

# Jewish Times

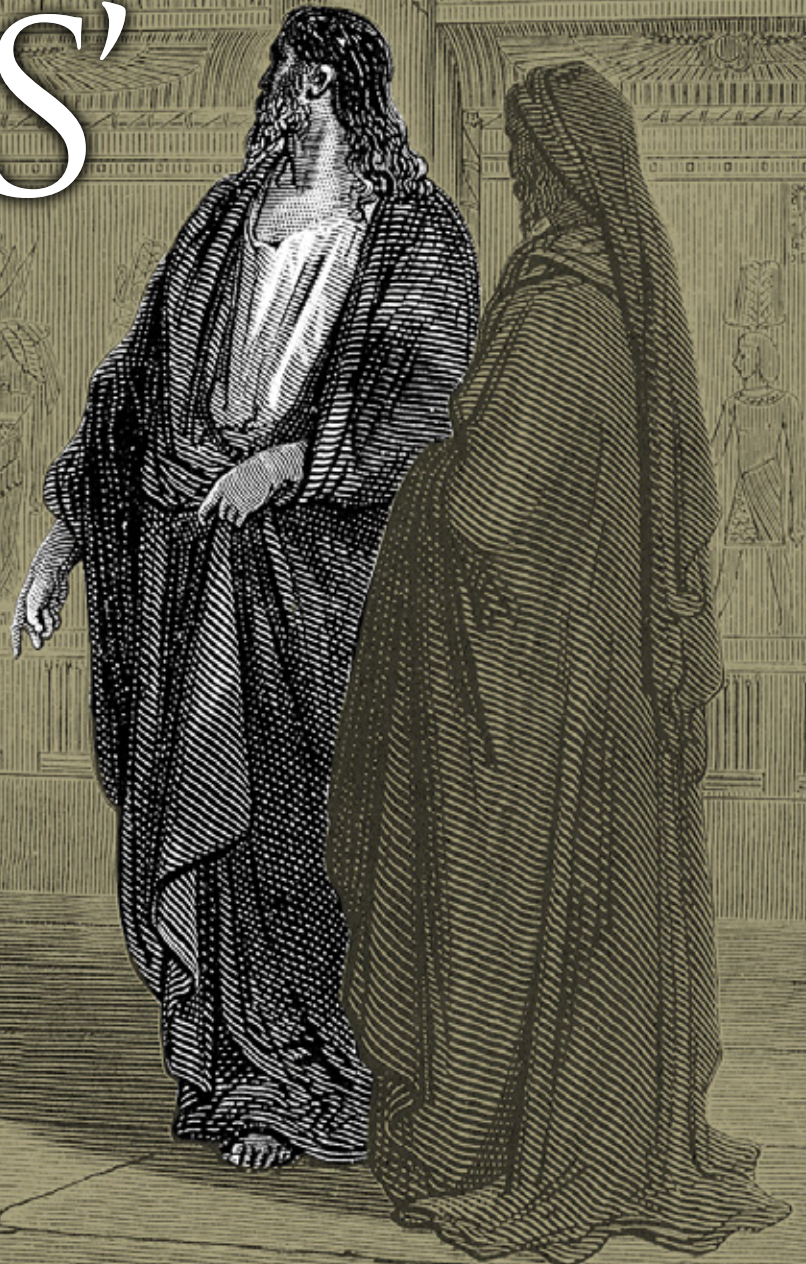
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**PERFECTED MAN'S VALUES**

# MOSES'

MISSION TO  
SAVE THE JEWS

**Rabbi Israel Chait**





# MOSHE'S MISSION

— *Rabbi Israel Chait* —

TRANSCRIBED BY A STUDENT

The basic question regarding the beginning of Moshe Rabbeinu's mission is the first sequence of events. God engaged Moshe Rabbeinu at the burning bush and told him to take the Jews out of Egypt. Moshe turned down this mission several times. Chazal say that this dialogue spanned a 7-day period.

*But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, not yesterday or the day before or in times past..." (Exod. 4:10)*

The verse says 3 days, but Chazal learn that it was 7. We learn that Moshe strived to avoid this mission.

When Moses saw God writing the crowns on the Torah's letters, he asked God this:

*"Who is preventing You from giving the Torah [as is without crowns]; why do You need to write these crowns? Torah is perfect, give it already." God replied, "Someone in the far future named Akiva will derive lessons from these crowns; what every crown stands for." Moshe asked God to show him Akiva and God showed him. But Moshe could not understand what Rabbi Akiva was learning from the crowns. Moshe said to God, "You have a great person like this, yet you give the Torah through me?" [Why not give the Torah through Rabbi Akiva?] God replied, "It is a decree from before Me."*

It is an interesting gemara. It means that God perfected Torah's theoretics to such a degree for the sake of Rabbi Akiva. [God made the Torah with such perfect design to offer an appreciation of His wisdom for even the greatest of minds; even one man.] Additionally, the correct time to give the Torah was after the Exodus—a simple answer for why God couldn't give the Torah through Rabbi Akiva who lived much later. But that's too simple of an answer. The truth is that Moshe Rabbeinu's existence was an act of divine providence, as Maimonides says:

*And due to God's love for us and to fulfill his promise to Abraham our father, He created Moses our teacher (Maimonides, Laws of Star Worship 1:3)*

God caused the most perfect member of the human species to exist in that precise time.

*The woman conceived and bore a son [Moshe]; and she saw he was good, she hid him for 3 months. (Exod. 2:2) Rashi: "When he was born the whole house became filled with light" (Sotah 12a).*

This means that Moshe's existence was an act of divine providence. Moshe felt, "If it is providence that I live at this time, You could have taken Rabbi Akiva" Ultimately, Moshe accepted the mission. Then he returned to his father-in-law Yisro to take leave and descend to Egypt.

*And it was during his travels, at an inn, and God approached him [Moshe] and sought to kill him (Exod. 4:24).*

Moshe is traveling to fulfill God's mission, and God wants to kill him? Rashi comments:

*Because he had not circumcised his son Eliezer, and because he had showed himself remiss in this, he brought upon himself the punishment of death.*

What is meant that Moshe did not perform the mitzvah of circumcision? God forbid. But since Moshe was on a journey, there was a tradition (Ibn Ezra) not to endanger a child [through circumcision while journeying]. Therefore, when Moshe came to the inn, instead of performing circumcision first, he first engaged in lodging preparations. Being remiss, as Rashi states, means that he was involved in the inn the first.

We can't talk about the sin of Moshe Rabbeinu, but I would say this much. What is circumcision? It is the Bris of Abraham. It is the essence of Judaism. Besides Passover, circumcision is the only positive command for which one is punished with excision (karase) for violation. Now, what demanded Moshe's mission? It was the Bris of Abraham. So, when Moshe Rabbeinu argued with God for 7 days, he was not worthy of death; God had patience with Moshe and answered his questions and persuaded him to accept the mission. But when Moshe was remiss regarding circumcising his son—Bris Abraham—then he was worthy of death. Moshe was remiss regarding the very driving force of his mission. That is the continuity of the sequence in the parsha.

As Moshe did not desire this mission, it affected the driving force of the mission: Bris Abraham. Therefore, this reluctance expressed itself by Moshe being remiss in circumcising his son.

Abraham was the founder of the nation. Isaac and Jacob were great Patriarchs as well, but we conclude our prayer with "*the shield of Abraham*" [Abraham was primary]. The nation was based on the true recognition of God. Circumcision was the mitzvah that represented the nation

[a command intended for man to dominate the sensual life and follow an intellectual life]. And as Bris Abraham—circumcision—was the driving force of Moshe’s mission, Moshe’s resistance to fulfill the mission was expressed in a resistance towards circumcision.

*So Tziporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and it reached his [Moshe’s] legs [Tziporah showed it to Moshe] (Exod. 4:25)*

This caused Moshe to recognize his flaw. If not for Tziporah’s action, there would be no mission of Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe was not at fault when he argued with God for 7 days before accepting the mission. But if something effectuated a change in Moshe’s fulfillment of God’s command, there was no excuse for that and he was worthy of death.

Moshe then goes to Pharaoh, who then makes matters worse, demanding the Jews now collect their own straw without minimizing their brick quota. The Jews approached Moshe and said him:

*May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us (Exod. 5:21).*

This menial straw collection reduced the Jews’ self-worth and they blamed Moshe. Moshe then asked God why He made matters worse:

*O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people (Exod. 5:22,23).*

But we are struck; what is Moshe’s question? [Previously at the burning bush] God told him that Pharaoh won’t free the Jews:

*And I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to leave (Exod. 3:19)*

Why should Pharaoh’s response be of any concern to Moshe? Moshe should simply perform his mission and God will address all else. God told Moshe that He will bring wonders and afterwards, Pharaoh will free the Jewish nation. Therefore, what was Moshe’s concern [that matters worsened]? If the plagues had already taken place and Pharaoh still did not free the Jews, then Moshe has a question. But not yet.

*God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as a Mighty God (El Shaddai), but I did not make Myself known to them by My name יהוה.”*

Now there is a change. God tells Moshe that there will be a new manner of His revelation, giluy shechina. The Patriarchs perceived God through El Shaddai—providence—not through miracles which would now happen, never occurring before. Moshe then communicated this to

the Jews, but they did not listen:

*And Moses told this to the Israelites, but they would not listen to Moses due to their exasperation, and from harsh labor (Exod. 6:9).*

Now, after God explained to Moshe this new mode of revelation, Moshe says this to God:

*The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech? (Ibid. 6:12)*

What is Moshe's problem? The answer is that we view this incident of Moshe unrealistically, in a sort of imaginary manner. But it must be understood more maturely. God can perform countless miracles, but this is not His preference:

*I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians (Exod. 3:8)*

"Descending" [to alter nature and save the Jews through miracles] refers to something which is not God's preference. There is one principle which underlies this entire story. God can alter nature, but there is one thing God does not do: change man's free will. There were unavoidable times when God changed natural law, such as the Exodus and Revelation at Sinai. And even in these instances, the changes in nature still followed natural law somewhat, such as the wind that blew the locusts into Egypt. But to change man's nature, this never occurred and never will occur. Thus, Moshe Rabbeinu understood that with all the miracles that God could produce, they cannot affect man's free will. Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu was bothered with a problem: "How can I take out a nation from Egypt? If I do, I have a nation of idolaters and what good is that?" Moshe Rabbeinu saw that the Jews were steeped in the depths of idolatry. It is like the angels said to God at the parting of the Reed Sea:

*The Egyptians are idolaters and the Jews are idolaters. Why are the Jews different that You should save them? (Zohar, Parshas Terumah)*

Moshe Rabbeinu saw that he had to reach the people [expose them to the fallacy of idolatry] but not through miracles because miracles will not accomplish anything. Moshe felt he had to reach the Jews' personalities and open their eyes to true ideas. Knowing that miracles offer only a short-lived effect and would not help [after the Exodus 3 days into the desert, the Jews already started complaining], when Moshe accepted his mission, he took it upon himself to transform the Jews. The original plan was that the Jews would travel 3 days into the desert where Moshe would give them Torah and ideas. This would remove them from their backbreaking labor which did not allow them time to think, allowing them to learn the basic principles of Judaism. Knowledge is the only way to change the Jews' personalities and relate to God. Judaism is not a religion or miracles. In his Guide, Maimonides strongly criticizes people who turn to the miraculous to perceive God (book II chap. vi):

*Say to a person who believes to belong to the wise men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the fetus, he will be satisfied with the account: he will believe it, and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire and is as big as a third part of the Universe, yet he considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs, and that this power is called "angel," or that all forms are the result of the influence of the Active Intellect, and that the latter is the angel, the Prince of the world, frequently mentioned by our Sages, and he will turn away; because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of creating forces that act in a body without being perceived by our senses.*

This means to say that he cannot perceive the greatness of God through the unbelievable wisdom of nature that God created. Maimonides criticizes this person because his whole way of life is wrong. This is a fundamental of Judaism that we do not look to God to render miracles to draw close to Him. There is not a single prayer where we ask God to perform miracles. The one way to draw close to God is through Torah study, through knowledge.

*And I will cause the Egyptians to view the Jews favorably so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed (Exod. 3:21).*

This "favor" (chane) displayed by the Egyptians to the Jews was necessary to remove the Jews' humiliation of slavery.

*Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart [fear] when they see war, and return to Egypt (Exod. 13:17).*

This teaches that the Jews were not yet ready for war. The only war which they were capable of was not in the capacity of the aggressor, but in defense, namely the war with Amalek.

*Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed (Exod. 17:11)*

The mishnah (Rosh Hashanna 3:8) asks:

*And was it Moshe's hands that make [success in] war or break [success in] war? Rather, [this comes to] tell you, [that] whenever Israel would look upward and subjugate their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would prevail; and if not, they would fall.*

The gemara says that [during the war with Amalek] Moshe Rabbeinu was a shliach tzibbur, the public's emissary in prayer. When the Jews saw Moshe standing in prayer, they focused their hearts on God. They [now] had the proper views. But, as the Jews had not yet totally

removed their slave mentality, they needed to see Moshe's hands raised to give them strength. That is why they could not yet wage an aggressive war. During the war with Amalek when they didn't see Moshe pray, the Jews lost their courage.

*When the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him" (Exod. 32:1).*

Again, we see the dependency of this is slave mentality.

To establish the nation, they needed 1) true ideas and 2) they had to overcome their weakness due to slavery. This took 40 years to remove.

Now you understand the responsibility Moshe had on his shoulders. The mission wasn't simply to go to Pharaoh and tell him a story. Moshe knew that he had to convince this nation of the true ideas of God, developing them into an intellectual nation. And he knew he could not do so through miracles, as God does not change the human personality that way. Moshe also knew that it was his mission to convert Pharaoh and the Egyptians to at least accord respect to the Jews, so the Jews would gain self-esteem.

Chazal are burdened with the verse *"And God hardened Pharaoh's heart"* (Exod. 9:12, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:8) for they knew that God doesn't tamper with free will, not even for a single rasha. It is against God's will to ever tamper with any person's free will.

All the miracles could not help Moshe Rabbeinu on his mission. That is why he did not want to accept the mission. It was a tremendous responsibility. The fact that Moshe argued with God sounds strange to us. And how could Abraham our father argue with God?:

*Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? (Gen. 18:25)*

Where do you find a people portraying their greatest leaders as arguing with God? The reason this sounds strange is due to our improper understanding of prophecy. We view it as a mystical phenomenon [where one receives it and blindly follows orders]. But that is wrong. Moshe's free will was never impaired either. A prophet functions normally, just like us. From the prohibition for a prophet to conceal his prophecy we see that the prophet is no different than anyone else [he can choose to violate God's will and conceal his prophecy, because the prophet has free will]. Moshe Rabbeinu spoke with God "face-to-face": he was awake and could conceal his prophecy at that moment. But as all other prophets prophesied in dreams—"...in a dream I speak to him" (Num. 12:6)—they could conceal their prophecy only once they awoke.

Moshe Rabbeinu had the right to argue because the prophet is obligated to understand his mission just as we are obligated to use understanding. If Moshe had a question, he had to ask God. If he disagreed, he must say so. This is what Maimonides means in his Guide where he says that prophecy is a natural process. Just as one learning a Tosfos is foolish to say, "I believe

Tosfos” [without thinking into the question], Moshe and the prophets used their minds to understand. They were obligated to argue with God.

Bilam the rasha received prophecy only as a means for Israel. But since it wasn't a natural process for him, he was overawed by it. Because he was a great intellect, he was able to see something. But Bilam's nature was not that of the prophets, and he experienced only a momentary change because it was unnatural for him. And that is why the moment that prophecy was withdrawn from him, he reverted to his evil nature and the Jews killed him. This shows you that a person cannot attain any greatness from an external phenomenon. Greatness is generated only from an internal source where one changes his own nature, and Bilam never accomplished this change. Even though Bilam had a great mind, his interests were physical:

*Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little... (Num. 22:18)*

Now we understand Moshe's complaint. Even though God said, *“I know the king of Egypt will not free the Jews,”* after Moshe first approached Pharaoh, things go bad and the Jews complain to Moshe that he worsened matters. Moshe then said this to God:

*Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people (Exod. 5:22,23)*

Moshe was not talking about the miracles. He did not doubt that God will perform those miracles. His complaint was based on his understanding that reaching the people must be without miracles, and now that things went bad, his mission was failing. Moshe complained because how could he reach the people when they hated him?

*And they said to them (Moses and Aaron), “May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us” (Exod. 5:21).*

The plagues were related to redemption; the Jews were to take a moral lesson from them. The plagues were not simply to free the Jews as they contained ideas that the Jews should derive from them. The original plan was that the Jews would travel 3 days from Egypt with no plagues. Pharaoh would recognize the Jews as a nation. The Rav said that God's plan was that Pharaoh and Egypt too would accept Torah:

*But Moses said, “Even you will give in our hands sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to the Lord our God” (Exod. 10:25)*

That was the original plan. But Pharaoh rejected this option with his own free will. Therefore, this plan had to be scrapped. The new plan was a different method of reaching the Jews: Pesach Mitzrayim, the Paschal Lamb. This refers to the mitzvos: the halachic medium was used to reach the Jews:



*And the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and I will see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. (Exod. 12:13)*

The blood was on the inside of the door. Chazal say that God “seeing the blood” refers to the Jews engagement in God’s mitzvos. That is what saved the Jews. The blood on the door did not save the Jews, rather it was their performance of the mitzvah. Halacha was the medium that changed the Jews’ emotions.

*Withdraw your hands, and take for yourselves a lamb (Exod. 12:21)*

Chazal comment, “Withdraw your hands from lambs of idolatry and take yourselves a lamb of mitzvah.” The Passover lamb intended that in sacrifice—the greatest medium of idolatry—the Jews convert this act into a halachic entity and remove the tumah (stain) of idolatry. The wisdom of the halachos (laws concerning the Paschal lamb) raised the Jews to a higher level. The Jews were told to take the lamb 4 days in advance of killing it in plain sight of the Egyptians to display their courage. [The lamb was Egypt’s deity. The Jews’ redemption depended on their ability to reject idolatry and accept the true God.]

We had cited the Jews’ critique of Moshe and Aaron being evildoers, having contributed to Pharaoh’s new decree that the Jews find their own straw without reducing their brick quota [a tremendous burden]. What was the purpose of the Jews now reaching this low-level? Did God cause to occur that Moshe and Aaron lose their esteem at the outset of their mission?

This question is not a question because this decline was simply a result of peoples’ free will. Since God never interferes with free will, the Jews could see in Moshe and Aaron either the beginning of something great, or they could—because of their mental state—choose not to listen to Moshe.

*...but they would not listen to Moses due to exasperation, and from harsh labor (Exod. 6:9).*

The Jews’ exasperation and harsh labor blinded them from seeing the beginning of the redemption. Therefore, my answer is that there was no reason for Moshe and Aaron to suffer a failure at the mission’s outset; it was due to the people’s free will [not God]. Since God does not interfere with people’s free will, it is absurd to say that there was a reason [for this setback] other than the Jews. To say that there was a “reason for their failure,” [as if this was a necessary step] is to say that it was God’s plan that the Jews reject Moshe and Aaron.

*And the Lord said to Moses, “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may bear when I speak with you and so trust in you ever after” (Exod. 19:9).*

This is no guarantee. But it means that if the people properly exercise their free will, they will have the opportunity to see that what Moshe Rabbeinu says in God’s name as Torah from Sinai, is in fact just that. But they can reject it too.

*“And they stood at the nether part of the mount” (Exod. 19:17), and Rav Dimi bar Hama says, “The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned Mount Sinai above the Jews like a basin, and He said to them: ‘If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there, under the mountain, will be your burial” (Avodah Zara 2b).*

This [coercion] indicates that the Jews wanted to reject Torah. But the plain meaning is that the Jews accepted Moshe and Torah from Sinai. *“And so trust in you ever after”* was no guarantee. For if it was, there is no need for Revelation at Sinai [this possibility is wrong as it suggests that God can coerce the people’s free will to believe in Moshe without Revelation].

When you see an idea, certain verses light up. They take on a new meaning [than previously understood].

Regarding Moshe’s mission, I think it was a true acceptance of responsibility to reach the people. That is why Moshe argued with God for 7 days; he did not want to accept that responsibility. There are a few verses that show that once Moshe accepted this responsibility, it was an acceptance of responsibility to the people, to teach them true ideas, and that God would not help him in this realm. It laid upon his shoulders alone like any other person who takes a responsibility to accomplish a task.

*Moses heard the people weeping, every clan (Num. 11:10)*

This was the case of the Misoninim (Ibid. 11:1).

*We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic (Ibid. 11:5)*

The Jews were regressing. They were in the desert under difficult circumstances that caused their regression to the point that they wished to return to Egypt. Meaning, now they did not see the value in leaving Egypt.

*Let us appoint a chief and return to Egypt (Ibid. 14:4)*

This is the worst state of affairs because this reveals that the Jews had no appreciation for all the wisdom they learned from Moshe Rabbeinu since leaving Egypt.

*...that we used to eat free...*

Rashi comments on the word “free”: “Free from mitzvos.” That was most horrible for Moshe, for it means that he failed. Moshe gave them Torah and they are preferring “cucumbers, melons, leeks, etc.” There is no greater epitome of failure.

*And God’s anger burned greatly, and in Moses eyes it was evil. And Moses said to the Lord, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have*

*laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" (Ibid. 11:10-151)*

What is clear from these verses? It is the tremendous sense of responsibility Moshe had regarding his mission. He accepted this at the burning bush. From Yisro too we see that Moshe felt personally responsible to judge the people alone, but Yisro differed. Moshe could have thought of Yisro's [judge] system too, but there was no smicha [rabbinical ordination] yet [through which Moshe would ordain judges]. Moshe [then] inquired from God and God said Yisro was correct.

This responsibility was one that Moshe initially refused as he did not feel fit; he was not charismatic or a good speaker. They asked Aristotle, "What is the best way to influence people: the use of Socratic logic or a great orator?" He replied, "A combination." Moshe thought similarly and that's why he refused. But apparently God didn't think that way [as Moshe was not charismatic or a fluent speaker]: influencing people through charisma is not proper. Ideas alone should influence people.

Evil people throughout history succeeded through their powers of oratory. Interesting is that in the Jewish nation you do not find this phenomenon. And even in Israel's good speakers, it is a different kind of phenomenon. You also do not see evangelical types in the Jewish nation [those who arouse audiences with religious fervor]. This has been alien to our people from the time the Torah was given.

50 years ago in America some rabbis were great orators who moved people with their speeches, but they fell by the wayside; you don't hear about them anymore. But that which endures are the writings of the great rabbis, the gedolim, our thinkers, writings which still inspire us today. The Vilna Gaon is more influential today than the great speakers of 50 years ago. You see this is a trait of the Jews which started with Moshe Rabbeinu.

The Jewish people are not subject to that type of influence or charismatic leadership. It doesn't exist in the Jewish nation. Take people like Rabbi Dovid Feinstein who does not speak, but his future influence is greater than the orators. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein too never aroused anybody by his speeches. The influence of the Rav is not because of his oratory skills, but because of his Torah ideas. I don't think you can find more genius in one person in generations. And those more prone to be influenced by his oratory were not of his better students.

Insofar as the Mesora [Torah transmission] is concerned, it is not even the writing that is responsible for it. The writing is necessary because without it, you could not know the Vilna Gaon's ideas. The reason why people are committed to Judaism is due to Torah She'Baal Peh; the rav/student institution. Torah exists today due to the personal relationship of the generations' leaders, from one generation to the next. That's why the Mesora exists in the same format as it did 2000 ago.