

Moshe and Aharon: Leadership through Humility
Beha'alotcha 5781

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I.

In Parashat Beha'alotcha, things fall apart.

The dream of Israel, which had beckoned the Jewish people, towards which they consistently moved throughout their thirteen months in the deserts, starts to fray. And the people turn, as is so often the case, on their leaders.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, it is in this very Torah portion that one senses the full greatness of the leaders of the Jewish people, Moshe and Aharon.

As the Sages teach us, these brothers' true greatness lay in their humility, their absolute refusal to engage in self-promotion and self-aggrandizement, a trait which each brother manifested in his own way.

This week's *sedra* begins with a brief description of Aharon's lighting of the menorah, with a clear emphasis on his punctilious adherence to the lighting instructions he received from Moshe. Chazal observed¹ that it could not have been easy for Aharon to perpetually be on the receiving end of directions from his younger brother. Nonetheless, Aharon steadfastly performed² the hallowed service of kindling the Temple flame, secure in the knowledge that he was carrying out the will of the Lord.

From the very moment that the mantle of leadership had been passed from Aharon to Moshe, despite the latter's having gone into exile in Midian, Aharon's response was one of true happiness for his brother, *v'samach b'libo*. His happiness was pure, and deep, and completely authentic; it was a joy of the heart.

If Kayin raged when his younger brother, and his offering, were favored, and eventually murdered his own brother; if Esav despised and plotted the death of Yaakov; and if the brothers did the very same to Yosef, Aharon was completely different. It was never about him.

In Chazal's telling³, it was specifically for this reason- his capacity to rejoice in the achievements of his younger brother- that Aharon was selected as the representative of the Jewish people, the Kohen Gadol. Indeed, there could scarcely be a greater recommendation for someone to represent others, to address their spiritual needs as Kohen Gadol, than someone

¹ Sifrei BeMidbar 60.

² Ramban BeMidbar 8:3. Aharon, as Kohen Gadol, did not need to personally kindle the menorah.

³ Talmud Bavli Shabbat 139b.

who was able to put his own ego aside when it came to his brother's ascent to the pinnacle of communal leadership.

It strikes me that the reason that Aharon was so successful in bringing peace⁴ between those suffering in their personal lives from strife, in friendship, in marriage, is that people could appreciate that Aharon was not merely 'talking the talk', when it came to peace, but that he had walked the walk- *na'eh doresh, v'na'eh mekayem*.

Sitting next to Aharon, who had put aside any of his own considerations of ego in maintaining a loving, peaceful relationship with his brother, even the most hardened cynic could soften toward an erstwhile antagonist.

II.

As far as Moshe himself is concerned, the Torah tells us that no man who ever walked the face of the Earth embodied the trait of humility then Moshe Rabbenu, and perhaps, never more clearly than in an incident recorded in our Torah portion.

When two individuals from the camp begin to engage in prophecy, Yehoshua, Moshe's closest and most loyal student, instinctively senses the position of his mentor being usurped, and offers to incarcerate the rogue prophets.

Moshe, characteristically, has the diametrically opposite response. Would that it were, Moshe plaintively sighs, that all of the Jewish people were themselves prophets of the Lord.

In a heartbeat, Moshe would choose the spiritual advancement of his fellow Jews over maintaining his own indispensable role as Hashem's liaison with his Nation. That same selfless leader who twice forewent the opportunity to have the nation built through him alone, was not content with the people's mere survival, but deeply wished for them to experience a measure of spiritual elevation, *ki yiten Hashem et rucho aleibem*.

III.

Moshe and Aharon define not only the proper ethos of Jewish leadership, but the broader Jewish attitude towards honor and prestige as well. Rambam⁵ places humility at the pinnacle of our pantheon of values, but specifically celebrates it in leadership⁶. Ramban⁷, for his part, derives the very prohibition of arrogance from the laws concerning monarchy.

⁴ Avot 1:12; Avot D'Rebbe Natan 12:1; Rashi to BaMidbar 20:29, s.v. *kol beit yisrael*.

⁵ Mishneh Torah Hilkhos De'ot 2:3.

⁶ Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Lulav 8:15.

⁷ Ramban Devarim 17:20 s.v. *l'vilti rum levavo me'echav*.

Aharon's personality stands as an eternal repudiation towards those whose pursuit of honor and glory overrides all other considerations, and destroys relationships: *ha'kinah, vi'ha'ta'ava, vi'ha'kavod, motzi'in et ha'adam min ha'olam*⁸.

Moshe's heartfelt desire for all Jews to be able to experience the spiritual levels which he had achieved is a direct rebuke towards those whose self-worth is linked to suppression of others. On the contrary, *eizehu mechubad, ha'mechabed et ha-beriyot*⁹, the greatest honor is to accord due respect to others.

Together, these brothers remind us that the ultimate source of all honor and glory is not in control or power, nor in the fawning admiration of multitudes, but in humble service of the Lord. In that sense, perhaps Chazal's celebrated equation, *hu Aharon u'Moshe, hu Moshe V'Aharon- melamed she'shekulin ki'achat*¹⁰, implies not only some measure of equivalency, but a shared spirit as well. They were impelled to their course by the same lofty motives, altogether noble and pure.

In the inimitable expression of Chazal, applied to the Divine, but no less, to his humble servants, *b'makom she'ata motze gevurato sham ata motzeh anvatanuto*¹¹, in the place where one finds their greatness, there, one finds their humility.

⁸ Avot 4:21.

⁹ Avot 4:1.

¹⁰ Bereishit Rabbah 1:15. Clearly, the equivalency does not encompass the realm of prophecy, in which Moshe's superiority is axiomatic.

¹¹ Talmud Bavli Megillah 31b