!

But one thing never changed. With the exception of his striking the rock, Moses always reflected the will of G-d. His mission wasn't ever about himself, but his people and his G-d. Like a mirror, water reflects an image back at us.

When you take Moses' Hebrew name and refract it, as if it's held over water, *Mem* (מ) *Shin*(ש) *Hay* (ה) becomes *Hay Shin Mem*. משה becomes שמח. Moses and G-d are two halves of a whole. One was an extension of the Other, so much so this was encoded into his name.

May our own choices in 2019 reflect the core values of who we are as individuals. And may our individual core values continue the timeless legacy of our leader Moses, our people, and our G-d.

Shabbat Shalom.