

Shemot: The Shepherd of the Wilderness **Talia Weisberg, Class of 2024**

Parshat Shemot begins the narrative of how the family of Jacob becomes a nation, detailing the suffering they endure and the beginnings of redemption as they coalesce into a people committed to the service of Hashem. The first time God appears in the exodus story is at the incident of the Burning Bush. The verse describes how Moshe arrives at the scene:

U' Moshe hayah ro'eh et tzon Yitro chatono cohen midyan vayinhag et ha tzon achar ha'midbar v'yavoh el har ha'elokim choreivah.

Now Moshe, tending the flock of his father-in-law Yitro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Chorev, the mountain of God (Ex. 3:1).

To round out this sparse telling, the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 2:2) fills in the details:

Our Rabbis say: When Moshe, may he rest in peace, was herding Yitro's flock in the wilderness, a kid fled from him. He pursued it until it reached cover. Once it reached cover, it happened upon a pool of water, and the kid stopped to drink. When Moshe reached it, he said: "I didn't know that you were running due to thirst. You are tired." He carried it on his shoulder and was walking. The Holy Blessed One said: "You have the compassion to behave with the flocks of flesh and blood in this manner; by your life, you will herd My flock, Israel."

The careful reader of the text will notice that the verse is full of foreshadowing, which is what the Midrash picks up on. Moshe leads the flock of goats into the *midbar* (wilderness or desert) to Chorev—another name for Har Sinai—and there experiences divine revelation. So too, the Midrash says, will he lead Bnei Yisrael, who are referred to as the flock of Hashem, through the *midbar* to Sinai, where they will receive the Torah from God.

It is powerful to imagine Moshe—the redeemer of Israel, the man who will split the sea and be the conduit for God’s most extraordinary miracles, arguably the greatest leader in all of Jewish history—carrying a baby goat through the desert and apologizing to it for not being fully attentive to its needs. For Moshe, there was no creature too small to evade notice, no animal too insignificant to deserve protection. Moshe’s compassion towards those for whom he was responsible, particularly those less capable than himself, knew no bounds.

The Midrash Tanchuma tries to understand why Moshe took his flock into the *midbar* to begin with. Is the wilderness not a place of great danger for small goats? Why would Moshe take his precious charges to such a threatening locale? It explains:

Rabbi Yochanan said: He went into the wilderness because he foresaw that Israel would be exalted through the wilderness, as it is said: “Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness?” (Song 3:6). The ascent from Egypt was through the wilderness; the Torah was given in the wilderness; the manna and the quail were obtained in the wilderness; the Tabernacle, the *Shekhinah*, the priesthood, kingship, the well, the clouds of glory—all occurred in the wilderness. Therefore, “he drove the flock into the wilderness” (Ex. 3:1).

In fact, this Midrash says, the *midbar* was not scary and wild, but rather a wondrous setting for what would be some of the Jewish people’s greatest moments and spiritual highs. Moshe brought his flock to the *midbar* as a “dress rehearsal” for what would be, establishing the *midbar* as a place where the beings in his care—be they goats or Israelites—would access God and God’s protections.

God chose Moshe to shepherd Israel and be the intermediary between them and the Divine because of the care with which he treated his animals. It was not because Moshe was the most pious person or the most capable leader, but because he was compassionate and kind to others, even when he did not expect to receive recognition for his behavior.



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In this time of difficulty, it is imperative that we follow Moshe's model, notice one another's needs and carry each other, no matter how peripheral or insignificant. There is an exegetical principle of *ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*, the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children, that posits that the actions we read about in the Torah are repeated in later generations. As we wait for over a hundred hostages to be freed—over a hundred members of the flock of Israel—we can find hope in the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu did not rest until every kid in his care came home. He would not write off even the smallest goat; instead he carried it through the desert to ensure its safety. There is no saying what the future will hold; but we know that Moshe was the Israelites' redeemer, freeing them from pain and suffering, and we are the descendants of those Jews who experienced liberation.

Talia Weisberg is a connector, passionate about facilitating rich Jewish experiences and helping people make informed Jewish decisions. She is currently interning concurrently at Congregation Sherith Israel in Nashville, TN and Beth David Synagogue in West Hartford, CT. She was previously the Orthodox Educator at MIT Hillel and a student chaplain at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at Harvard University and learned Torah at Drisha and the Center for Modern Torah Leadership. In 2013, she was named as one of the Jewish Week's "36 Under 36."