

Remarkably,
Moses
hesitated



THERE IS no redemption without respect. (Shutterstock)

Compassion and respect for others

Parashat Shemot, which opens the second book of the Torah, recounts the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt.

After years of comfort in Egypt, the Jews were subjected to harsh enslavement. Pharaoh decreed the execution of all newborn Jewish boys, and generations of Israelites lived as downtrodden slaves, devoid of hope. Finally, when the suffering became unbearable, their cries reached heaven, and God decided to bring their torment to an end.

God revealed Himself to Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh's palace, and tasked him with the mission of announcing the redemption to the Israelites. The *midrash* explains that Moses was chosen for this mission because of his kindness and compassion. Despite his privileged position, Moses identified with the suffering of his brethren:

"He saw their burdens" (*Exodus* 2:11).

The *midrash* elaborates:

"...He would see their suffering and weep, saying: 'Woe to me for you! If only I could die for you, for there is no labor more difficult than working with mortar.' He would lend his shoulder and help each one of them.

"Rabbi Elazar, the son of Rabbi Yose HaGelili, said:

"He saw a heavy burden placed on a small person and a light burden on a large person, a man's burden on a woman and a woman's burden on a man, an elder's burden on a youth and a youth's burden on an elder. He would set aside his own princely staff, go to them, and adjust their burdens as though assisting Pharaoh."

"The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: 'You set aside your own concerns to see the suffering of Israel and treated them as brothers. Therefore, I will set aside the heavenly and earthly realms and speak with you.'"

(*Midrash Rabbah, Shemot, Parasha 1*)

Remarkably, even after this divine revelation and a direct command to confront Pharaoh and lead the redemption, Moses hesitated. For seven days, as Rashi (the great biblical commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) explains, Moses argued with God, trying to avoid the mission. His primary concern was that his older brother, Aaron, might feel slighted if Moses were chosen to lead.

"We learn [from this] that for a full seven days the Holy One, blessed be He, was enticing Moses in the thorn bush to go on His mission... All this [reluctance] was because he [Moses] did not want to accept a po-

sition higher than his brother, Aaron, who was his senior."

(Rashi on *Exodus* 4:10)

It is astounding. An entire nation awaits redemption while the suffering is overwhelming, yet Moses does not agree to go until God promises him that Aaron would not be harmed and would actually take part in the redemption journey. Finally, God reassured Moses, promising that Aaron would not only accept his role but would rejoice in his heart:

"And behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart." (*Exodus* 4:14).

This episode teaches a profound lesson: Redemption and progress cannot come at the expense of another's dignity. Even as an entire nation awaited salvation, Moses refused to proceed until he was certain that no one would be hurt or disrespected.

This story highlights the deep Jewish value of honoring others. True goodness and redemption must always uphold respect and compassion for every individual. ■

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Era of seismic changes

Dump old frameworks

In the past few months, we have witnessed some seismic changes in the Middle East: The concept of Syria collapsed, and with it comes a new threat to the countries created in the last 100 years. At the same time, Iranian influence in the Middle East is significantly weakened, while Turkey is rising as a significant regional power.

In the coming months, we should expect some more big changes in the global arena as US President-elect Donald Trump takes office. He already announced his intentions to acquire Greenland and possibly the Panama Canal, and he even raised the idea of ending Canada's independence and turning it into a US state.

When seismic changes occur, legacy frameworks of the old circumstances become obsolete.

One can remember the debates in the Israeli media among pundits and around the negotiator tables: Should Assad control the water of the Sea of Galilee, or should his forces be stationed a few meters from the water in exchange for peace?

Today, Assad is out of Syria, the Golan Heights are recognized as part of Israel, and, as the popular Israeli song "My Daughter, Are You Crying or Laughing?" goes, "there are still guns on the [Hermon] mountain, my daughter, but they are threatening Damascus." Indeed, if anybody engages in a debate today about whether Assad should be on the water on the Sea of Galilee or just near it, he would be mocked.

One can also remember the debates in the early 21st century about the two-state solution and "land swaps" – the idea that in exchange for Israel keeping "settlement blocs" in Judea and Samaria, Israel will give the Palestinians areas adjacent to Gaza, effectively extending the Gaza Strip.

One can only imagine what Oct. 7 would have looked like if that had been the case.

Indeed, in the new world realities, not only should the idea of expanding Gaza be ridiculed, but so should the idea of the two-state solution – an obsolete framework, irrelevant in today's circumstances.

Seismic changes occur not only to geopolitical circumstances but also when it comes to ideological threats.

For much of the 2,000 years of exile, the threat to Judaism came from religious-based European hatred. When a new form of opposition to Judaism



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emerged in the late 19th century, called antisemitism, many dismissed it as merely a political view. In fact, antisemites did not level theological or religious accusations against the Jews, nor did they accuse Jews of using the blood of Christian children to perform religious rituals – they merely suggested that Jews were "occupying Europe" and corrupting humanity. (Later, the term "antisemitism" was retrofitted to include all forms of Jew-hatred – contemporary and historical.)

European attitudes toward Jews

were going through a dramatic shift at the turn of the 20th century, yet Jews and their allies were not sufficiently alarmed, since they were captured in their old conceptions – those that were relevant in prior centuries of European opposition.

A similar dynamic exists today. As discussed in this column, we are in the midst of a fast-moving multi-arena attempt to negate the idea of the Jewish state, and through it, to negate the idea of Judaism. In the last week alone, at-

tempts have been made in a number of

European countries to arrest Jews (again) and charge them with war crimes – part of an effort to demoralize and humiliate the Jewish nation (the more it changes, the more it stays the same).

And yet, this imminent threat to the survival of Judaism is not getting sufficient attention. Much of the focus remains on countering traditional antisemitism.

Whether it is geopolitical or ideological, seismic changes require us to dump old frameworks and adopt new strategies. However, it is hard for the collective human consciousness, and big systems, to internalize big changes as they occur. There is a natural tendency to operate within the confines of old, obsolete frameworks and conceptions.

This is the case today, this was the case at the turn of the 20th century, and this has been the case since the beginning of time. ■

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Jacob changes world order

This weekend, Jews will begin reading *Exodus* in synagogues, after concluding reading *Genesis* last week.

What is often missed in this transition is the monumental shift of world order that was put in place by Jacob.

The "conventional wisdom" at the time was that succession should be passed down to the eldest.

Indeed, Laban tells Jacob that this principle is so deeply rooted, that the idea of giving the youngest ahead of the eldest daughter to be wedded is outright taboo.

When it comes to passing down the Abrahamic blessing, which was passed to Isaac and then to Jacob himself, it seems for much of the book of *Genesis* that there was only one dispute: Who is the eldest? Is it Leah's oldest son, Reuben, or is it Rachel's oldest son, Joseph?

Jacob initiates a seismic change in his final days that makes this question obsolete – effectively switching from a system of "seniority" to a system of "divine-based meritocracy." Apparently, Jacob views his role not to be determining who is really the elder son but rather to understand

what God wants him to do.

He first "neutralizes" Reuben's claim by "promoting" Joseph's sons (his grandchildren) to be his own: "Ephraim and Manasseh, like Reuben and Simeon, shall be mine," he declares, essentially reducing Reuben's claim to be *pari passu* with Ephraim's.

He then "neutralizes" Joseph's claim by switching the succession order of Joseph's children, putting the younger Ephraim ahead of the older Manasseh.

Finally, he parts ways with his father, Isaac, and grandfather Abraham – who both made a clear succession choice ("winner takes all") – and instead gives a blessing to all his children, setting the foundation for the nation of Israel.

Jacob created a new order. Therefore, the question of who is the older becomes irrelevant.

Indeed, from now on, the nation of Israel will operate under the system of "divine-based meritocracy." This is evident with the succession question of the new leader, Moses, introduced in this week's Torah reading. The two presumed contenders, Joshua and Ca-

leb, are not his descendants and are not even from his tribe. It is made clear that they are not picked by Moses based on age or seniority, but based on who God tells Moses to choose. This concept is reiterated a number of times down the line, including when Samuel picks King David.

But all of these took place centuries after Jacob put in place this new order.

In the immediate months that followed, just like the seismic changes today, not everybody recognized the change.

Upon returning from Jacob's funeral, Joseph's 10 half-brothers, who describe themselves as "slaves of God," effectively concede the elderly dispute of the old order and declare that they are "slaves of Joseph" instead.

Joseph corrects them: "Am I in the place of God?"

He comforts them and assures them that the questions and events of the past are indeed in the past. There is a new order put place in by their father, Jacob, and hence they should have no fear.

– G.K.