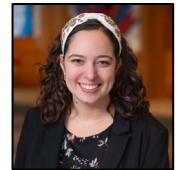


## Moshe the Mindful?

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Just a few verses after meeting Moshe, we delve into his world and learn a wealth of details: separated from his birth family, raised by Pharaoh's daughter, forced to flee after striking an Egyptian, and encountering God while tending to his father-in-law's flock. Just before discovering the burning bush, the Tanakh notes that Moshe drove his flock *אֶתֶר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֲרִבָּה*, "into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God" (Exod. 3:1).

Why, after years among people, did Moshe seek the wilderness—a solitary and desolate place? Was it for his own sake for a moment to himself, or did he go there with the purpose of finding God?

As I near the end of my journey through rabbinical school, especially as I enter my final semester, I am reflecting on how I've processed this experience. Someone recently asked if I journal to navigate the transition toward becoming a rabbi. Typically, my response would have been no; I shy away from that form of self-reflection. Yet, I've recently embraced the unfamiliar: welcoming solitude with my pen, journal, and self.

Moshe's journey mirrors the struggles many face in navigating transitions and seeking purpose amidst uncertainty. The 19th-century Polish commentator Ha'emek Hadavar suggests Moshe intentionally led his flock to the most remote location, a place no other shepherd dared venture, seeking solitude. He needed such desolation to encounter God. While we don't know if Moshe had his own meditation, journaling, or spiritual practices that promoted solitude, his courage and strength in recognizing the necessity of solitude are evident. Being alone doesn't equate to feeling lonely; it can be a conscious endeavor to connect with oneself and, more profoundly, with God. Perhaps Moshe only gathered the courage to approach the burning

bush precisely because of the solitude he sought, away from the chaos of family and life.

I wonder if the intentional separation from the familiar, an act often misconstrued as loneliness, was instead a purposeful endeavor. It echoes the profound truth that solitude can foster not only self-discovery but also a profound connection with the divine.

In this desolate moment, Moshe finds the strength to approach "the heart of the fire," *בְּלִבַּת־אֵשׁ*, without turning away (Exod. 3:2). Had the fire appeared in a more crowded area, Moshe might have been concerned for others' safety. Yet, in the vast desert, with a moment to breathe, Moshe gazes long enough into the fire to realize it does not consume the bush. Here, his leadership potential emerges: he investigates the peculiar bush, showing no fear, approaching closer, and suddenly encountering God.

Rashi teaches that God resided within this fire. Thus, Moshe wouldn't have noticed God's presence without his courage to move toward it. If he hadn't sought to distance himself from the noise of society, he may never have discovered his true purpose.

Virginia Woolf described solitude as "freedom from the oppression of constant noise and distraction."<sup>1</sup> In an era dominated by incessant noise and perpetual connectivity, finding moments of true solitude becomes an arduous task. However, therein lies the irony—amidst the digital clamor, the pursuit of solitude becomes all the more valuable for inner exploration and spiritual connection.

We must view spending time with our thoughts as a deliberate internal exploration, even if it involves

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

uncomfortable self-reflection, in pursuit of meaningful experiences. Surely, Moshe didn't know he was destined to become a prophet, but his courage to step away and lead his flock into the wilderness was the first stride toward becoming the leader of the Israelites.

This deliberate quest for introspection, akin to the ancient solitude sought by Moshe, stands as a testament to the enduring human quest for understanding and purpose. Just as Moshe's solitude paved the way for his divine encounter, our contemporary pursuits of journaling, meditation, or venturing outside comfort zones serve as modern pathways to self-discovery.

Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani, who spent extensive time alone in a Japanese cabin in the 1980s, taught, "The only real teacher is not in a forest, or a hut or an ice cave in the Himalayas, It is within us."<sup>2</sup> Tiziano Terzani's wisdom reverberates today, reminding us that the most profound teachings originate not from external sources but from within ourselves. The transformational power of solitude, whether in the wilderness of ancient times or the quiet corners of our modern lives, serves as a timeless beacon guiding us toward self-realization and enlightenment.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/03/the-virtues-of-isolation/521100/>