

Ekev

When You are Nearby to Moshe

And now, Israel, what does G-d really ask of you anyway – simply to fear him...

Dvarim 10:12

“Is fear of God really something so simple?” wonders the Gemara.¹²² “Yes,” it continues, “*ligabei Moshe* – regarding Moshe – it is something simple.” The intent of the Gemara is to explain the biblical verse, God has told the Jewish people that He doesn’t ask much – just fear! The Gemara explains that for Moshe, fear of the Lord was easy. Now, that is all well and good, but for all the rest of the nation in the desert, it was quite a task, as it is for us! After all, Moshe was talking to everybody, not just himself! How did the Gemara resolve its original question?

When Dasan and Aviram rebelled against Moshe, the Torah tells us that “Moshe sent to call Dasan and Aviram, sons of Eliav.”¹²³ The Chasidic masters¹²⁴ explain this verse in a fascinating way. Everyone has a spark of good in them, for if not, they would cease to exist. The way to influence a person to abandon negative and self-destructive behavior is to get in touch with that person’s spark, and ignite it. But sometimes, it seems a person cannot be reached. They have so covered over that spark that it is only by connecting back to their parents that one can reach them. Dasan and Aviram were acting in a wicked fashion, and Moshe was not successful in reaching them. So, Moshe issued a decree, “that Dasan and Aviram now be called only ‘*bnei Eliav*.’” They were no longer to be called by their given names, but rather, as the sons of Eliav. But to this, they replied, “We will not go up.” They refused to look up their family tree, to their ancestors. Often, a person can be reached by simply reminding him where he came from, and who he shares his blood with.

Adoniyahu, the son of King David, we are told, was “never upset by his father’s telling him, ‘Why did you behave like that?’”¹²⁵ The plain meaning would seem to be that King David did not discipline his son at all. But R. Meir of Parmishlan¹²⁶ explained that this statement is not to be understood simplistically. In fact, he explained, what it means is that Adoniyahu never felt in his life, “I should not do this, for this is not the way that the child of King David ought to act.” He simply did not feel that this obligated him to do anything special.

122 Brachos 33b

123 Bamidbar 16:12

124 R. Chaim Palagi in *Tnufa Chaim*, Korach, 9, quoting something that he heard from the Baal Shem Tov. I was unable to find this quoted anywhere from the Baal Shem Tov. However, R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (d. 1829), the Ohev Yisrael, to Korach, actually suggests this novel interpretation on his own, and this is likely the source that ultimately made it to R. Chaim Palagi (1787–1868) in Turkey.

125 Melchaim I, 1:6

126 Quoted in *Shem Mishmuel*, Shemos 677, and Behaaloscha 670.

But, in fact, the way that we relate to our ancestors and the great people to whom we are connected is something that can bring out the best in us. It shows us what we can accomplish, and how great we can be.

So, how did the fact that Moshe had an easy time fearing God make it any easier for the Jews? *Kli Yakar*¹²⁷ explains that the answer lies in an alternative translation of the Gemara's words, *ligabei Moshe* (regarding Moshe). Those words can also mean "nearby Moshe." The Gemara was saying, "When a person was with Moses, it was simple to fear God." Moses was a giant of a man, both physically¹²⁸ and spiritually. He radiated a light so intense¹²⁹ that the average person could not stand it and he was therefore forced to wear a mask.¹³⁰ Anybody who has had the privilege to spend time with an authentic Torah giant can attest to the heightened awareness that is experienced just by being around that individual and witnessing his actions and interactions. If you would have met Moshe, you would have seen that there is a God, and you would then have had no trouble fearing Him.

In his weekly *The Scoop*,¹³¹ Rabbi Zvika Soroka relates the following awe-inspiring anecdote: Not too long ago, on a late Motzai Shabbos, I went to hear the Kaminetzer Rosh Yehshiva, R. Yitzchok Shiner, shlita, speak. He recounted a fascinating story that occurred which he was a young boy (about seventy years ago). In the University of Pittsburgh, where he attended for a short stint, he was acquainted with a Jewish professor who was an older bachelor. The long-awaited day finally came when the man, who was in his early fifties, got engaged. Unfortunately, the woman was not Jewish. The event was planned, a date was set and the invitations were dispatched. About a week before the wedding was scheduled, he sent out a message that the wedding would be postponed for another month. The month passed and once again, he informed his friends that it would be rescheduled shortly. The day came and passed and eventually, the wedding was called off.

When he was asked about this strange course of events, and for an explanation for his behavior, he related the following story: He grew up in dire poverty in Europe. The future there was bleak and he was determined to immigrate to America to seek greener pastures and a more pleasant life. Since he couldn't even afford a train ticket, he had to travel across the entire country on foot until he could manage to get a job on a boat that would take him to America. After many hours of traveling in the snow, he was beginning to feel weak. He was suffering from frostbite and was about to collapse when he arrived in a small village. It was late at night and the town was asleep, but he saw a flickering light in a house in the distance. He knocked

127 Ad loc. see also *Mishnas Moshe* (R. Moshe Blau), ad loc., as well as *Mahari Shteiff* (Amaros, Berehsis, par. 6). See also *Ohr Hachaim* to Shemos 27:20.

128 Brachos 54b, Nedarim 36a. See also Mechilta, Bo 14; Bamidbar Rabbah 12:9

129 Bava Basra 75b, "Moshe's face radiated like the sun."

130 Shemos 34:29

131 Shelach, 2009

on the door and asked for a place to sleep for the night. An old man opened the door, graciously took him in and placed the traveler in his own bed. He fed him a nutritious meal and spent the night checking on him and nursing him back to health. (R. Shiner began crying at this point in the story.) The next day, the man ate breakfast and said goodbye. After leaving, he inquired from a villager about the identity of the owner of the house in which he had just slept. "You don't know who he is?" the man incredulously remarked. "That is the house of the famed Chofetz Chaim!" The professor then explained his actions. "How could I marry a non-Jew when I once slept in the bed of the holy Chofetz Chaim! It has been many years, but I just couldn't bring myself to face that day that I would marry out of the faith after encountering such a Tzaddik.

Indeed, exposure to something powerful and great could stay with a person for life!