



# *Al Shloshah Devarim*

Three *Divrei Torah*

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## Shmot 5767

While out tending the flocks, Moshe comes to “*har ha-Elohim horeva* — Horev, the mountain of God.” (Ex. 3:1). Perhaps he is unaware of the sanctity of the place, but he is clearly intrigued by the sight of an angel in a flaming bush. As he approaches this miraculous sight, God calls him by name and says: “Moshe!...Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” (Ex. 3:5)

One *pasuk* [verse], so many questions! For example:

1. Why should Moshe “not come closer”?
2. Why should Moshe remove his shoes?
3. What is holy ground?

Let us take them in order:

1. Why should Moshe “not come closer” to the fiery manifestation of God’s presence?

Ramban, the thirteenth century Spanish exegete, writes that although later in life Moshe he would attain an unprecedented prophetic level, at this point he was a neophyte. He lacked the qualifications, the “prophetic clearance,” to get any closer to God.

Perhaps Moshe was told to keep his distance to help maintain the mystery and awe of the event: the wilderness, the angel, the flames, the unconsumed bush, the voice of God. If Moshe had gotten closer, he might have been distracted by the details: Do the flames go through the angel or

behind him? Where does the fire come from, the branches or the ground below the bush? Is the angel's mouth moving when God's voice is heard?

By keeping Moshe at a distance, God preserves the power of the moment.

## 2. Why is Moshe told to remove his shoes?

Moshe is of the clan that will produce the *kohanim*, the priests, whose sacred service in the Holy Temple will be performed bare-footed. (To this day, before the *kohanim* recite the Priestly Blessing over the congregation during services on Shabbat — in Israel — and festivals, they remove their shoes.)

Chizkuni, a thirteenth century French commentator, reminds us that the Talmud mandates that one must not enter the Temple Mount wearing shoes. (BERAKHOT 54a). Since one is likely to have stepped in “unsanitary” places, it would be unseemly to wear such soiled shoes in a sacred place. So, too, it is here with Moshe.

A late sixteenth century commentator, Efrayim Shlomo ben Aharon of Prague, writes in his *Ollelot Efrayim* that removing his shoes was a lesson for Moshe in leadership: When you walk barefoot, you feel every pebble and thorn. As leader, Moshe will need to be able to feel every obstacle and discomfort that his people will face.

Perhaps it is that the sole of a shoe is the least penetrable of anything we wear. When approaching a sacred encounter, it is best to remove all barriers — figurative and literal — so that every part of the body, even the soles of your feet, might absorb the experience of the divine.

## 3. What is “holy ground”?

The JPS Torah commentary notes that just as *Sefer Breishit* (Genesis) introduced the concept of sacred time, *Sefer Shmot* (Exodus) now shows us sacred space. (Exodus, p. 15)

According to the Encyclopaedia Judaica, the notion of a holy site “is almost nonexistent in primary Jewish sources...Holiness, insofar as it can be applied to places, is measured according to the laws and mitzvot applying to the place...not according to what may once have happened there.” (8:921-2) However, over time, some places — particularly graves — have become venerated. Prayers offered at those sites are considered more efficacious.

Horev, “the mountain of God,” is not a burial place. There is no

remnant of a structure that had been used for sacred purposes; there is only God's statement that this is "holy ground." Certainly, God's presence makes the place sacred, but isn't God everywhere? The Sefat Emet (R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, a nineteenth century Polish commentator) quotes a midrash: no place is devoid of the divine presence, not even a thornbush.

Ramban offers that when the Shekhinah, God's presence, rested atop the mountain, the whole mountain was sanctified.

At what point, then, did Moshe step over the line onto holy ground? After the epiphany at the bush, when could Moshe put his shoes back on?

We've managed to quantify time, and we know by the clock when sacred time — Shabbat, holy days — begins and ends. The mountain was made sacred by God's presence. How much of the mountain? Where does the mountain begin, at this rock? At that plant? At the exact point where the land starts to rise? If God's presence confers even temporary sanctity, how far does it extend and for how long? When God's presence moves off the mountain, is that ground no longer holy?

We Jews can daven almost anywhere. With a few siddurim and a Sefer Torah we can turn a school gymnasium or a Boy Scout clubhouse into a synagogue and perform sacred rituals. As the Encyclopaedia Judaica notes, we can sanctify where we are by what we do there. Would that we are able to perform mitzvot and pray wherever we are so that every place we stand is "*admat kodesh*, holy ground."

## Acharei Mot - Kedoshim 5766

*"Mipnei seivah takum; v'hadarta p'nei zakein, v'yareita mei-Elohekha*  
— You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God." (LEV. 19:32)

Why would the Torah mandate respect for the elderly? Shouldn't it be obvious that a society would care for its elderly? After all, if the younger members of society have any expectation of growing old, wouldn't they want to give considerate treatment to the aged so that they can expect the same when it's their turn?

And why would the text seem to be repetitive: both "rise before the aged" and "show deference to the old"? According to Rashi, the renowned

eleventh century French exegete, this indicates that even if an elderly person is mean or unsavory, respect must be shown, for every elder has acquired wisdom that the young do not have. Further, Rashi tells us how to fulfill this mitzvah: Don't take an old person's seat, don't speak unbidden on behalf of an old person, and don't contradict an old person's statements. And, Rashi continues, if you think you can close your eyes to the elderly, the Torah adds "*v'yareita mei-Elohekha* — you shall fear your God." You cannot close your eyes to God.

Ramban, the thirteenth century Spanish commentator, cites the Talmud: the addition of the phrase "show deference to the old/*zakein*" means that only a *hakham*, a learned person, is to be respected (KIDDUSHIN 32b). But Saadia Gaon, an eleventh century Babylonian commentator, reads the Torah text as including all elderly persons, not just the learned.

Ibn Ezra, an eleventh century Spanish exegete, comments that the words, "*v'yareita mei-Elohekha* — you shall fear your God," are appended to the commandment because if you don't treat the elderly with consideration, you will be punished by God when you yourself are aged.

In *Arukh HaShulchan*, a nineteenth century compendium of work on Jewish law, the Lithuanian Rav Yechiel Michel Epstein follows the progression of rabbinic discussion from respecting the elderly in general to the view that "elderly" refers to the *talmid hakham*, one who is learned in Jewish text. This leads to the requirement to "rise before," i.e., respect, every learned person, regardless of age or personality.

Why couldn't the rabbis have taken the text at face value, leaving it at respect for the elderly? The Torah doesn't specifically mention respecting the *talmid hakham*, so perhaps the rabbis felt a need to encourage respect for knowledge of and skill with Torah, and found in this text a way to extend coverage.

One of the pleasures of Torah study is the continuing conversation that spans millennia and continents, with each generation seeking relevance to its time and place. Modern Israel follows the tenth-century Saadia Gaon's universalistic reading of the mitzvah to respect the elderly, with an emphasis on the literal. On public transportation in the United States, certain seats might be designated as "reserved for the elderly or handicapped." The first time I got on a public bus in Israel, I was delighted to see that, above those same seats, the signs read: "*mipnei seivah takum* — you shall rise before the aged."

## Nitzavim - Vayeilekh 5766

“*Vayeilekh Moshe vay’daber et ha-devarim ha-eileh el kol Yisrael* —  
Moshe went and spoke these things to all Israel.”

(DEUT. 31:1)

As one commentator points out, this wording is unique. Usually, the text reads: Moshe spoke, Moshe said, Moshe commanded.... Here, before speaking, “*Vayeilekh Moshe*,” Moshe went, he walked.

A “farewell” tour”? Ramban writes that Moshe went to say goodbye “*el kol Yisrael*,” to all the children of Israel. Another commentator notes that Moshe went to each and every Israelite. Thus, throughout time, in the blood and heart of every Jew can be found a word, a spark of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher.

The eighteenth century Torah commentary *Noam Megadim*, by R. Eliezer Ish Horowitz of Poland, interprets the phrase “*vayeilekh Moshe*” to mean after Moshe’s passing. Read in this way, the Torah is suggesting that even after his passing, Moshe’s words continued to be heard. Another commentator cites the Talmud (BERAKHOT 31a): When one leaves the presence of a friend, one’s parting words should be a rule of *halakhah*, law. So, Moshe left Bnei Yisrael with laws for repentance and final exhortations to follow God’s mandates.

Until now, Moshe has spoken, exhorted, commanded, assembled, talked, complained, raged — all in an effort to bring Bnei Yisrael closer to God. Now, it is Moshe who approaches the people. Perhaps he went door to door. It certainly would have been effective; a little personal attention can go a long way.

In our household, we’ve found that the best way to ensure that the person to whom you’re speaking hears you is to touch that person while you’re talking. A hand set gently on an arm or shoulder is sometimes needed to break the spell of an enthralling book, the concentration of a challenging Sudoku or crossword, involvement in a vital Internet chat, or a petulant mood. It also matters that what’s being said isn’t being yelled across the room or from floor to floor.

At the end of his life, at the end of the Torah, Moshe is speaking personally. He is not relaying God’s words, as he has done so often. Moshe is attempting to allay his people’s fear of uncertainty, to reassure them about his

successor Yehoshua, to reaffirm that God is present and *holekh imahem* — walking with them.

Perhaps, as the commentators suggest, Moshe is extending himself to touch each Israelite, so that his personal words will be heard (*Ha'azinu*) and his personal blessing (*V'zot Ha-Brakhah*) will be appreciated.

As we bless our daughters each *erev* Shabbat, we lay our hands on the head of each child. This helps make a connection that we feel adds weight to the formulaic text. It's just not the same when they're away from home and we bless them over the phone.

*"Vayeilekh Moshe vay'daber et ha-devarim ha-eileh el kol Yisrael* — Moshe went and spoke these things to each Israelite." A demagogue can incite a mob, a bully can rule a group; a true leader touches and inspires each of us.



*Since the week of parshat Vayyechi 5764, Jonathan Kremer has been presenting a dvar Torah at Thursday morning minyan at Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El, Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. To receive his devarim by email, write to [5kremers@verizon.net](mailto:5kremers@verizon.net). To view Jonathan's graphic design and Judaic art works, visit [www.kremerdesigns.com](http://www.kremerdesigns.com). (He has designed Kerem since its inception.) He also composes tunes for Jewish liturgy and sings with Kol Minor, an a cappella group.*

