

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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The

Servant Leadership

of
Moses

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Moses detail
on the Knesset
(Israeli
Parliament)
Menorah in
Jerusalem
depicts Aaron
and Hur holding
Moses's arms
at the Battle of
Rephidim

WITHOUT A DOUBT, ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN NAMES IN THE BIBLE

is Moses, the man chosen by God to lead His people out of Egypt and through the desert to the Promised Land. He was, like all men, flawed, yet Adonai repeatedly lauded him as a humble and servant-hearted leader. Throughout the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and *Tanakh* (OT), Moses is called “God’s servant,” “My servant,” “the servant of the Lord” and other iterations. In fact, the term “servant” is applied to him more than any other person in the Bible, including Jesus (Yeshua).

God made Moses responsible for His people, the Israelites. Moses often acted as an intermediary between the people he served and God, helping deliver God’s law, standing with the people on the journey through the desert and teaching them how to live and worship Him.

God Himself said of Moses, “*He is faithful in all My house*” (Num. 12:7). What made him such a standout in the eyes of the Lord? A closer examination of Moses’s qualities shows that despite his failings, he was a man whose leadership was bolstered by striving to serve not just the Almighty God, but the people entrusted to him as well.

Servant or Leader?

While today's society might be tempted to juxtapose leadership and servanthood, the two are actually meant to go hand in hand. The concept of a servant-leader is only confusing if we think of leaders as powerful, controlling people who make others do their bidding without a thought to their wellbeing, or if we view servants only as sniveling, fearful workers toiling away silently on the sidelines. General Bruce C. Clarke, an army officer who served in World War I, World War II and the Korean War clarified the concept perfectly when he said: "Rank is given you to enable you to better serve those above and below you. It is not given for you to practice your idiosyncrasies."

True leadership is servanthood, something we see modeled again and again by the patriarchs, judges, prophets and apostles in the Word, not to mention by our ultimate example, Jesus (Yeshua). Servant leadership turns the world's notions of power on their head; instead of people working to serve a leader, the leader exists to serve the people.

Moses fits this role, and God took notice of it throughout Scripture. The apostle Paul painted us a character portrait of Moses in Hebrews 11, when he wrote, "*By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt*" (Heb. 11:24-26). The apostle traced the first major instance of



Moses's faith to that moment when he chose to identify with the affliction of the people of God rather than with the luxury and position of Pharaoh's house.

Coincidentally, this was also Moses's first action as a leader—and an indication of his servant heart that made his leadership so successful. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explained in his book, *Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, that a Jewish person views a leader as someone who “identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God.” Moses chose to align himself with the God of Israel, thereby becoming associated with an entire nation of people who, though deeply flawed and at times downright wicked under his command, were in his eyes children of a greater promise.

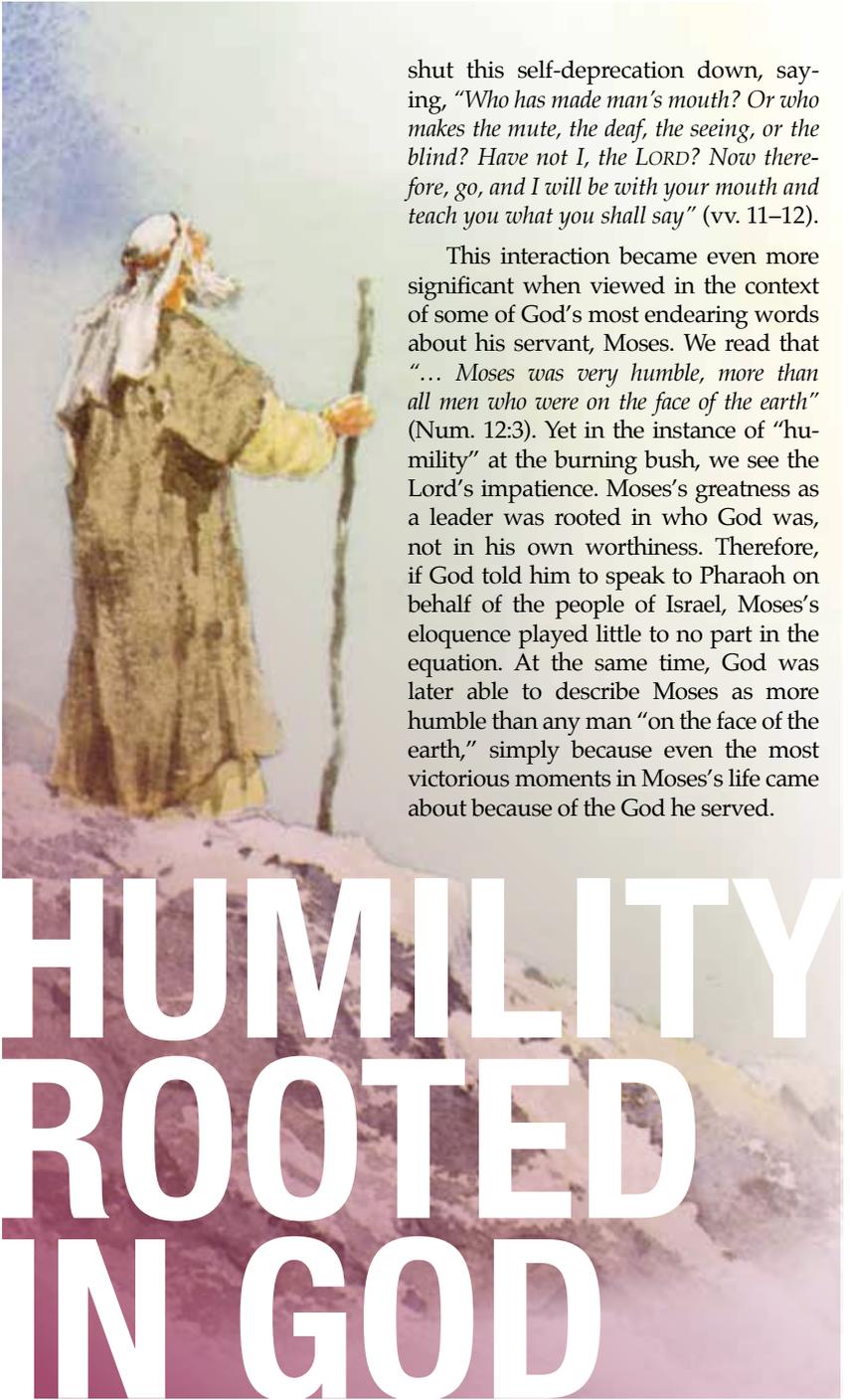
Humble Beginnings

When Moses stood at the burning bush, receiving the call of God to speak to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt, his first response was to insist he was unprepared. He couldn't speak well, he argued. He was an outcast, a prince turned shepherd. To top it off, his last act in Egypt before fleeing had been murder. Although we read in Acts 7:22 that Moses was “*learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds,*” he didn't consider this knowledge the compelling ability he would need to lead a people out of bondage.

In his article “Feast: Moses Servant of God,” John W. Ritenbaugh puts it well: “When God called him from the burning bush, he was ready. He did not realize it himself at the time, but I am sure he was a far different man, greatly humbled as a result of the education as a shepherd, and his fall from power as well, and knowing what it was like in comparison with being a scion of Egypt.”

Regardless of the exact reasons behind his insecurities, Moses was clear in his initial response to God at the burning bush: “*But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you’*” (Exod. 4:1), and later, “*O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue*” (v. 10). Yet God immediately





shut this self-deprecation down, saying, *“Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the LORD? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say”* (vv. 11–12).

This interaction became even more significant when viewed in the context of some of God’s most endearing words about his servant, Moses. We read that *“... Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth”* (Num. 12:3). Yet in the instance of “humility” at the burning bush, we see the Lord’s impatience. Moses’s greatness as a leader was rooted in who God was, not in his own worthiness. Therefore, if God told him to speak to Pharaoh on behalf of the people of Israel, Moses’s eloquence played little to no part in the equation. At the same time, God was later able to describe Moses as more humble than any man “on the face of the earth,” simply because even the most victorious moments in Moses’s life came about because of the God he served.

HUMILITY ROOTED IN GOD

A Servant Intercessor

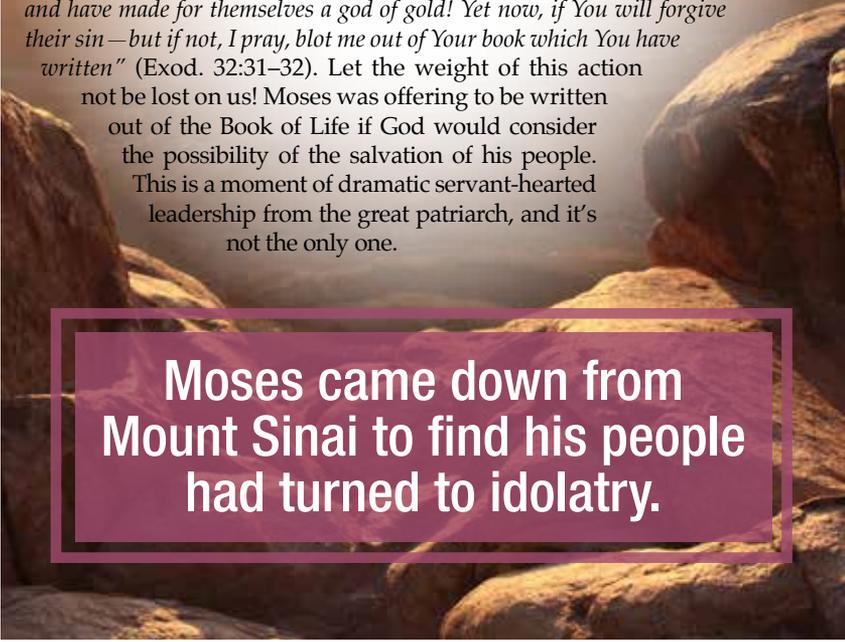
A clear example of Moses's heart for his people can be found after one of their greatest transgressions. In Exodus 32, Moses went up the mountain to receive the tablets of the Law from God. In his absence, the people despaired and erected for themselves a golden calf to worship. God's anger burned fiercely at this blatant idolatry. *"I have seen this people,"* He said, *"and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation"* (Exod. 32:9–10). It's important to note the exact terms of what God offered Moses. He would still keep His promise to Moses and would make of *him* a great nation, if only Moses would step aside while God's wrath consumed the sinful Israelites.

This option would likely have been irresistible to any power-hungry leader. After all, Moses must have been quite weary of all the complaining and hearing, *"We'd be better off in Egypt."* The Israelites were certainly not acting like a chosen people, prostrated as they were in front of a false god, offering sacrifices to an abomination. Yet Moses's heart was for his people, regardless of their sin. He pleaded with God, reminding Adonai of His promises, *"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever'"* (Exod. 32:13).

The Lord relented and Moses started his descent down the mountain. Later, he had another opportunity to plead with the Lord after the first round of judgment had been carried out at the hands of the Levites. Moses returned to the Lord and begged: *"Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written"* (Exod. 32:31–32). Let the weight of this action

not be lost on us! Moses was offering to be written out of the Book of Life if God would consider the possibility of the salvation of his people.

This is a moment of dramatic servant-hearted leadership from the great patriarch, and it's not the only one.



Moses came down from
Mount Sinai to find his people
had turned to idolatry.



A Leader in the Face of Opposition

Moses faced no small amount of opposition in his role as leader. At one point, even his own family rose up against him. We read in Numbers 12 that Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman he had married. They began to question whether God had really spoken through Moses, claiming He had also spoken through them. God's response was beautifully tender. He said, *"I speak with him [Moses] face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD"* (Num. 12:8). Because Moses was God's servant, Miriam and Aaron's accusations were not just against Moses. They were against God as well. God afflicted Miriam with leprosy, and once again, Moses's response was exactly what we'd already seen modeled by his servant leadership. He pleaded with God, *"Please heal her, O God, I pray!"* (v. 13). At no point in this chapter did Moses defend himself against the accusation of Miriam and Aaron. The only time he spoke was to beg God to have mercy on them.

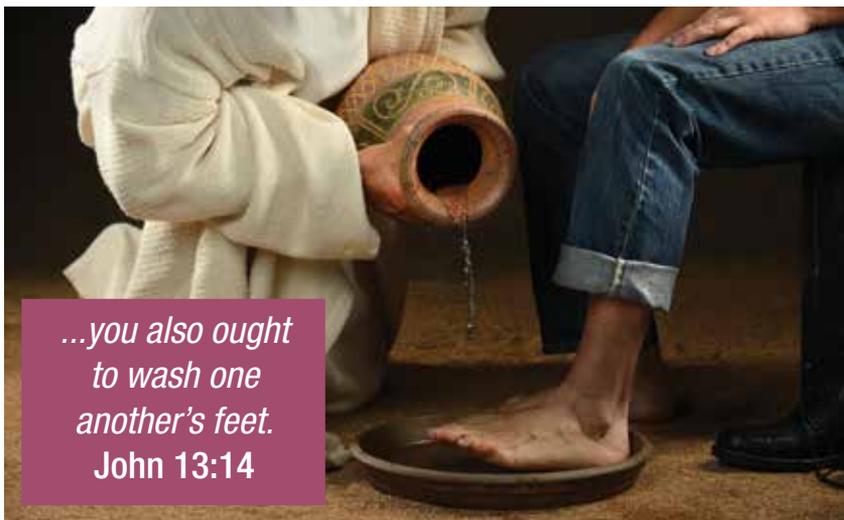
We see another story of Moses's intercession on behalf of those who spoke against him later in Numbers after Korah, Dathan and Abiram rose in opposition against Moses and Aaron. God's anger burned fiercely, but again we see Moses (and this time Aaron too) falling to their faces on behalf of the people of Israel. Though God initially told the two men to separate themselves from the entire congregation so He could bring judgment, the men begged, *"O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with the all the congregation?"* (Num. 16:22).

This repeated willingness to turn the other cheek and allow God to fight his battles and intercede on behalf of his enemies characterizes Moses's servant-hearted leadership. How could Moses refrain from responding to such abuse? I love the way author Dewey Beegle puts it in his book, *Moses, Servant of Yahweh*. He writes:

Time has a way of painting halos on the portraits of great men, and Moses is no exception. Yet those passages which picture him as a giant are balanced by those in which he is portrayed as a human with all the limitations of mortal flesh. The leading role in the whole story is Yahweh's. Moses was a gifted man, but it was only by Yahweh's grace that he lived to exercise those gifts... From start to finish the biblical narratives make it clear that Moses's greatness was due to the personal, face-to-face relationship which Yahweh had with him.

Moses's confidence in the face of opposition came from knowing that opposition to him was opposition to Yahweh, as mentioned before. He didn't need to defend himself because God would do that for him. We should strive to emulate this beautiful *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) example of truths Jesus illustrated later in the Writings of the Apostles (NT) to bless those who curse us, to be a peacemaker and to live as though the “*last will be first*” (Matt. 20:16).





*...you also ought
to wash one
another's feet.
John 13:14*

The Servant Heart of Jesus

Jesus (Yeshua) spoke often about this “upside-down” economy of servanthood and its role in the Kingdom of God. He modeled the concept of a servant-hearted leader who “*made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant*” (Phil. 2:7). When Jesus’s disciples were battling over who was “first” in the Kingdom, Jesus quieted their bickering with the following sobering truth: “*And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:44–45).

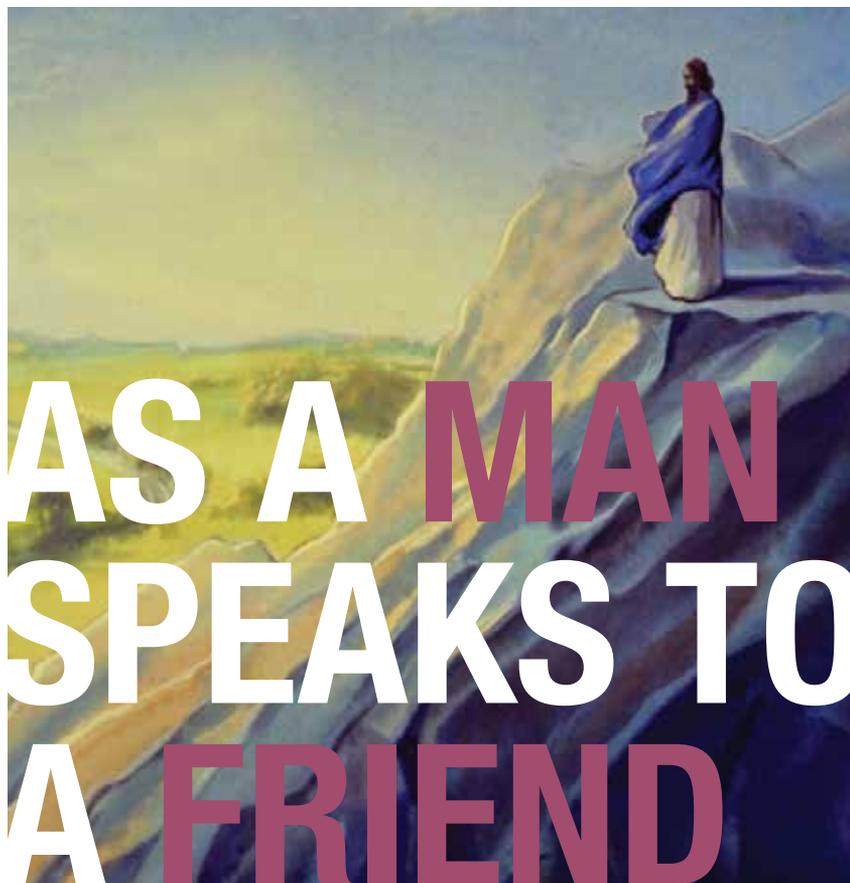
Jesus gathered quite the following while He walked the earth. He had no shortage of zealots in attendance who would have liked Him to preach the downfall of the Romans, but He did not do that. Rather, He preached a kingdom of meek, mourning, merciful, pure, persecuted peacemakers. He told people to go the extra mile. He sacrificed his reputation to sit with sinners and thieves and to touch the outcast and beggars. We talk about the moment when He washed His disciples’ feet (John 13) as a casual moment of kindness, but in ancient times it was no small thing. In a city crowded with animals, filth and the unwashed masses, sandaled feet would have been caked with filth by the time a traveler arrived at his or her destination. Because it wasn’t just dust, but often also excrement and other disgusting things that dirtied travelers’ feet, foot-washing was a nasty job relegated to slaves. You can imagine how incredible it must have been when Jesus wrapped himself in a towel and, in the role of the lowest of servants, began washing the dirtiest, smelliest parts of his disciples. It was such a *faux pas* that even Peter exclaimed against it, saying, “*You shall never wash my feet!*” (John 13:8).

But Jesus had a bigger plan than Peter could see. He was modeling the attitude He wanted His disciples to carry with them forever: “*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet*” (v. 14). Jesus, the greatest leader of all, was showing that true leadership involves sacrificing yourself for the ones you love and the ones you lead.

Goodbye to the Servant

Moses's servant-hearted leadership was exactly what the people of Israel needed to guide them through times of physical and spiritual hardship. Moses's servant nature did not make him weak. He stood for what was right, even in the face of great opposition, and even death, when the last title attributed to him was that of servant, "*So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab*" (Deut. 34:5).

Rabbi Sacks spoke about Moses's end of days as follows: "A good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders. That was Moses's greatest achievement—that he left behind him a people willing, in each generation, to accept responsibility for taking further the great task he had begun." Joshua was a good leader raised by a good leader. He was waiting on the lower part of the mountain when Moses received the Ten Commandments during the fateful building of the golden calf and was able to witness the leader's response to that difficulty. It was in part this training that prepared Joshua to lead the people where even Moses could not—into the Promised Land.



Closing Thoughts

I can hardly think of a better way to be known by the Lord than the way spoken of in Exodus 33, where we read, “So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (v. 11). If we’re looking for ways to emulate Moses and are seeking to uncover what kind of life leads to such an intimate relationship with God, perhaps his servant heart would be a good place to start.

We can respond to opposition with humility because God is our defender when we align our lives with His will. We can “wash others’ feet” as Jesus (Yeshua) did, not cringing from undignified or uncomfortable situations but serving selflessly. We are each called to step into a role of leadership in our communities, directing others to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so that one day He may say of us: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”



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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God’s chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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