



Parshat Shemot

Why is Our Greatest Prophet Called Moshe?

Dear Rebbetzin,

My name is Moshe and I always wondered about the meaning of my name. I know the Torah says that when Pharaoh’s daughter rescued the little ark in which the baby was floating on the Nile, she called him Moshe because she had pulled him out of the water. Yet, I don’t quite understand the connection between the name Moshe and being pulled out of the water and why this should be a fitting name for our greatest prophet who brought us the Torah.

Moshe Wasserman (name changed)

Dear Moshe,

I like your question. It is important to understand the meaning of our names, since the names that our parents give us are inspired by prophetic insight. When naming their baby, parents receive *Ruach Hakodesh* (prophetic insight) so that the name matches his or her soul (*Arizal, Gate of Reincarnation, Introduction 23*). Therefore, the study of our Hebrew name is to study ourselves which enables us to improve ourselves and get closer to Hashem. The work that a person is involved with is according to his name (*Ba’al Shem Tov, Bereishit 135*). Let us look into the Torah and commentaries to unravel the deeper meaning of the name Moshe. Perhaps, we can understand why it was a fitting name for our greatest prophet. This may also help you to understand your own soul mission.

Pulled and Pulling Out

After saving Moshe, Pharaoh’s daughter tried to find a nursemaid for him, but Moshe refused to nurse from a gentile. Thus, Pharaoh’s daughter ended up paying Moshe’s mother to breastfeed her own son. When Moshe was weaned, his sister Miriam brought him back to Pharaoh’s daughter, who adopted him as her own and called him by the name Moshe:

ספר שמות פרק ב': וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבִאֶהוּ לְבֵת פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן הַמַּיִם מְשִׁיתָהוּ:

“The child grew and she took him to the king's daughter, who adopted him as her own son. She called his name Moshe saying, ‘I pulled him out of the water’” (*Shemot 2:10*).

It is interesting to note that the etymological connection between Moshe and being pulled out of the water is only found in the Hebrew language. As the word *מֹשֶׁה/Moshe* is related to *מְשִׁיתָהוּ/meshitihu* – “I have pulled him out.” How come the Egyptian princess gave Moshe a Hebrew name, and how did she know Hebrew in the first place? Our sages explain that she converted, and had learned the Holy Tongue. She named him for the miracle that he was pulled from the water, and to remember that he was from the Hebrews. Therefore, he is not mentioned in the entire Torah except by this name. Being pulled out is passive, and thus Moshe’s name should have been in the passive form *מֹשׁוּי/Mashui* or *נִמְשָׁה/Nimshe*. Why, then, did she name him “Moshe” in the active form? With this name, Pharaoh’s daughter suggested, “just as I have pulled him out, likewise he will pull others out – he will pull Israel out of Egypt (*Chizkuni, Shemot 2:10*). He will help others escape and pull them out of troubles. Although, I pulled him from the water, it was only in order that he should help pull out others (*Sforno, Shemot 2:10*).

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Innate Water Connection

Moshe is drawn from the water and his entire essence is connected with the drawing of water. His name means not only, "I drew him out of the water." It also means drawing water for others, and drawing others out of the water. Pharaoh's astrologers erred when they said that Moshe would be struck by the waters of the Nile. His daughter understood that Moshe would not be damaged by the waters of the Nile, for "from the waters [of the Nile] I have pulled him." Rather, he will be struck by those waters that he will pull out for others. Therefore, she called him Moshe with regards to the future, referring to the waters of Meriva (*Ba'alei Tosfot, Shemot 2:10*).

וַתֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ מִצְרֵי הַצִּילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָרְעִים וְגַם דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁקֵךְ אֶת הַצֹּאן: (שמות ב: יט)

"They said, an Egyptian man delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and also drew water enough for us, and watered the flock" (*Shemot 2:19*).

Moshe saved Yitro's daughters who had been thrown into the water by the other shepherders. We learn this from the repetition of the word דָּלָה/*dalah* – drew. He drew water for the flock and he also drew us out [of the water] (*Ba'alei Tosfot, Shemot 2:17*). The Torah is called Torah from Heaven. In Hebrew, heaven is שָׁמַיִם/*Shamayim* – there is water. Moshe had to draw the Torah out/down from the upper water and draw the people out/up from the lower water. Water symbolizes a new dimension. There is an entire world of life going on under the water. Moshe was able to access the upper dimension, where there is no eating and drinking by staying forty days without eating and drinking on the mountain. With Tziporah's help, he was also able to come back down and pull the people up. Moshe, who was born and passed away on the seventh of Adar, is a Pisces, which is a water sign.

Moshe's Many Names

Actually, Moshe had many names. His mother, Yocheved, originally called him טוּבִיָּה/Tuvia when "She saw that he was טוב/tov – good" (*Shemot 2:2*). It is a great merit for Bityah, the daughter of Pharaoh, that the name she called Moshe is the one that Hashem chose to call him throughout the Torah. She received this merit because of her kindness in saving Moshe, despite the danger she thereby imposed upon herself. From here, we learn the reward of those who bestow kindness. Indeed, Moshe had ten names. Nevertheless, "Hashem told Moshe, by your life, from all the names that you are called, I will not call you except by the name that Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh, called you, "she called his name Moshe," "He [Hashem] called to Moshe" (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 1:3*). The name "Moshe" reflects the general personality of Moshe, whereas each of his other names describes a particular attribute. Moshe was called Yered [bringing down] because he brought down the manna. He was called G'dor [fencing] or Avigdor because he was able to keep the rebellious nature of the Israelites in check. He was called Chaver [friend, connection] because he connected Israel to their father in Heaven. His name was Socho because he was like a protecting Sukkah for Israel. Yekutiel [from *tikvah* – hope] means that Israel hoped for G-d in his days. His name was Zanuach [relegated] or Avi Zanuach, because he put aside the sins of Israel (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 13a*). Moshe was called Shemayah [Hashem heard him] because Hashem heard his prayer, and Halevi [the Levite] as he was from the Tribe of Levi (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 1:3*).

Pulling Moshe's Soul Down to Earth

Ohr Hachayim notices that the naming of Moshe is in the opposite order of all other naming in the Torah. Usually, the reason for the name is mentioned before the name as in: *"Whoever will hear will laugh... and she called his name Yitzchak."* Bityah hid the reason for the naming of Moshe since it was against the law of Egypt. She simply called him Moshe, without an explanation, however, Scripture adds the explanation. Alternatively, it is also possible that Pharaoh's daughter didn't know the entire reason for the name that Hashem gave her except the reason she mentioned. According to Arizal, Pharaoh's daughter knew that she didn't only pull Moshe out of the water. She pulled him out of the higher world to bring his soul down to earth. Her intention was to draw Moshe down from the world of Emanation into the world of Creation. This is the meaning of "the daughter of Pharaoh went down to wash on the Nile." For the Nile (יֵאוֹר) is the *gematria* of Creation (בריאה) and also has in it some of the letters of בריאה/beriah. (י-א-ר)... (Arizal, *Likutei Torah, Yesha'yahu*). The name Moshe, moreover, has the numerical value of 345, which is the *gematria* of K-El Shaday – corresponding to the world of creation (Arizal, *Sha'ar HaPesukim, Yesha'yahu*).

The name Moshe characterizes a man of great spiritual depths who is connected to the higher worlds. Thus, you may be a person of much potential and strength of which you, yourself, are not even aware. We can now understand why Hashem agreed with Bityah – daughter of Pharaoh, since it was by the greatest wisdom that she called his name Moshe. (*Avodat Hakodesh* 2:30).