



INSIGHTS INTO LASHON HAKODESH

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The Torah's Perspective on Greatness

In Parshat Shemot, we are introduced to the greatest prophet that ever lived: Moshe Rabbeinu. Hashem Himself explains in במדבר "ב: ז-ח" that unlike all other prophets to whom G-d spoke in a dreamlike state, Hashem communicated with Moshe in a much more direct manner - פה אל פה אדבר בו - Was Moshe Rabbeinu always great? Are human beings born "great"? Is greatness thrust upon us or can one achieve it in some other way? These are questions which philosophers have addressed throughout the ages. In this week's Parsha, we learn about the Torah's fascinating approach to "greatness".

The Torah explicitly tells us about Moshe Rabbeinu's developmental growth on two occasions. The first is found in שמות ב: י after Moshe was no longer an infant and being nursed by his mother, Yocheved:

...וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבַאֲהוּ לְבַת־פְּרֹעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן...

"**And the boy grew up.** And she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he was for her like a son..." The Torah then states that Moshe received his name and in the *very next pasuk*, the Torah continues to list another stage of development:

”וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֶּה אִישׁ־עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו”
“And it was in those days, **and Moses had grown up**, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen...”

Twice does the Torah use the word: וַיִּגְדַּל - “And he grew [up]”. While it is clear that the first time indicates physical development, perhaps the second mention of גדל refers to Moshe's moral development.

Interestingly, throughout the Torah, this shresh, this root, of גדל has a number of nuanced meanings. Sometimes it means “to grow up” or mature, as it does here with Moshe Rabbeinu, while elsewhere the translation is slightly different.

For example, in last week's Parsha, before his death, Yaakov Avinu reached out to bless Yosef's children. He placed his right and stronger hand on Ephraim's head and his weaker left hand upon the elder Menashe's head. Upon seeing this, Yosef protested and insisted that Yaakov switch his stronger hand to be placed upon Menashe's head. The Torah writes

(בראשית מ"ח: ט)

וַיִּמָּאֵן אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר יְדַעְתִּי בְּנֵי יְדַעְתִּי גַם־הוּא יִהְיֶה לְעָם וְגַם־הוּא יִגְדַּל וְאֹלָם אֶחָיו הִקְטִין יִגְדַּל מִמֶּנּוּ ...

“His father refused, and said, “I know, my son, I know. He [Menashe] also will be a nation and he **also will become great**, but his younger brother [Ephraim] **will be greater than he...**”

In this location, the shoresh of גדל means “to *become* great”.

The שרש of גדל, has one additional meaning. In פרשת לך לך, when Hashem speaks to Avram for the very first time and commands him to move to Eretz Yisrael, Hashem promises him (בראשית יב:ב):

”וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאַבְרָכְךָ וְאַגְדְּלָהּ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה”

“And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and **I will make your name great**, and you shall be a blessing...”

Here, G-d seemingly assures Avram that He will make his name great. The commentaries discuss different possibilities of what “a great name” might mean, with some suggesting that G-d would make Avram well-known. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch does not agree with the above translation. He notes that the pasuk doesn’t say “אגדל” “I will make your name great” as stated above, but rather uses the word אגדלה- which translates as: “I wish to make your name great.” Indeed, G-d can bestow blessings upon individuals, but ultimately, only their actions and commitment to Him will determine the outcome of whether such blessings are actualized.

Within these three explanations of the word לגדל, “to grow”, “to become great” and [a variation of] “to make great” we can learn a very important Torah lesson. In Judaism, no human being is innately born spiritually “great”, no person is an immediate גדול. Neither in their Torah learning nor in their refinement of character, no person is born as a finished product. Unlike the Greeks who believed people were born “great” and talented- some were heroes and some were villains, the Torah’s view on

greatness is quite the opposite. Rather, the Torah suggests that to become great (גדול), one must *grow* (לגדל) and develop themselves. This process can be frustrating and is far from a quick-fix for someone who truly desires to be on a high spiritual level. This spiritual perspective on greatness requires one to commit time and time again to work on themselves- to be regimented in pushing themselves forward. Whether one wants to be a גדול בתורה, a great Torah scholar, or transform themselves into a בעל חסד, one who graciously performs acts of kindness, one must appreciate that growth does not happen overnight. Malcolm Gladwell stresses this rule in his book “Outliers”. He suggests that throughout history, in order for someone to achieve a level of “expert”, in a specific area, they had to minimally commit ten thousand hours of practice. No famous athlete started out as such at the beginning of their career. Rather, they only became a success after inching their way forward in their personal growth and skill. If this is true in the physical world, so too, in the world of spirituality, our growth works in a similar manner. True, some are born with certain traits or qualities that can seem outwardly to give them a “head start”, but G-d doesn’t compare each of His children. Each one of us is judged according to our own potential.

Yes, Moshe Rabbeinu was raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Perhaps as the Ibn Ezra suggests (שמות ב:ג), Moshe was purposely raised in a palace in order to be raised up above his brethren, a quality which would help him to become Am Yisrael’s ultimate leader. Yet, even with this blessing, Moshe’s greatness was only *actualized* by the painstaking

actions he took- his ability to risk everything and stand up for a fellow Jew, his ability to advocate for the Jewish people after they sinned, and his repeated choice to *grow* and learn from his mistakes and from others. From this week's parsha, we are reminded to set our spiritual sights high and to know that everyone who ended up spiritually "great" had to "grow" themselves, and forge themselves step-by-step to get there. ■

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