



We read in Parashat Shemot of the famous revelation to Moshe at the "burning bush," in which God orders Moshe to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh to demand the release of the Hebrew slaves. Moshe initially refuses to accept this challenge, and raises numerous arguments to support his contention that the mission would assuredly fail. At one point he insists, "*Ve-hein lo ya'aminu li ve-lo yishme'u be-koli*" – "But they will not believe me or heed my voice" (4:1). After God guaranteed him that Pharaoh will ultimately yield to his demands, Moshe now argues that *Benei Yisrael* will not believe in his prophecy or accept him as their leader.

The Gemara (Masekhet Shabbat 97) teaches that God sharply criticized Moshe for doubting the people's faith: "Moshe – they are believers and the children of believers!" God further informed Moshe that *Benei Yisrael* would indeed accept his message with enthusiasm and hope (4:31), whereas he, many years later, would be guilty of insufficient faith (Bamidbar 20:12).

Maimonides makes reference to this Talmudic passage in his *Iggeret Ha-shemad*, a letter he composed to provide support and consolation for the Jews of Spain and Morocco who had outwardly forsaken Judaism under the pressure of the Almohade persecution. His father, Rabbi Maimon, had written an epistle of consolation expressing the viewpoint that these Jews could and should still be accepted and respected as full-fledged Jews despite their having avowed their loyalty to Islam in order to save their lives. An anonymous North African rabbi then disseminated a harsh response to Rabbi Maimon's letter, caustically berating those Jews who verbally accepted Islam and asserting unconditionally that they have placed themselves permanently outside the ranks of faithful Jews. This letter quickly spread throughout the affected communities, and Maimonides penned his *Iggeret Ha-shemad* to clarify *Halakha's* stance towards martyrdom generally, and to demonstrate the fallacy latent within the anonymous rabbi's uncompromising condemnation.

He begins his treatise (after briefly reviewing the circumstances that prompted its composition) by making reference to Moshe's doubts concerning *Benei Yisrael's* faith:

Our rabbis have made it clear that the children of Israel before the exodus from Egypt, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, at the time of Moses, deviated from the true paths of Judaism and even neglected the covenant of circumcision... But despite their evil practices and deviations, Moses himself was condemned by the Almighty for accusing them of faithlessness, when he said, "behold they will not believe in me." He was, thereupon, admonished... And he was subsequently punished, in keeping with the rabbinic dictum that "one who accuses the innocent is subject to personal punishment as was the case with Moses."

After noting similar examples where the prophets Eliyahu and Yeshayahu – and even the ministering angels in the heavens – made broad, disparaging generalizations about the Nation of Israel, Maimonides contends that most certainly in his time, during the Almohade persecution, criticism of the Jewish people was entirely unwarranted and forbidden:

Now if such punishment was meted out to great pillars of Judaism like Moses, Elijah, Isaiah and ministering angels because they maligned the people of Israel, we can imagine the penalty awaiting an ordinary, insignificant simpleton, who with a loose tongue dared to assail whole communities, their scholars, their disciples, priests and levites, calling them transgressors... For, alas, the oppressed did not rebel against God because of evil passions or lust. They strayed from the Law not because of a relentless pursuit of high position or evil passions as the prophet exclaimed: "Because from the swords they fled, from the drawn sword and from the bent bow and from the pressure of war" (Yeshayahu 21:15).

God's criticism of Moshe demonstrates the extent to which He demands that Jewish leaders look upon their flocks with patience, understanding and sensitivity, rather than harsh condemnation and scorn. Moshe raised the seemingly understandable argument that the broken, downtrodden Hebrew slaves would respond skeptically to his sudden announcement of redemption. Yet, even this reasonable suspicion was deemed unfairly judgmental. No one – not even a prophet – reserves the right to despair from the Jewish people and their potential, and to fail to recognize their stature of greatness even in periods when they fall short of the demands and expectations of God's treasured nation.