

# *The Education of God: Moses*

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God stared in unbelief at the stack of work piled on his desk: reports, proposals, complaints, requests covered the entire surface. Out of the midst of the accumulation his gooseneck lamp struggled to liberate itself; nothing else could be seen rising above the piles. As he watched in silence, one stack of papers, without warning or apparent cause, slid from the desk and spilled onto the floor. Pushing his way into the middle of all the papers, God found the intercom, and buzzed for his administrative assistant.

"You rang?" asked Satan, as he closed the door behind him.

"Yes, I rang," said God. "What in the name of all that's holy is this clutter on my desk?"

"Well," said Satan, "when you take an extended vacation, the work does tend to pile up. You never were very good at delegating our functions, so it just waits till you get back. Now, over here, you have your regular daily reports on fallen sparrows-- after all, you did say you didn't want one to fall unnoticed. And over here are the reports on the number of hairs on every human head-- though I've never understood why you wanted to know that little detail. (By the way, we've noticed an interesting trend: as male human beings age, the number of hairs on their heads decreases-- unless you count beards-- then it seems to remain about the same.) Oh, and here are the weekly pastoral prayers asking for the protection of various nations and heads of state, and an end of death and suffering for friends and an increase of death and suffering for enemies-- the usual stuff. These are prayers for rain; these are prayers for sunshine; these are children's bedtime and mealtime prayers-- most of it pretty unremarkable."

"What about that mountain of stuff on the credenza over there?" asked God. "What in heaven's name is all of that?"

"Oh, that," said Satan. "That's the pile of prayers and complaints and petitions from the Children of Israel."

"Who?" said God.

"The Children of Israel," said Satan. "Oh, that's right. You were gone when all that happened. Well, let me bring you up to date. You remember Jacob? Abraham's grandson? Well, the morning after you and he had that wrestling match..."

"What wrestling match?" asked God. "I never wrestled with anyone! why would I spend time wrestling with Abraham's grandson?"

"To tell you the truth, I never gave that story much credence myself," said Satan, "but Jacob came home one morning with a permanent limp and insisted it was the result of wrestling you to a draw."

"To a draw!" shouted God. "He wrestled me to a draw? What fool would believe a story like that? When I enter a contest, I never settle for less than winning."

"Well, be that as it may," said Satan, "such was his claim. In fact, he said he got you in a half-nelson and wouldn't let you go until you had blessed him. Right after that he changed his name to Israel."

"Changed his name? The longer I watch human beings, the less I understand them," sighed God. "anyway, what's this got to do with that pile of petitions on the credenza?"

"Well, to make a long story short, there was this severe drought all over the fertile crescent. One of Israel's twelve sons, a kid named Joseph..."

"Twelve kids!" exclaimed God. "I guess I'm not the only one he was wrestling with!"

"Actually," said Satan, "it was thirteen-- he had a daughter, Dinah, too, but she spends most of her time in the kitchen. In any case, Israel's son, Joseph, organized a very effective program of famine relief for Pharaoh in Egypt. Egypt had the only reliable supply of food in the entire middle-east; so Israel packed up the kids and moved to Egypt. Pharaoh received them well for Joseph's sake, and gave them some choice real estate in Goshen. Eventually, Joseph died, Pharaoh died, and a new generation forgot the debt Egypt owed the Children of Israel..."

"I thought you were going to make this long story short," interrupted God. "It sounds like you intend to recite a national saga, and all those stacks of petitions are growing even as we stand here. What does all this have to do with anything?"

"Well," said Satan, "it is a long story. Egypt enslaved Israel. They have them engaged in slave labor camps, building cities. They have enforced population control. All in all, Egypt has made life miserable for the Israelites. Those stacks represent the prayers addressed to you by the Israelites seeking a redress of grievances."

"Why petition me?" asked God. "I didn't send them to Egypt. I gave them a nice quiet spot of their own. It isn't my fault they go wandering all over the place. And what am I supposed to do about the Egyptians? They don't even believe in me."

"Well," said Satan, "they seem to think you made some kind of open-ended commitment to Abraham, which they inherited-- something about you saying 'trust me, you won't be sorry.'"

"Oh yeah," said God. "I do remember something like that-- I guess I'll have to do something about the situation. Tell you what, tomorrow morning we'll have a strategy session to try to develop an approach to this problem."

"Sorry," said Satan, "but you'll have to handle this one yourself. Now that you're back, I'm taking a few personal leave days to do a little walking up and down upon the earth. This place gets to you after a while. I need a little R and R."

God dismissed his assistant and sat quietly staring at the petitions and prayers stacked up all over his office. They seemed to increase in number even as he watched. "It'll do no good to appeal to Pharaoh directly," he thought. "I find it almost impossible to carry on a civil conversation with someone who refuses to acknowledge my existence. I suppose I'll have to look for someone who can be my spokesman, my prophet-- someone who can gain access to Pharaoh. It can't be just any brick-maker. It'll have to be someone with connections in the palace."

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Moses stood brooding alone in the desert. Life had not gone well for him. First there was the shock of discovering that he was adopted, and that he was a descendant of slaves, not of princes. Then he'd witnessed the abuse of his people at the hands of his adoptive grandfather's soldiers. He'd been so angered, he'd actually killed that overseer. Now, forced to flee, he was alone in the desert-- without friend, without family, with no future. Moses was feeling so sorry for himself he did not hear God call his name. God called a second time, and still could not break Moses' self absorption. Suddenly, the bush in front of Moses burst into flames-- flames which burned intensely, but didn't seem to consume the bush. Moses was startled out of his self-pity.

"Now that I've got your attention, Moses, I wonder if we could have a little chat," said God.

"That's quite a trick," said Moses, " how did you do that?"

"Never mind," said God, "I have more important things to talk with you about. I want you to undertake a special mission for me. I want you to go to the Pharaoh in Egypt and ask him please to release the Israelites so they can go back home where they belong. You see, I have a special obligation to the Children of Israel-- a promise I made long time ago."

"Who are you?" asked Moses. "What makes you think I can get in to see Pharaoh? Even if I did, I couldn't deliver your message. Every time I see my Grandfather, I get tongue-tied and begin to stutter. And even if I could deliver the message, what makes you think he would release the Israelites?"

"Well, just tell him it's God's will," said God.

"What God?" asked Moses.

"THE GOD," said God, "the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the great I AM."

"Oh, that God," said Moses. "You don't seem to understand. Pharaoh has hundreds of Gods. He plays one off against the other, that way he doesn't have to take orders from anyone. This approach of yours just isn't going to work with my grandfather."

"Look," said God, "I made the heavens and the earth. I must know what I'm doing. Trust me, and you won't regret it. Take your brother Aaron along for company, if you like. Just do this one little favor for me. You'll be hailed as a national liberator until the end of time."

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So it was that in time Moses stood before the Pharaoh of Egypt.

"You've decided to come home, have you," said Pharaoh. "I don't know what to do with you, Moses," said the ruler. "I took you into my home; I treated you as one of the family; I gave you every possible advantage-- a good education, fine clothes, servants, chariots-- and how do you reward me? You turn against me; you take up with that Israelite rabble; you run with street gangs; you kill one of my employees. Now here you are back again, dressed in long robes, like a juvenile delinquent. What do you want this time?"

"W-w-w-well, Grandfather," said Moses, "I-I-I-I've come to ask you to release the Children of Israel and p-p-p-permit them to go back to their ancestral homeland. Th-th-th-this wasn't my idea. I-I-I-I'm supposed to say 'Thus saith the Lord God: Let my people go!'"

"Oh, Moses," sighed Pharaoh, "have you been smoking pot again? You know that if one God gives an order, we can always find another who will give a different order. We must act on the basis of national interest, and it just isn't in Egypt's national interest to let the Israelites go. Beside, where would they go? To Palestine? How do you think the PLO would feel about that? It would throw the entire middle east into turmoil. Why don't you go take a nice warm bath, get into some decent clothes, and at dinner we'll talk about your future."

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Moses stood staring at a bush in front of the palace. "It didn't work, God," he said to no one in particular. "God, are listening to me? God?"

"Shhh," said God in a low voice. "That guard is watching you. You want to get carted off for observation for chatting with bushes? Let's find a place where we can talk undisturbed."

Finding a deserted stretch of river bank, Moses stretched out in the warm sun. "I told you it wouldn't work," he began. "I told you my..."

"Never mind," said God. "I know what happened. I was listening the whole time. It's obvious we're going to have to try something to convince Pharaoh. Go back and tell him that if he doesn't release the Israelites, I'll start to get nasty. I have a whole bunch of plagues up my sleeve. I wonder how he'd like to see the Nile run red with blood, or maybe a plague of locusts, or maybe he'd like a painful skin condition. I could overrun the place with frogs. Oh, there are dozens of things I could do. Go, Moses, tell him to let my people go, or I will smite his country."

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Two weeks later, at the same deserted spot along the banks of the Nile, Moses addressed God again:

"Look, God, this just isn't going to work," said Moses. "We've tried everything you suggested. Pharaoh says that hordes of locusts descend upon Egypt every so often anyway. The boils only caused him to consult an expert dermatologist. The bloody Nile he says was the result of erosion upstream at the river's source-- says it's actually good for the soil. The hail shook him for a bit, but he got an old almanac and decided that once every century or so Egypt is due for some rogue weather. When the frogs showed up, he dined on frog's legs. Besides, he says that a great nation simply cannot give in to blackmail. Egypt has too much pride for that. As a matter of fact, he increased the workload of the Israelites and decided since they had so much time for complaining, they could find their own straw for making bricks. He is a stubborn old man. Now all he'll say is that I should get a haircut and shave my beard, and give up this adolescent rebellion. Maybe he's right," sighed Moses.

"Wait a minute," shouted God. "We don't give in that easily. It's time Pharaoh felt God's full power. Until now I've just been toying with him. Tomorrow morning you tell that stubborn old man that if he doesn't release the Israelites, I'll, I'll-- I'll kill the first born of all Egypt. After all, my cause is just; and after all, I am God. Talk about national pride, what about my pride? I can scarcely allow my plans to be thwarted by one stubborn mortal."

"But God, you don't really mean to do it? I mean, the children are innocent. They don't have any part in this. There must be some other way," objected Moses.

"When the cause of liberty and justice and sovereign pride hangs in the balance, we must be prepared to do difficult and unpleasant things," said God. "Take my message to Pharaoh. And then go tell the Israelites to get ready to travel. Oh, by the way, just so Pharaoh knows we're serious, have the Israelites mark their houses some way. Say it is so my messengers don't kill the wrong babies."

"How shall we mark our houses?" asked Moses.

"Oh, I don't know. Think of something. Isn't this the season when they often have spring lamb for dinner? When they kill the lamb this evening, have them smear a little blood on the door, just something so Pharaoh's spies are sure to see it."

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God was sitting at his uncluttered desk when his administrative assistant entered.

"Good to have you back," said God smiling. "Gabriel is a fine fellow, and works hard, but he just doesn't have your flair for detail. He really isn't all that bright, either. Rather something of a 'yes man.' Now you can get back to your tasks, and Gabriel can get back to his real love, playing first trumpet in the symphony."

"Nice to be back," said Satan. "I see you've taken care of the Children of Israel."

"Oh, yeah," said God. "No problem. Of course, Pharaoh was a bit stubborn, but after I gave him a demonstration of my power, he eventually saw it my way. The Israelites are camped at Sinai now, getting organized and preparing to travel to Canaan. I've arranged emergency food supplies until they get on their feet again. I don't like welfare, strips people of their dignity, you know. But sometimes there just isn't any other alternative. You're awfully quiet. What's that frown all about? I get the impression you do not approve of the way I've handled this situation."

"Well," said Satan, "I don't like to second guess or to use the advantage of hindsight to be overly critical, but I can't help thinking of all those innocent children who were killed as part of your scheme."

"Funny, that's what Moses said," commented God. "But there just wasn't any other way. Pharaoh called my bluff. My honor was at stake. I couldn't just give in to him. Besides, I promised Abraham. It's really Pharaoh's fault. That stubborn old man should have given in to my demands."

"I can't help wondering," mused Satan, "if you realize the full consequences of your action."

"Of course I do," said God. "Israel is free. I've demonstrated my power. No one will ever resist my plans again. And I've taken care of that stack of paperwork which was cluttering up the office. I think I've done quite well, and I did it all without your help or advice."

"That's true," said Satan quietly. "You have also just invented international terrorism."

"What?" said God.

"Well, what else would you call it?" asked Satan. "You could not make Pharaoh do as you wanted him to do, so you unleashed violence on innocent people-- on little children."

You escalated the violence until the government gave in to your demands. Isn't that terrorism?"

"But there didn't seem to be any other way," said God. "He refused my demand for justice. He didn't even believe I existed. I had no other alternative. What could I do?"

"I don't know," said Satan. "What bothers me most is what will happen when human beings begin to follow your example. After all, they are a very imitative species. Once they begin to think that the end justifies the means there is no telling what they may do to each other."

"Oh my god," said God. "I'm going to have to find a way to keep them from following my example. And I'd better do it quickly."

So it was that God appeared again to Moses. "Is there some place we can talk without being interrupted?" asked God.

"Why don't we go up on the mountain," replied Moses. "Everybody is busy getting the camp organized. Nobody has time for hiking and mountain climbing at the moment. We'll not be disturbed up there."

When they reached the mountaintop, Moses asked, "Now, what's on your mind? Before you get to that, though, I want to tell you how impressed everyone is with the way you handled Pharaoh. Who would have thought of using innocent children to force him to give us our freedom. It was a stroke of genius. Even the doubters are singing your praises."

"That's what I want to talk to you about," said God. "You know that things that are right for God to do may not always be right for human beings to do. I mean, you shouldn't always follow my example. I mean actions that are right in one situation may not be right in another."

"Oh," said Moses, "then you think there are no absolutes, that ethics must be situational?"

"That's not quite what I had in mind," said God. "What I want to talk with you about is a series of rules or regulations which will permit human beings to live together in peace and co-operation, and prevent them from trying to exercise powers which properly belong only to me. I thought maybe we could put together a few rules or laws for governing human conduct."

"Like, 'be nice to each other, and don't fight,' and things like that?" asked Moses.

"Well, sort of," said God. "Only, maybe we should dress it up a bit, make it sound a bit more impressive. Let's begin with something like 'Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not lie; thou shalt not covet.' How would that be?"

"Okay, I guess," said Moses, "but maybe we should put something in about worshipping you, and special holy days, and things like that, so they'll know the law is from you and not just my doing. Maybe I should carve it on stone. Much more impressive than waving around a piece of papyrus."

"Fine," said God, "whatever you think. But above all, make sure you include that one about not killing. I'm very serious about that one."

"Great," said Moses, "I think we're really on to something here. A written document will give real legitimacy to government, make it appear as if you endorse the policies of the government, keep people from just doing as they please. You know, I'm more and more impressed with the way you manage this universe."

Moses set to work to carve his code of laws on a slab of stone. (Had he been a professional stone carver, it would have been a more comprehensive code, but since he was an amateur, he tired quickly, and decided to leave it at ten basic rules.)

God watched him work for a while, and then wandered off, thinking to himself that law was at best a weak hedge against the powerful forces he'd unleashed within the human community. Looking down the centuries, he saw that in the inevitable struggle between justice and law, the innocent would often suffer and mercy would seldom be served. He pondered his latest undertaking. As the God of the universe, he obviously had much to learn.

Moses had seemed to understand the flaw in his plan for freeing the Israelites right from the beginning, but the human instinct for justice had been swept away by the success of the venture.

It was an irony, thought God, that so frequently it was his creatures who instructed him. It was a double irony that so often his learning was at their expense.

In his heart he knew that they would develop law into a complex system, but in his heart he also knew that law would never be enough to protect the human community from violence and hatred.

In his heart he knew that there would have to be another answer. But in his heart, he did not yet know what that answer would be.