

Shemini, 5780, Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

"And Moshe heard, and it was good in his eyes" (10:20).

Even Moshe Rabbeinu can get it wrong. After learning of an apparent mistake that was made in the inaugural Temple service, Moshe expresses frustration towards Aharon's sons. When Aharon explains the situation, Moshe immediately realizes that his objection was inappropriate. Rather than trying to cover up his mistaken judgment or lashing back defensively at Aharon, Moshe responds with simplicity and grace: "and Moshe heard and it was good in his eyes" (10:20). It's one thing to externally accept correction without pushing back. It's entirely another thing for the situation to be genuinely considered "good" in one's eyes. Moshe's ability to wholeheartedly accept correction stemmed from his deeply rooted humility, which may closely have related to a clear conception of the true source of his greatness.

Few things are more revealing about a person's sense of self than how he or she receives criticism or correction. While every rule has its exceptions, generally speaking, the more insecure a person feels, the more defensively he or she will react to any hint of criticism. After all, if you feel like a nothing to begin with, having your intelligence or competence questioned will make you feel like even more of a nothing -- a feeling that is, understandably, extremely difficult to live with. I remember a nurse once telling me that she had mastered the delicate ability to correct doctors in a subtle enough way to prevent them from realizing that they were being corrected, so that they would ultimately be receptive to her observations and not become defensive.

Jewish mysticism teaches that at our core, beneath our physical body and the various external layers of personality that we superficially exhibit, each one of us is a pure "neshama" -- a soul, which is nothing other than a spark or "aspect" of the Divine Himself. By our essential nature we are good, we are holy, and we are of Infinite importance. Regardless of our looks, our intelligence, or what we accomplish or majorly mess up in our professional, family, or social lives, we will always carry this quiet inner greatness which cannot be extinguished; rather, only covered up, when we forget who we are. And the more we live a life that is consistent with this greatness, rooted in true values of Torah, Mitzvot, and kindness, the more we will remain aware of it, and the more we will intuit that our greatness is ultimately not our own -- which is the essence of true humility. While this spiritual concept is obviously very deep and requires study and elaboration, relating to it on even a basic level can have powerful ramifications in every aspect of a person's life.

So many of us base our self-worth on our false self, the ego. Egos thrive on popularity, wealth, physical appearance, or honor, and can therefore make a person devote literally his or her entire life to chasing these false fillers in order to feel a transient sense of significance. But such cravings can never be fully satiated, nor do they nourish the core of who we are, and ultimately leave a person feeling even more insecure and insignificant. I recall once encountering a physician in academic medicine who openly described to others how he would read his own CV

describing his list of publications and degrees twice every day in order to feel a sense of importance; some people spend hours posing in front of a mirror or any reflection of their visage they may encounter; people in the entertainment industry have written of their intense craving for attention and approval from others, and the searing pain they feel when they fall short. But a truly humble person is simply not interested in these saccharine mirages, because he lives acutely aware of his true self, the Neshama, as the source of his greatness. Such a person knows that true honor is not really his doing at all. He can therefore accept criticism without fear of being relegated to insignificance, because deep down, he knows that he will never be insignificant.

Confusing "humility" with low self esteem can be a devastating mistake. If this equation was true, humble people would be expected to be the most disturbed by criticism and correction, the opposite of what Moshe Rabbeinu demonstrates in this week's Parasha. Rather, true humility stems from the exact opposite -- a healthy awareness of the unconditional Divine greatness within.

During challenging and changing times like these, many people struggle with attaining an accurate sense of self. People who are struggling financially may begin to feel like they somehow matter less than they used to. People who spend an entire Pesach alone may sometimes be prone to incorrectly feel unimportant and unloveable. Moshe Rabbeinu's humility sends us a critical reminder to never forget the true source of our self-worth, regardless of what we face.