



Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Shemot / פרשת שמות 5779

Actualizing Potential

Our parsha introduces us to our ultimate righteous individual – Moshe Rabbeinu. While the Torah itself does not indicate that Moshe was inherently different there is a series of midrashic passages that highlight his uniqueness from birth. According to one midrash, the house was filled with light at the moment that he was born.¹ Another opinions posits that he was born circumscribed.² A third midrash asserts that he had the voice of an older child as a baby, indicating that he even physically matured faster than the average child.³

This inherent specialness of Moshe raises serious questions about free choice. If Moshe was born on a supernal spiritual level, then of course he ascend to Sinai and bring down the Torah. Of course, he was the most righteous person of the generation. Why do we praise Moshe for being a righteous individual if his traits were inborn?

Perhaps the answer lies in a key difference between potential and actuality. God grants each of us different aptitudes and natural inclinations. Just as one child might have an aptitude for music, similarly, one child can be born with a higher spiritual aptitude than another person. Our job is to take what we are given and fully actualize the good parts of ourselves, no matter where the ceiling lies.

This task is ubiquitous and applies to Moshe Rabbeinu just as much as the lowly chopper of wood. While Moshe and the average person might end up on different levels due to their differing natural limitations, each person is judged solely based on how much of his potential he actualized. In the language of *Tanya*, each person has their own “truth” based on the spiritual plane that they occupy and the mission is to take that individualized “truth” and serve God with it.⁴ Moshe fully actualized his potential and it is for that we praise him.

¹ Sotah 12a.

² Ibid.

³ Rashi to Shemot 2:6.

⁴ *Tanya*, chapter 13.



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The same is true regarding locations. For reasons unknown to us, God decided to imbue Yerushalayim with greater spiritual qualities than other places in the globe. While we cannot fathom God's reasons for this, we know it to be true and can sense it even today. Similar to people, the true potential of Yerushalayim must be actualized through arduous spiritual labor.

The one difference, however, between a person and a place is upon whom the responsibility falls to actualize the latent potential. With people, each person is obligated to care for their own potential. Places, however, do not make moral choices and therefore the responsibility falls on us – the Jewish people. We are the one's who must dedicate ourselves to our holy city in order to actualize its potential as the location where God's presence will be palpably felt. May we be up to the task.