

Be Humble...But Not Self-Deprecating!

Parashat Mishpatim

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I am really *schepping nachas* today...I am so elated, so proud...Of Moses! I know, you thought I was going to say something about one of my kids, or brag about my wife, or talk about how great these teens did in services today. Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of all of them for sure, but today I just can't help but thinking about how much progress Moses has made. I mean he has really come a long way! Did you notice how confident and self-assured he was in th Torah portion this morning? There he was, standing in front of the Jewish people:

Va'yavo Moshe v'yisapeir le'am et kol divre Hashem ve'et kol ha'mispatim, "Moses came forward and instructed the entire nation about everything that God had said, and all of the laws of the Torah." (Ex. 24:3) For a hundred verses, Moses lectures and preaches, teaches and instructs the people on a vast array of laws—criminal laws, torts and damages, personal injury, labor and employment, human rights, it sounds like a law school course catalogue! Then he details the religious and festival calendar, and related rituals...which sounds like a rabbinical school course catalogue. Moses is articulate, fervent, expressive, passionate, stirring! This is the same Moses who 20 chapters earlier griped to God:

Lo ish devarim anochi! I am not a man of words! *Ki ch'vad peh, u'chvad lashon anochi.* I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. (Ex. 4:10)

'I can't possibly go to Egypt,' Moses declares. 'You can't possibly expect *me* to plead the case of the Jewish people, to demand their freedom before the most powerful king on the face of the earth! I am not a good speaker; I am not a convincing sweet-talker. I can't be responsible for this!'

The classical explanation, of course, is that Moses had a speech impediment; perhaps a stutter. Maybe he was glossophobic...Afraid of public speaking. After all it's the number one social phobia, some say it effects 75% of the population! I wonder if the 12th Century French commentator Rashbam, Rabbi Shmuel Ben Me'ir had it right though when he explained that what Moses was worried about was:

Eini baki bi'leshon Mizrayim!

'I am really not fluent in Egyptian! Yes I grew up in Pharaoh's house, but I spent a lot of time with my Hebrew speaking mother and sister, so I never fully picked up Egyptian.'

Why do I say that? Because when Moses is speaking Hebrew he couldn't be more fluent. He couldn't be more loquacious. If you think my sermons are long, this guy is irrepressible!

Seriously though, how do we account for the Moses of Exodus 4 versus the Moses of Exodus 24? Or, for that matter, the Moses of the entire Book of Deuteronomy? How is it possible that this is the same person?

I'm reminded of one of my all-time favorite movies, *The King's Speech*. Colin Firth plays King George VI, who is tutored by Lionel Logue, a speech pathologist played by Geoffrey Rush to overcome a serious speech impediment. The King tells Logue "I have stuttered all my life." To which Logue responds, "That's not true. I've never met a baby who was born stuttering. It doesn't happen." Maybe Jethro, Yitro coached Moses the way Lionel Logue coached King George, who ended up giving a magnificent radio address to the nation when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939. Maybe Moses has evolved since those early days tending sheep in the wilderness. He's older now; more confident. After all by chapter 24 Moses has already successfully led the Jewish people out of Egypt, presided over 10 incredible plagues, and routed the pursuing Egyptian Army. That's got to make a guy feel more confident.

I recently listened to a talk given by Rabbi Eitan Bendavid of Kehillat Shivei Yisrael in Ra'anana, a town northeast of Tel Aviv. He suggested that these very different episodes in Moses's life are meant to teach us that even Moses, even *Moshe Rabbeinu* had both strengths and weaknesses. The greatest prophet ever was better at some things than at others. When it came to teaching Torah to the Jewish people, he was the best! Transmitting God's teachings on Mt. Sinai to the Jewish people below was his expertise. Leading a people from slavery to freedom; serving as an ambassador in a foreign country; being the general of an army fighting the Amalekites in the desert, not as much. Yes, he managed to pull it off, but it wasn't necessarily where he was most adept or comfortable. God convinced Moses that he had to meet with Pharaoh, and that had to lead the people out of Egypt, but Moses did so with a lot of hesitation, a lot of self-doubt, fully aware of his challenges and struggles.

And it is that very awareness of his shortcomings that made Moses eligible to receive the Torah in the first place! The Rabbis say:

Divrei Torah ein mitkayemin eileh be'mi she'da'ato sh'feilah

Torah can only be given, can only be sustained by someone who is humble. (Sotah 5a) And of course the Torah says about Moses that he was *anav me'od mikol ha'adam*, the most humble person in the world. (Num. 12:3)

Now I have to tell you, this led to an important personal realization. I think being humble and feeling you're inadequate are often confused. Humility does not mean to berate yourself about all the things you're not good at; or to feel badly about yourself when someone else excels in something, and you sit around wondering why you're not as good at that something as they are. Humility is the awareness not only of your shortcomings, but also of your strengths.

Listen to this fascinating statement in the Gemara (Sotah 5a)":

According to the Sage Rava, an arrogant Torah scholar should be excommunicated! Wow that's extreme. But wait, there's more. That same sage then said, and a Torah scholar who has *no arrogance at all* should also be excommunicated! It's easy to understand why a Torah scholar, which is the ideal kind of Jew according to the rabbis, should not be arrogant, or proud, or self-important. Those don't seem like very holy character traits. But a *little bit* of pride, a little sense of self-importance...that is also necessary. Because without it, you can't possibly recognize your own potential, your own unique ability to contribute to the world. Humility is not about ignoring

or disavowing your strengths. It is about being able to recognize both your strengths and your weaknesses. To be able to draw upon and act upon your God-given gifts and talents, and also to be in awe of other people's gifts and talents. Moses may not have been an intrinsic spokesman or military leader, but he was a great teacher and rabbi. Because he recognized that these strengths and weaknesses were all a part of who he was as a person, *ha'Torah mitkayem bo*, the Torah was able to dwell within him.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov so beautifully taught that "the humility of our Teacher Moses is implanted within every Jew." (*Likkutei Etzot, Ga'ava va-Anavah*, 166a, no. 30) The humility of Moses means to amplify what we're really good at, and not feel badly about what we're not. If everyone had the same talents and the same weaknesses we would be in big trouble. I celebrate the people who are great at math, because if it were up to me we'd all be in big trouble! I know that I have other skills that are unique and special to offer. And so do you. Be humble, but don't be self-deprecating. They are not the same. If you're not as good at something, as skilled at something, as successful at something as someone else, that's not a reflection on you. Be happy for them. Their skills are necessary, and so are yours. The British writer and theologian C.S. Lewis once said that "true humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less." How blessed we are that people have so many different talents, interests, strengths, and skills. Let us learn, in the spirit of our Teacher Moses, to appreciate and celebrate them all!