



Humility and Hierarchy • Parshat Beha'alotcha

Moses' signature character strength, the most significant for his success as leader, teacher, and prophet of Israel, was humility. He personified this virtue, which is one of the most aspirational traits in all of Biblical and Rabbinic literature: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). What exactly does this mean?

At first glance, this description of Moses as very humble does not make sense in context. In the preceding verses, Miriam and Aaron criticize Moses because, "He took a Cushite woman;" they claim they are on equal prophetic level to Moses since God has spoken to them as well (Num. 12:1-2). We are then told that Moses was humble, followed by God's rebuke of their behavior and amplification of Moses' superior prophetic status. How does Moses' modesty fit in with the narrative flow?

One possibility is that Moses' humility explains why his siblings thought they were of equal status. He never revealed his prophetic superiority to them. Alternatively, Nahmanides points out that Moses was humble because he ignored his siblings' insult. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm similarly writes in *Derashot Ledorot* that humility is reflected in "... dignity in response to humiliation, restraint in the presence of provocation, forbearance and a quiet calm when confronted with calumny and carping criticism."

While this moral message is important, it misses an essential element in the definition of humility. David Konstan, a scholar of ancient Greek

philosophy, describes the ideal character of a successful Greek nobleman: "People who really do excel... whether in regard to family, power, wealth ... expect deference from their lessers on account of their superiority and are especially likely to become angry if they suffer a slight instead."

Aristotle deemed it a character flaw if someone of a higher stature does not feel indignant in defense of his honor when offended by someone of a lesser status.

In his book, *Before Honor is Humility: The Ideal of Humility in the Moral Language of the Sages*, Dr. Shmuel Lewis contrasts this Greek conception with the prized trait of humility as described in the Talmud. While it was indeed acceptable for a sage to be insulted when not shown proper deference by a less gifted sage, the ideal response is not anger but humility. Humility from this perspective only applies in the face of formidable challenge from an inferior.

This hierarchical dynamic is essential in understanding Moses in *Parshat Beha'alotcha*. Despite his stature as a prophet, he did not get upset when challenged by his siblings. Instead, he responded with an equanimity of spirit and an absence of anger. The same dynamic is evident in the preceding narrative. Eldad and Medad prophesied separately from the seventy elders. Joshua viewed this as a disrespectful gesture against Moses. In his zealotry to defend his teacher's honor, Joshua implored Moses to restrain them. Moses responds, "Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Lord's people were

prophets, that He would rest His spirit upon them all!” (Num. 11:29).

This episode adds the secret to Moses’ humble outlook, which reflects a fundamental tenet of his mission as leader and prophet. Moses’ underlying wish is that everyone would merit prophecy. He wanted to shatter the potential hierarchical nature of spiritual power. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, Moses’ vision has “no monopoly in intellectuality or spirituality... that the lowest in the nation could be considered as equally worthy of the

spirit of God as the first official in the highest office.”

This leveling of social hierarchies speaks to the essence of the Exodus story. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains in *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, Egyptians believed in a divinely endorsed pyramid-shaped social structure. The ruler at the top was to be worshipped and had the right and duty to enslave and oppress those lower in the hierarchy. Judaism served as a foil to such ideologies. Everyone is created in God’s image, thus nobody is inherently greater than anybody else.

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Character Challenge: When someone challenges your wisdom, strength, or status, instead of reacting with what may be a justified defense, consider a humble posture.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “It was only with the development of agriculture, cities and trade that hierarchy came to dominate human societies. There was usually an absolute leader, a governing (literate) class, and the masses, used as labour in monumental building schemes and as troops for the imperial army. Judaism enters the world as a protest against this kind of structure. We see this in the opening chapter of the Torah in which God creates the human person in His image and likeness, meaning that we are all equally fragments of the Divine... Something of this egalitarianism can be heard in Moses’ remark to Joshua, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that He would rest his spirit on them.”