



From 1 - 10, How Tall Are You?

The Talmud describes Moses at ten amos tall, while Pharaoh was just one. What exactly does that mean? What is “spiritual height?”

Moses vs. Pharaoh

How tall is Joe Biden?

I recently read that since the advent of the television age, the taller candidate for president has almost always won the election. It has been more than a century since a shorter-than-average man was elected to the White House. That was William McKinley, who at 5-foot-7 was ridiculed as a “little boy” when he ran in 1896. The tallest president in history was also one of the most important—Abraham Lincoln, who towered over people at 6-foot-4.

This reminded me of a story I’d heard as a child in Cheder. Moses had to kill the giant Og. As the teacher was describing how giant Og was, he then added, “and Moses himself was ten amos (15ft) tall!”

My teacher then continued telling us about other unnaturally built biblical people. “Pharaoh,” he said, “was only one amah tall!”

In my childish mind, I tried to picture the image of the fateful face-off between Moses and Pharaoh - begging “Let my people go...” I could see this giant Moses talking to a midget Pharaoh and I tried to reconcile these facts. Listen, if G-d can split the sea, turn water into blood and to talk to people who can’t see Him surely he can create giants.

It was only a few years ago that I discovered what the commentaries explained about Moses’ height. When the Talmud says, “Moses was ten amos,” it was not implying that he was 15 feet tall. This passage is meant to teach us something deeper. And when we’re told that Pharaoh was only one amah, this too is not to be taken literally.

The Rebbe explains that from the scripture it would seem that Moses was of average height. This he proves from three places.

a. Though Moses is a key figure in Torah and is discussed and described endlessly, there isn't even a shadow of a hint, anywhere in Torah, that Moses was of extraordinary height.

b. When Jethro's daughters come running home after Moses saved them from the hands the shepherds in Median and they are asked by their father, "How are you home so early?" The girls answer simply, "An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds." Now, if Moses was 15ft tall, the girls would have said something to the effect of, "A giant man saved us." This detail is much more conspicuous than being Egyptian.

c. In this week's parsha, the Jewish people are trying to erect the walls of the Mishkan but no one is able to lift the beams. Moses turns to G-d and says, "These cannot be lifted by any man!" G-d responds, "You, Moses, you place your hands upon them as if to lift them and they will rise on their own." (-Rashi)

If Moses was in fact 15ft tall, why was a miracle necessary? We know that the beams of Mishkan wall were 15ft tall. Any man can lift objects that are the same height as themselves.

How Tall Are You?

What then is the meaning of Moses being 10 amos? What is the meaning of Pharaoh's being one amah?

These days everything is measured on the "1-10 scale." Everyone asks, "On a scale from 1-10 how was our day?" or "On a scale from 1-10 how was the Rabbi's speech?" When something is great we give it a 10, when something stinks we give it a sorry 1.

What gave us the idea that 10 is the perfect number?

G-d created the world with the Ten Utterances. Therefore, completion in any area will be with the number ten. A Minyan is only complete with ten men. The commandments are ten in number. There are ten levels of Jews from the heads and judges of the community until the woodchoppers and water carriers of our people. There are ten days of repentance. Israeli cities have ten levels of holiness, culminating of course with the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Thus, when the Talmud wishes to describe the greatness and holiness

of Moses it says, "Moses stood 10 amos tall." He had reached the pinnacle of perfection; he was the greatest of men. In stark contrast, Pharaoh the king of Egypt who represents absolute evil, is given only a 1, the lowest mark on our spiritual 1-10 scale.

(Toras Menachem Vol. 59 pg 302)

(המהר"ל בחידושי אגדות על בבא מציעא דף פד)

Jews were never the tallest in the class. You would never put stakes in a Jewish kid becoming a basketball superstar. But physical height is out of our control anyway, so let's not worry about that. Our spiritual height, on the other hand, is absolutely in our control.

Any of us, in but a moment, can spring up from one amah to a perfect ten! With every deed we do, we grow taller and taller. A Jew must always strive to be head and shoulders over his surroundings. Every day, we need to ask ourselves, "Where am I, on a scale of one to ten?"