**“It Matters What We Do”**

If you’ve read this week’s e-news or heard me talk before, you’ll know I love the stories of Moses. What an eventful and chaotic life he had! I thought I knew the story well, but I’d like to share insights inspired by Jewish writers commenting on their sacred texts about their greatest prophet.

I think we can see that Moses took a while, but finally learned, that “It matters what we do.” It’s from ideas of how Unitarian Universalist kids could talk about their church, and it works in this faith community, too. So if asked, we might say, “I go to a church where people have open minds, loving hearts, and hands that are ready to help." Or, we believe, "It's a blessing we are born, and it matters what we do. What we know about God is a piece of the truth. We let the beauty we love, be what we do. And we don't have to do it alone." And if asked what we believe, we might say, "We believe in asking good questions"— then ask about their beliefs, and ***listen***.

**Establish the work of our hands**, prayed Moses in Psalm 90. Over 4,000 years ago, Semitic people started crossing the deserts from Palestine into Egypt. Some came as traders and immigrants. Others were prisoners of war, and yet others were sold into slavery by their own people[[1]](#footnote-1). We enter Moses’ story when Egypt’s Pharaoh was worried the enslaved Hebrew minority’s population was increasing. His plan to weaken them through harsh rule and forced labour had the opposite effect; “the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out.[[2]](#footnote-2)” Concerned they might ally themselves with Egypt’s enemies, he ordered the Israelite midwives to kill all male babies at birth.

Moses is born during this time. His mother, Jochebed, hides him in a reed basket in the river, with sister Miriam to keep watch, and miraculously, he’s rescued by the king’s daughter, and raised in the palace. That’s quite a rags to riches story—and it’s just the beginning.

But let’s not forget the midwives. When he discovers they’ve disobeyed him, and not killed male babies, they tell the king it’s “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” One Jewish rabbi says, “In their refusal to obey Pharaoh, [the midwives] assume a key role in the collective birthing of the people of Israel.”

Next come the missing years—do you hear the echo of Moses’ life in the way stories were told about Jesus? By people who believed he was the greatest prophet, the deliverer of their people, the Teacher, the man of God. Whatever position Moses attained through his palace upbringing, and whatever challenges to his identity, it doesn’t save him from the wrath of Pharaoh.

Think about it for a while. Think of the challenges for Māori children taken from their mothers and fostered by Pākehā. Think of the Black children adopted by people with a “white saviour” attitude, detaching them from their people and culture. Think of the delicate balance Pasifika kids face in a Euro-centric education system that expects impudent behaviour from them: making eye contact, questioning their teachers, valuing individual achievement over community learning. Imagine being a fourth generation Chinese Kiwi from a working class family, in university tutorials with wealthy international students, and being no good at maths.

Imagine being discovered by royalty and adopted into the Palace with its peculiar customs and bizarre religious rituals, over the years becoming highly educated and successful, looking and dressing just like the other royals, with all that implicit authority. Imagine learning that your nurse and childminder, a badly dressed woman with an estuary accent, a despised Hebrew slave, is your birth mother. Imagine watching her disguise her innate intelligence from the entitled lesser royals she works beside, see them treat her with suspicion and contempt.

Imagining an adolescent Moses in that situation, we begin to understand his churning emotions, his resentment at missing out on a normal family life, his shame at the ignorance and passivity of his enslaved kinsmen, his expectation of deference to a member of the royal household. He despises their failure to manage their pitiful income, their propensity to breed like rabbits, and their live-for-the-moment, don’t expect your life to be better than this attitude; he’s uneasy with their politeness to outsiders and their rowdy family parties, envying the hospitality, but expecting to be waited on like a prince.

Imagine finding that his position as foster grandson of the king doesn’t protect him when he kills an Egyptian taskmaster who’s beating a Hebrew slave. How dare he! Pharoah wants Moses executed. Imagine his encounter with two scrapping Hebrews: he thinks he’s in a position to help, but they resent his intervention, and ask if he’ll kill them in a temper like the Egyptian and try to bury their bodies in the sand. What does he know, with his fancy clothes and posh accent? They’re real men, they’re sorting things out with their fists, and they don’t want his anger on their behalf, or his high-handed interference.

So Moses flees from Egypt all the way to Midian, leaving behind both birth and foster families. While stopped at a well to rest and drink, he defends a priest’s daughters who’re being harassed by other shepherds. When their father asks why they’re home earlier than usual, they answer: “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." "Where is he then?" their father asks. "Why did you leave him there? Invite him for supper to break bread."[[3]](#footnote-3)

It’s a great story, and of course, Moses marries one of the daughters, Zipporah, and settles in to work as a shepherd for his father-in-law. As a Midianite priest and a land-owner, maybe his father-in-law helps Moses integrate the heritage of his own people with his higher education and assumed authority. We might wonder how well he works with his wife’s sisters who’ve been managing the flocks on their own. Does he expect to become farm manager, or is he content with his role in the community of drawing water and herding animals?

And one day, Moses decides to investigate a tree that seems unnatural: on fire but not burning up. [Rabbi Shimon Felix](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/author/rabbi-shimon-felix/) suggests that during this time Moses develops his leadership skills, his ability to see beyond his narrow struggles, and his role as liberator. “It makes more sense,” he writes, “to see this not as a pyrotechnics display put on by God to impress Moses and get his attention, but, rather, as a final, ultimate step taken by Moses… the final stage in his evolution and growth as a person and a leader.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

So Moses discovers that here in the foreign land of Midian, he’s on holy ground, and he comes to realise his mission: he must return to Egypt, and free his people. But Moses protests: nobody will listen to him; they won’t take him seriously. “This is our first greatest fear: That those we deeply love and care about won’t ever really get us,” says Rabbi Michelle Missagieh[[5]](#footnote-5). Next, Moses admits his—and our—second fear: “I don’t have the skills to make a difference in the world… Who am I to take a leadership position…?” A third time, he protests. “What Moses is really expressing is our third deep fear,” writes Rabbi Michelle. “When put to the test, I don’t think I can actually do what others want of me, I’m scared I won’t fulfil my destiny… be the person I’m meant to be, change for the better, or even live up to even my own hopes and dreams for myself.”

But there’s a solution: ask for help! Aaron, Moses’ brother, will be right there with him. That’s when Moses overcomes his very real, very human fears, and stops making excuses.

So begins the heart-rending story of liberation and rebellion we know as The Exodus; jubilation when pharaoh and his chariots drown in the Reed Sea; sister Miriam’s triumphant dance with the other women; the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night; water cascading from a rock; miraculous food appearing; the 10 Commandments inspired on Mt Sinai.

But Moses’ troubles aren’t over: his flock of ex-slaves might not be used to making their own decisions but they don’t want to take orders, either. And yes, Moses was their liberator, but they resent his assumption that he knows God’s will, and they still see him as a class traitor, who’s moved away and mixed with different sorts of people. Aaron and Miriam understand them! They recall that while they gathered straw to make mud bricks, Moses grew up in palatial luxury. “Throughout antiquity, Egypt was known as the breadbasket of the world,” writes archaeologist [Philippe Bohstrom](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/writers/WRITER-1.4699323). “The annual flooding of the Nile produced rich harvests, and when famine hit neighbouring lands, starving peoples often made their way to the fruitful soils of Egypt.”

The liberated Hebrews yearn for fatted calves and quail and sweetmeats instead of manna; the generation born in the desert think of Egypt with nostalgia, and berate Moses for bringing them to this desolation. Time and again, they rebel: while Moses communes with God on the mountain, they ask Aaron to help them make a golden calf to represent their deity, since Moses has disappeared.

And eventually, at 120 years of age, clear-sighted and healthy, Deuteronomy tells us, Moses is taken once more to the mountaintop and shown the Land of Promise, but he dies and is buried there in Moab, never to see the covenant fulfilled.

And yet, between sorting out inter-tribal rivalries, and making sure only the purest lambs were used for sacrifices, facing his family’s disapproval of his mixed-race marriage, completing the ornate Tabernacle in the wilderness, keeping an eye out for that pillar of cloud by day and fire by night—Moses has time and energy to write this prayer:

“For a thousand years in thy sight

are but as yesterday when it is past,

and as a watch in the night…

“Let thy work appear unto thy servants,

and thy glory unto their children.

**“And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us:**

**and establish thou the work of our hands upon us;**

**yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it.”[[6]](#footnote-6)**

Perhaps Moses understood that his life’s work was complete, and it was up to others to continue it. Perhaps he took a long-term view—a hundred years or a thousand are like a day gone by, or like the night watch; it seems long, but how quickly it is done.

Deuteronomy[[7]](#footnote-7) is the book of the Torah whose law and theology most directly shaped later Judaism. It anticipates… a society pursuing justice and righteousness, living in harmony with God and enjoying His bounty[[8]](#footnote-8). But the promise of this land is conditional[[9]](#footnote-9): Israel’s welfare depends on maintaining a society governed by God’s social and religious laws. The Torah’s humanitarianism is most developed in Deuteronomy’s concern for the welfare of the poor and disadvantaged.

By Jesus’ time, much of the law involved what work you could and couldn’t do, who you could and couldn’t work with, and when; how particular tasks were to be done down to the last detail. Jesus was familiar with the Torah, and its greatest prophet, Moses. We heard last week about the scribes and pharisees trying to trick Jesus with questions about paying tribute to Caesar. In today’s reading, they’re back with questions of law. But there’s more to the Torah than rules and regulations, so Jesus answers:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.”

This is Deuteronomy’s concern for the welfare of the poor and disadvantaged in action.

And it sounds relatively simple, doesn’t it? Provided, of course, you’ve learned to love yourself, to love that of *you* which is God, to see and love the God in your neighbours—even the noisy ones, the messy ones, the ones who play their music too loud or mow their lawns too early in the morning. The neighbours who whine a lot: the incessant writers-to-the-editor, the ones we wish would get a life; the doom-sayers and gloom merchants; the ones who try to take the shine off others’ achievements…

*Those* neighbours. Love *them* with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds—that’s how we establish the work of our hands.

Or maybe, we should love through our actions first, in faith that our hearts will catch up. Because, in these ways, our enterprise is favoured, and the divine beauty shines in us.

You might like to say it with me:

"It's a blessing we are born, and it matters what we do.

What we know about God is a piece of the truth.

We let the beauty we love, be what we do.

And we don't have to do it alone."

Blessed be the work of our hands.

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1. https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/.premium-were-hebrews-ever-slaves-in-ancient-egypt-yes-1.5429843 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/birthings-and-beginnings/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zipporah [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/?s=Moses+and+the+burning+bush [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/stop-making-excuses-and-step-up-to-the-plate/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. King James Version [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Excerpted with the permission of the Rabbinical Assembly from Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary (© 2001 by The Rabbinical Assembly, published by the Jewish Publication Society). https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/deuteronomy/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Deuteronomy 4:5‑8, 7:12‑13 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Deuteronomy 11:8‑9, 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)