

*“All the Reasons in
the World Not To”*: Learning (and good humor)
in Honor of Edgar Bronfman

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Moonshine Tevet | The Bronfman Fellowships

*“In the hour of a person’s passing,
neither silver nor gold nor precious stones accompany them,
but only Learning and Good Deeds”*

(Pirkei Avot Chapter 6 Mishna 9)

“and their jokes...” (anonymous gloss, 5775)

This Friday, 18 of Tevet (January 9) will mark the first anniversary (“yahrtzeit”) of Edgar M. Bronfman’s passing. Edgar continues to serve as a driving force and inspiration behind the work of the Bronfman Fellowships, and the Bronfmanim community celebrates his enduring legacy

As a community of learning, we marked his passing 12 months ago with communal text study. We now invite you to join Bronfmanim the world over to dedicate some time this week to learning in Edgar’s memory, an ancient Jewish tradition that responds to death by increasing life and learning.

This week’s Torah portion, *Shemot*, tells of Moses’s travails as a young leader.

This story was a favorite of Edgar's, and served as an inspiration to him as he travelled Soviet capitals in the 1980's to demand "Let my People Go." As I studied the weekly Torah portion in honor of Edgar's Yahrzeit I asked myself what I missed most about him. The first thing that came to mind was our weekly study sessions at the Foundation offices. But on second thought, what I missed most were his jokes.

Below I shared a collection of texts that I have been studying this week in Edgar's memory, as well as a collection of Edgar's own jokes. We hope Bronfmanim will be sharing their words of Torah this week as well – may all these efforts contribute to increasing the joyous Torah which Edgar first invited us to partake in all those years ago.

Portrait of a Young Leader: A collection of sources on Young Moses – interpretations from the 12th century to the 21st – on the story of Moses' first steps as a moral and political leader, can be [downloaded here](#). If you're lacking a hevruta with which to study these texts, you can hear my rendition of them on [this Youtube link](#).

Humor in service of the Jewish People: "When one wants to understand the essence of something, one must seek out the jokes of that place" said Reb Nachman of Breslov, and Edgar would have surely agreed. Edgar told his story of leadership in service of the Jewish people in "The Making of a Jew" (1996), and interspersed in the book are some of his best (publishable) jokes. I've scanned the pages where such jokes are mentioned in [this 15-page pdf excerpt](#). Reading the excerpts before and after each joke one gets a

(somewhat random but equally effective) insight into the adventures and leadership of Edgar M. Bronfman z"l.

(Finally – my own contribution of Torah in honor of Edgar)

Excuses, Excuses

The highlight of this week's Torah portion is the story of the burning bush. What we wouldn't do to encounter a bush that charges us with that which we should take on in our lives. And how terrifying an experience that must be. Moses, for his part, upon first hearing from God, has a very clear response: he hides his face, then proceeds to say "NO", five different ways. God persists, again and again, until He is so fully God is enraged that a belligerent Moses accepts the charge. Each refusal of Moses' was wrapped in a different excuse, and studying these five excuses is a telling experience. The full text of their conversation, with the refusals highlights, can be found here.

Exodus 3:18-4:21

God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said... 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'

And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.

'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh,

and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?'

'When I come to the children of Israel, and say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you; and they shall say to me: What is His name? what shall I say to them?'

'But they will not believe me, nor listen to my voice; for they will say: The lord has not appeared unto you!'

'Lord, I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.'

'Oh Lord, send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send.'

(14) And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses...

שמות ג:יח-ד:כא

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲבִירֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֶיךָ

אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב

וַיִּסְתֵּר מִפְּנֵי

כִּי יָרָא מִהִבֵּיט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים:

: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים

מִי אֲנִי כִּי אֵלֶּךָ אֶל־פְּרַעֲוֹה

וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:

הַזֶּה אֱלֹהֵי בְּאֵ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

וְאָמְרָתִי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם

וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מִה־שְׁמוֹ מָה אֵמַר אֲלֵהֶם:

וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר

וְהֵן לֹא־אֶצְמִינּוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי

כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא־נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ ה':

: ' וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה'

כִּי אֲדַנִּי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי גַם מִתְּמוֹל־גַּם

מִשְׁלֵשׁ גַּם מֵעַז דְּבָרָךְ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כַבֵּד־

מָה וּקְבַד לִשְׁוֹן אֲנִי:

כי אֲדַבֵּר שְׁלֵחַ-נָּא בְּיַד-תְּשַׁלַּח:
וַיִּסְרַח-אֵלָּהּ 'בְּמִי'...

Moses' refusals follow an interesting pattern. They begin with himself – “Who am I” but then turn to seemingly pragmatic considerations: “what shall I say to them”, “they won't believe me”. Yet when God supplies him with (cryptic) answers for the Israelites and (scary) miracles for Pharaoh, Moses reverts back to hiding behind his own self understanding: “I am slow of speech, slow of tongue”. Finally, his most cutting and chutzpadik response: “Send I pray thee by the hand of him you shall send” – or in other words “send anyone but me”.

This long list of excuses is reminiscent of a very different list, compiled by Franz Kafka in his collection “Contemplation”:

Passers-by | Franz Kafka, Contemplation (1912)

*When one is taking a walk through the street at night,
and a man — already visible from a distance because the street rises in front of us and the moon is full —
runs toward us, we will not tackle him,
even if he is weak and ragged, even if someone is running behind him and screaming,
but rather we will let him continue running.*

*Because it is night,
and it isn't our fault that the street is rising before us in the full moon,
and besides, maybe these two have staged this chase for their own entertainment,
maybe both of them are pursuing a third,
maybe the first man is being pursued even though he is innocent,
maybe the second man wants to kill him and we will become accomplices to the murder,
maybe the two of them know nothing about one another and each is going independently to his bed,
maybe they are sleepwalkers,
maybe the first man is armed.*

*And after all, don't we have a right to be tired, haven't we drunk a lot of wine?
We are happy when the second man has also vanished from sight.*

Kafka's character, like Moses, feels called to action, yet quickly disassembles the call with a series of doubts and questions. The situations might seem very distant from each other: a direct calling from God versus an encounter with two strangers running in the night. Interestingly their list of excuses diverge as

well – Kafka focuses on our ability to read the situation. Moses focuses on whether he is the right person for the job. Yet at the end of the day, they are both asking “why me?” For Kafka the answer is clear: there is no “why me” - I am here randomly, and “it isn't our fault that the street is rising before us in the full moon.” We could have easily been on a different street, or on a moonless night. I am not called, my mere and random presence here presents no moral claim on me. For Moses, however, what eventually appeases him is the knowledge that Aaron will be at his side:

And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and He said: ‘Is not thy brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes forth to meet thee; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. And thou shalt speak unto him, and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. (16) And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and it shall come to pass, that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him in God’s stead. (Exodus 14-16)

The promise of a brother, a hevruta, someone who will be happy to see you and one who will balance out your shortcomings – this seems to change Moses’ mind. One wonders – would Kafka’s response been different had he had a companion with him that night?

One last thought on Moses being “Kvad peh,” slow to speak. Moses goes through a process through which he turns from being someone of “slow speech” to being one of the greatest orators of Human civilization. The book of Deuteronomy, Devarim, is in fact three long speeches which Moses delivers to the people of Israel before they embark into the promised land and he disembarks from this world. The three speeches end with a poem, a song, Ha’azinu, and a series of blessings. How this man, who began as a reluctant leader of slurred speech, became a stirring orator and finally a poet, is perhaps the most inspiring journey of all. As we overcome our own excuses, as we find ourselves called to leadership from surprising places, may we discover in ourselves unknown strengths and abilities, and grow into places we hardly ever imagined.

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