

## Moses and Dr. King: Partnering with God

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Why Moses? From among all the Israelites suffering in cruel Egyptian bondage, why does God select Moses, saying, “Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt?”<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps Moses is uniquely qualified. Having grown up in the palace, the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, he would have instant access, would know his way around the halls of Egyptian power, and might even know how best to speak to the tyrant who has been his *de facto* grandfather.

Or maybe it’s that Moses has already demonstrated his sympathy for the plight of his people. His first reaction to seeing a Hebrew slave beaten by an Egyptian overseer is to kill the enslaver.<sup>ii</sup>

Another possibility is that God anticipates that the appointed leader will need to settle disputes between fractious Israelites. Moses has already exhibited his willingness to intervene in such conflicts. When “he found two Hebrews fighting, he said to the offender, ‘Why do you strike your fellow?’”<sup>iii</sup>

Whatever the reason for God’s selection, Moses doesn’t want the job. After being dismissed by those quarrelsome Israelites, he ran away, all the way to the desert. Moses’s immediate response to God’s direction is to ask, “‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?’”<sup>iv</sup>

But what exactly does Moses mean, when he asks, “Who am I?” Rashi plausibly suggests that Moses finds himself unqualified. Pharaoh will surely expect any interlocutor to be of royal status like his own.<sup>v</sup>

Still, other potential explanations abound. Confronting Pharaoh would risk his life—and if he dies, he will leave behind a young widow and small children.

Perhaps instead, Moses thinks that he’s not a good enough person to become God’s human representative in bringing the people to freedom. The taskmaster he killed was human, after all.

Maybe he knows that only supernatural acts will convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites. If that’s true, only a divine being will do.

And then there’s that speech impediment. Moses declares, “‘Please, O my lord, I have never been a man of words...I am slow of speech and slow of

tongue.”<sup>vi</sup> A commentator explains that to mean that Moses doesn’t see himself as “a person who knows how to speak elegantly—that is, a person who does not halt or stutter or have difficulty in enunciating.”<sup>vii</sup>

Moses is not the perfect man for the job. But who is? Not only for the job that God assigns to Moses, but any of us for any role. Rabbis discuss “imposter syndrome,” the challenge of not being everything that somebody might expect a rabbi to be—or worse, all that we expect ourselves to be. Any of us with an ounce of self-awareness knows that we are not always the perfect person for whatever task we have, personally or professionally. I for one never felt so unqualified as I did when confronting impending parenthood, and I suspect I’m not alone.

The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, junior was deeply aware of this issue. In 1957, he began a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama this way: “I want to discuss with you a very practical problem... We’re using the subject, ‘Overcoming an Inferiority Complex.’ There is hardly anyone ... who has not at some time experienced a deep feeling of inadequacy. How many of us have been ... overwhelmed by an appalling sense of inferiority? This is one of those experiences that seems to run the whole gamut of human life. Some years ago, a survey was taken, a psychological study on the hundreds of college students, and it was revealed that more than ninety percent ... suffered from a nagging, frustrated feeling of inferiority.”<sup>viii</sup>

King continues in words that remind us of the many possible causes of Moses’s feelings of inadequacy: “Some people feel a sense of inferiority because they are physically handicapped. And some people feel a sense of inferiority because of ill health. Other people feel a sense of inferiority because they lack social charm. Others...because they are not attractive externally. And others feel a sense of inferiority because of love failures and because of moral failures.”<sup>ix</sup>

Dr. King knew plenty about failure, not least about “moral failures.” Hampton Sides writes about King’s condition at the time of his 1968 assassination: “A fierce critic of the Vietnam War, King had begun to preach an uncomfortable gospel that involved the radical redistribution of wealth. As he became more controversial, his popularity sagged. Key allies in Washington had abandoned him. He’d gained weight, was sleeping poorly, and was drinking and smoking more. He received frequent death threats. His marriage was strained from his travels and dalliances. One of his mistresses, in fact, was staying at the Lorraine [Hotel with him] the night before he was killed. His peripatetic life—what his aides called his ‘War on Sleep’—had taken a tremendous toll on King’s body, soul and psyche. He talked increasingly of giving it up... ‘Martin Luther King is finished,’ he said at his lowest moment in Memphis, a week before he was killed.”<sup>x</sup>

Still, neither Moses nor Dr. King permitted their failures or feelings of inadequacy to put an end to their work of bringing liberation to their people.

God provides the supernatural signs,<sup>xi</sup> not to mention the plagues, that will facilitate Moses's mission. Moreover, God sends Aaron to be Moses's mouthpiece.<sup>xii</sup> However, as the story continues, we find that Moses has gained confidence. He no longer seems to need Aaron to do the talking.

Dr. King, a pastor, would surely have credited God's help, too, but Hampton Sides urges us to consider the reverend's humanity: "The night before he was killed, ... he spoke of the threats that were out there... Yet he found a way to preach through his apprehensions, crying out triumphantly: 'I'm not fearing any[one]!' ... What made King's eloquence so ferocious and his courage so stirring was that, like the Memphis garbage workers he came to represent, he was a [human being]."<sup>xiii</sup>

None of us is Moses. After all, Torah ends by telling us that there never again would arise another prophet like him.<sup>xiv</sup> And none of us is Dr. King, either. Little could be less productive, though, than focusing on their unique greatness. Moses and Dr. King were both flawed, both failed as often as they prevailed, and both were all too aware of their own inadequacy. Still, each rose to the challenges of the time in which he lived, the needs of his people, and his mission. Each of us, in our own way, can do the same.

A midrash teaches that the burning bush had been there—afire, but not consumed—for a long time, perhaps the full four hundred thirty years of the Israelites' Egyptian sojourn. What was special about Moses? He noticed, he turned aside, and he acted.<sup>xv</sup> Having already paid attention to the suffering of his kin, he now sees and hears the presence of God, calling him to action.

You and I will not likely see a bush on fire but not burning up. And yet: We do see human suffering. We do see savage inequality. We do see bigotry. We do see the devastation that humanity has wrought on our planet. The question for us is, Will we pay attention? Will we, despite all our inadequacies, all our powerlessness, real and perceived, seek to take action? Will we get moving, hoping that maybe, just maybe, like Moses and Dr. King before us, we can partner with God to bring redemption. Then, we, too, can answer God's call and be a blessing.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 3:9-10.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 2:11-12.

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 2:13.

<sup>iv</sup> Exodus 3:11.

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<sup>v</sup> Rashi to Exodus 3:11.

<sup>vi</sup> Exodus 4:10.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibn Ezra to Exodus 4:10.

<sup>viii</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Overcoming an Inferiority Complex,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Church, Montgomery Alabama, July 14, 1957, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/overcoming-inferiority-complex-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>. King cites a study found in Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, Harper & Brothers, 1943, pp. 52-78.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>x</sup> Hampton Sides, “King had his share of flaws too,” *Times Union*, April 6, 2011, <https://www.timesunion.com/opinion/article/king-had-his-share-of-flaws-too-1324538.php>.

<sup>xi</sup> Exodus 7:9ff.

<sup>xii</sup> Exodus 4:14-15.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sides.

<sup>xiv</sup> Deuteronomy 34:10.

<sup>xv</sup> <https://h-nt.org/2020/01/19/the-burning-bush/>.