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Natural and Unnatural Leadership: Joseph v Moses

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For most of my life I've thought that the notion of "leadership building" was mostly bullshit. I've been of the opinion that you either have "it" or you don't: you're either driven or you're not, you get things done, or you don't. There is no training that can make someone a leader. But as a participant in a "leadership building" fellowship (The Dorot Fellowship) this year, I've begun to reassess this conception of leadership. This in turn has made me take another look at the character of Moses, who presents as perhaps the most unnatural leader of all time.

This week's Torah portion introduces us to Moses's character. He is born, grows up, murders, flees, marries, meets God at the burning bush, and finally returns to redeem his people. His hero figure is arguably unrivalled in humanity's literature since 1000 BCE, perhaps the greatest "leader" of all time.

In order to better understand his character, I turn to comparison. Joseph, Moses' immediate predecessor as savior of the Jewish people, presents an ideal opposite type: he is a deeply confident, natural leader.

If there is one thing we know about Joseph it is that from a young age he was blessed a predilection for the spotlight. Looking at their childhoods, Joseph grows up self-assured and assertive: his father's unabashed favorite, he is unafraid to interpret dreams aloud to his brothers - in which he is their master. When he's sold into slavery, he easily floats to the top, becoming the manager of Potifar's estate. When he falls again, this time into jail, he gravitates to become ringleader there too, and his jailmates eventually introduce him to Pharaoh, who rapidly appoints him as Welfare Minister.

Joseph's story is a story of clarity and drive: he never shies from his identity as a Hebrew (Potifar's wife references him as a "Hebrew man" [Gen. 39:14, 17], and his prison buddy identifies him to Pharaoh as a "Hebrew lad" [Gen. 41:12]). A clear indicator of his surety is his perfect optimism — he's so sure that the children of Israel will return to Canaan that he makes them swear that they will take his bones with them [Gen. 50:24]. Just before he dies in last week's Torah portion he utters perhaps the most vital words in whole of the exodus story: "God will surely remember/notice [*pakod ifkod*] you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" [Gen. 54:24]. He predicts the redemption from Egypt even before the Israelites are enslaved.

This brings us back to Moses. Unlike Joseph, as a young man Moses is confused about his identity: when we first meet him as an actor, he is walking about in Egypt and sees an Egyptian beating one of his "Hebrew brothers" [Ex. 2:11]. Then, after he flees the scene of the crime and winds up in Midian, he is mistaken by Yitro's daughters for an "Egyptian man" [Ex. 2:19]; nowhere does he correct them. Moses is also often scared. Unlike Joseph, who, when asked by his brothers if he means to "rule over" them [Gen. 37:8] his only response is to tell them another, painfully similar

dream, when two Israelite men confront Moses and ask “Who made you chief and ruler over us?” [Ex. 2:11]. He’s so terrified that he turns and runs, abandoning everything he knows.

The rest of Moses’s experiences are similarly anxious. At the burning bush when God tells him to his face that he needs to go save the Israelites and take them out of Egypt, he argues! He doesn’t think they will believe him. Even when God says, “They’ll listen to you!” just tell them that “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has appeared and said ‘I remember/have noticed [*pakod padadeti*] what is being done to you in Egypt...’” [Ex. 3:16] he’s skeptical. In other words when God tells him that he has the midrashicly proverbial golden ticket to the trust of the people, Moses still objects twice more until he has the password, visual miracles and two sidekicks: his brother and a magic rod.

In fairness, Moses’s worst fears are, in fact, realized: when Pharaoh makes the Israelite’s work harder, they get upset with Moses, and when he repeats God’s reassurances to them, “they [still] would not listen” [Ex. 6:9]. Moses later reminds God *twice* that he is “impeded of speech” and that Pharaoh has no reason to “heed” him. [Ex. 6: 12, 30]. But then the plagues start, and Moses slowly gains confidence and skill. He learns to be a leader. It is a slow and painful process, but by the end of this week’s Torah portion, Pharaoh is the one summoning Moses and asking him to “plead with the Lord” on his behalf. Moses seems to finally fit into his shoes as a dramatic, empowered leader “spreading his hands to the Lord” to end the plague of hail [Ex. 9:28, 33].

Moses and Joseph never meet in the Bible, but the midrash in Devarim Rabah imagines an encounter between them. Before leaving Egypt, Moses goes a-hunting for Joseph’s bones. According to the midrash, the “time for redemption” had arrived, and Moses walks around for three days, looking for Joseph’s hidden bones to take them back to Canaan. Then the story gets weird:

When he [Moshe] had become extremely weary, he was met by a certain Segula...She said to him, “Come with me and I will show you where he [Joseph] is”. She led him to a stream, and said: ‘In this place the magicians and the wizards made a casket of 500 talents and cast it into the stream. And so they said to Pharaoh: ‘do you want this nation never to leave here? Here are the bones of Joseph. If they never find them, they

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will not be able to leave’.” Right away Moses stood at the edge of the stream and said: “Joseph, Joseph!” You know how you promised Israel that “God will surely remember you” (*pakod ifkod*). Honor the God of Israel, and do not hold back the redemption of Israel!...Ask for mercy from your Creator and rise up from the depths. Immediately Joseph’s casket began to rise from the depths, like a single reed. Whereupon Moses took it and place it upon his shoulder. [Dvarim Rabah 11:7]

This midrash, if we read it as a commentary on leadership styles, can tell us something about how Moses and Joseph’s characters might interact. In many ways, Moses depended on Joseph — for his optimism, for his vision, for his drive. Indeed, the midrash makes it seem like it was only by the grace of Joseph — his password and his readiness — that allowed the Children of Israel to leave Egypt. But in the end, it is Moses the Anxious who gathers the bones of Joseph and is remembered as the Greatest Leader. He may not have been born with Joseph’s predisposition for high office, indeed, there is nothing to indicate that Moses was in any way discontented tending to his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert of Midian. But he learns leadership — he learns to, in the definition of leadership penned by the Dorot Fellowship - “taking responsibility for helping others achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty,” in Moses’s case, an uncertainty which was often his own.

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