

The Exceedingly Humble Prophet

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Parashat Shemot

Moshe's idealism trumps his self-interest.

As soon as Moshe comes of age (Shemot 2:11),¹ he repeatedly displays a high level of selflessness. Without thinking about his personal reputation, standing within Egyptian society, or necessity for anonymity as a political refugee, he saves a Jew from being flogged to death (2:11), another from being beaten by a fellow Jew (2:13), and Yitro's daughters from being harassed by male Midianite shepherds (2:17). Moshe's original utterance upon hearing HaShem's Call from the midst of the burning bush is, (3:4) "Hineini" (Here I am), a response that connotes readiness to serve without reservation and concern for personal interests.^{2 3}

Moshe's idealism could be understood as a function of his personal sense of humility.

Such behavior is totally in keeping with what the Tora says of Moshe in BaMidbar 12:3. In order to explain why God, rather than Moshe, Reacts to the unkind things said about their brother by Miriam and Aharon, the text objectively states, (BaMidbar 12:3) "And Moshe the man is Anav Me'od (exceedingly humble), more so than any other human being on the face of the earth." Even if he was being personally criticized by his siblings to his face, as some commentaries maintain,⁴ Moshe's humility prevented him from doing anything to defend himself. Rabbeinu Bachaye, noting the usage in the verse of the adverb "Me'od" (very), suggests that the description of Moshe epitomizes the sentiment found in the Ethics of the Fathers 4:4, attributed to R. Levitas of Yavneh, "ME'OD ME'OD Havei Shefal Ruach" (Very, very much ought you to be lowly of spirit). The commentator also cites RaMBaM's opinion in Mishna Tora, Hilchot Deiot 2:3, that while ordinarily, it is appropriate for an individual to attempt to keep his attributes and personal characteristics "on an even keel" in the sense of avoiding extreme behaviors and attitudes, when it comes to haughtiness, and its converse, humility, it is inappropriate to simply take a middling position. RaMBaM argues that extreme humility should serve as the baseline, rather than as an extreme to be avoided. Furthermore, all individuals should strive to achieve a humble spirit, not just pietists. Tiferet Yisroel on Avot 1:1 stresses that the phrase "Moshe Kibeil Tora MiSinai" (Moshe received the Tora from Sinai) is not just a geographical comment, but in keeping with Megilla 29a that posits that Sinai was chosen as the

¹The language "and he grew up" parallels the verb used in connection with Yaakov and Eisav prior to their differentiation in terms of personalities and religious persuasions—see Beraishit 25:27. It is assumed by the Rabbis that this is a reference to these individuals reaching puberty.

²RaShI on Beraishit 22:1 "This is the answer of the pious. A language of humility, a language of readiness." See also 22:7, 11; 27:1, 18; 31:11; 37:13; 46:2.

³While Moshe also hides his face, once God Begins Speaking to him from the midst of the burning bush, I would imagine that this would be the typical reaction of almost anyone, and not only someone who is extremely humble. The elders who audaciously eat and drink while they are seeing an Image of God in Shemot 24:11 would appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Was this because they lacked basic humility, or because they were exceedingly arrogant?

⁴Obviously if Miriam and Aharon were speaking behind Moshe's back, then the fact that God Responds to their criticism, rather than Moshe himself, would be due to the fact that only God was privy to what they said.

setting for the giving of the Tora due to its being the lowest of all surrounding mountains, exemplifying the theme of humility,⁵ it was only fitting that the “lowest” of men, Moshe, would receive the Tora in this place.

But is there a time for even Moshe not to be humble?

Yet, however admirable the quality of humility may be, from this week’s Parashat Shemot, it appears that the decisions resulting from Moshe’s humility directly cause God to become “angered”!⁶ According to Shemot 3:10, 12, 14-22; 4:11-12, God very much “Wishes” for Moshe to be His Representative to both the Jewish people as well as Pharaoh, culminating ultimately in the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. It is not surprising that the humble Moshe is exceedingly reluctant to accept such a task. He expresses his reticence time and time again:

- a) (Shemot 3:11) “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Jews out of Egypt?”
- b) (3:13) “Behold I will come to the Jewish people and I will say to them, ‘God, the God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ And they will say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ What should I say?”
- c) (4:1) “They (the Jewish people) will not believe me and they will not listen to my voice, because they will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’”
- d) (4:10) “Please God, I am not a man of words, I was not yesterday or the day before, and certainly not from the time that You began to speak with your servants, for I am heavy of mouth and tongue.”
- e) (4:13) “Please God, Send please by whom You are Accustomed to send.”

It is at this point (4:14) that God finally “Tires” of the repartee, and “Angrily” Informs Moshe that he will be assisted by Aharon, who will do all formal public speaking. But isn’t it to be expected that an individual who is deeply humble by nature would resist being thrust into the harsh spotlight of public service? Is the manner in which Moshe must be taught a sense of responsibility to his people, responding to his obvious humility with harsh words and even

⁵ChaZaL assume that in order for one to appreciate God and His Tora, one has to be able to thrust aside personal concerns and biases, i.e., be intellectually and emotionally humble. To the extent that an individual is haughty and overly concerned with his/her own issues and aspirations, rather than studying the Tora and being molded by it, the opposite will occur, and the student will attempt to impose his/her presuppositions upon the Tora tradition. This will lead to gross misrepresentations of the Will of God.

⁶Expressions in the Tora of God’s “Frustration” and “Anger” are considered to be anthropomorphisms by most commentators, who advise that they are not to be taken literally—see RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Yesodai HaTora 1:11. Anger is a human emotion that is brought about by frustration over not having things go the way in which one wishes them to. God never appears to have a problem with regard to getting His Way. Although, when the Divine has to deal with people endowed with free choice, it would at least appear that He sometimes Has to Go to “Plan B”, to assume that man has the capacity to limit God would be problematic in terms of God’s Omnipotence. To reconcile such an apparent contradiction, it has been suggested that God Has Created numerous paths to the achievement of a particular goal, all being equally acceptable to Him. Man’s choices merely determine which of the paths leading to the already decided-upon goal will be activated.

punishments?⁷ Why would Moshe not draw the conclusion from such a Divine Reaction that it was not good for one to be humble?

A possible additional factor that justifies Moshe's unwillingness to undertake the Divine Mission.

Furthermore, RaShI introduces an extra element into accounting for Moshe's reluctance to accept God's Call. In his interpretation of 4:10, RaShI maintains that the reason why Moshe did not wish to become God's Emissary and Prophet in Egypt was because this would mean supplanting Aharon who had been occupying this role for many years. While humility which only affects oneself could be critically viewed as an attempt to avoid taking risks and assuming responsibility, when this attribute is causing one to refuse to supplant another individual, particularly a sibling whom one admires, should it not be considered the right thing to do rather than behavior deserving of scathing rebuke?

Contextualizing even the admirable attribute of humility.

Ohr HaChayim on 4:14 offers an interesting insight regarding humility and Divine Service. The commentator points out that even if Moshe's humility is generally outstanding, with regard to his response to God's Request that he lead the Jews out of Egypt, Moshe's humility is surpassed by the humility of Aharon. Were Aharon an ordinary individual, it could have reasonably been expected that when told that he would no longer serve as the leader of the Jews in Egypt,⁸ but rather be reduced to being the public voice of a younger brother who would be the actual prophet and intermediary between God and the Jewish people, that he would be hurt and insulted. But God Points out to Moshe that not only will Aharon not mind serving in such a capacity, he will even be happy to do so (4:14). Aharon, too is a humble person, but this does not keep him from fulfilling the "Ratzon HaMelech" (the Will of the King), in contrast to Moshe's behavior until this point. Apparently it is one thing when personal humility does not allow one to respond to attacks by other individuals, or to strive to constantly improve one's status or material possessions. But when God Orders an individual to do something, however contrary to one's inclinations, however difficult such a behavior might seem to be in light of one's intrinsic nature and basic tendencies, there should be no argument, but rather happiness upon being called upon to serve, regardless of the role or the required behavior. In effect and quite ironically, true humility⁹ might require at times suppressing one's humility.

⁷Commentators maintain that originally Moshe was to have served as Kohen Gadol, but due to his reticence over accepting the call to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh, God Decided to have Aharon fill this role, thereby depriving Moshe of an important modality by which to serve the Creator.

⁸RaShI on 4:10, 13 maintains that before the advent of Moshe, Aharon has served as leader of the Jews.

⁹It should be noted that at times humility can be cited as an excuse for not pushing oneself to strive to achieve greater spiritual heights. Regarding Beraishit 19:19, when Lot explains that to escape the destruction of Sodom and Amora, rather than fleeing to high ground "to the mountain" which he imagines would take longer and put him and his family at greater risk, he would prefer being given a different destination, RaShI interprets what is at issue is not so much physical as opposed to spiritual preservation:

19:17 "Flee to the mountain"—Escape (by returning) to Avraham, who lives in the mountain as it states above (12:8) "And he removed (himself) from there (going) to the mountain"...

19:19 "Lest the evil overtake me"—When I was living among the people of Sodom, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, would See my actions and the actions of the inhabitants of the city and I (relatively) appeared like a righteous person worthy of being saved. But when I will come to an (objectively) righteous person, I will be Deemed an evil doer...

Contemporizing Moshe's dilemma with those that we ourselves often face.

In the absence of prophecy and God Making Known what He Wishes for us to do, it has become much more difficult to determine whether or not to become involved in something that will bring us to public attention and thereby compromise our humility. There is a fine line between not wishing to engage in self-promotion by maintaining a modest, low profile, and “stepping up to the plate” when things have to be done on behalf of one’s community and one’s people. It would appear that what we have to do is to try as much as possible to make sure that our intentions are “LeShem Shamayim” (for the sake of Heaven). If we can be relatively self-confident that what is motivating us is the ideal of enhancing overall Divine Service, then rather than, for example, the Gabbai having to ask us several times before we agree to serve as the Shliach Tzibbur (the leader of the prayer services) (see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, 53:16), we should seek out opportunities to lead by example, even before we are directly called upon to do so. In other words, we should be ready not only volunteer to serve as Shliach Tzibbur when no one else has an obligation or agrees upon being asked, but even to be Gabbai, if that is what our community needs.

(Avot 2:5) (Rabban Gamliel the son of R. Yehuda HaNasi) said...In a place where there are no men, try hard to be a man, sometimes even at the expense of personal humility.

On the one hand, we could generously explain that Lot was truly humble and afraid that he could not live up to a higher standard were he to be held to the standard set by his uncle. Yet this type of “humility” also serves as an excuse to maintain one’s status quo rather than dynamically continuing to personally improve.