

BEHAALOSCHA (NUMBERS 8:1-12:16)

I'm the Greatest...and the Most Modest!

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

No one was more humble than Moses. (See "Little Big Man".) *"Who am I,"* he asked, *"...that I should be the one to take the Israelites out of Egypt?"* (Exodus, 3:11) He shunned honor and glory because he genuinely felt that he didn't deserve it. In this week's Torah reading, we are told in so many words what Moses thought of himself: *"Moses was more humble than any man on the face of the earth."* (Numbers, 12:3)

It leads one to wonder... if Moses was so humble, how did he manage to garner the *Chutzpah* to debate with G-d? Whenever the Israelites sinned, and G-d wanted to destroy them, Moses argued with him; *"Do You want the nations to say that you weren't able to take the Israelites into the Land?"* (Numbers, 14:15-16) *"If you forgive them, fine; if not, erase me from Your book!"* (Exodus, 32:32) And what about the way he spoke to the Pharaoh? Moses showed throughout his career that he was a man to be reckoned with. Not exactly a wimp!

What does the Torah mean when it says that Moses was humble? Did he disagree with the Torah's assertion that *"Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, who G-d had known face to face, for all the signs that G-d sent him to perform in Egypt...and for all the strong hand for all the great awesomeness that Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel?"* (Deuteronomy 34:10-12)

A humble person should disagree with such a glowing description. But, since every word in the Torah is the essence of Truth, how could he deny these words without being labeled a heretic??!!

The answer is that humility has nothing to do with denial of greatness. Moses knew that he was the greatest of the prophets. He knew that he was righteous. His humility was that he didn't credit himself for his own greatness. Nor did he consider himself as having reached his full potential.

Let me share with you an experience I had about 15 years ago. I had accepted a position for the High Holidays in a once-great congregation in New Jersey. The synagogue building was a magnificent edifice in a bad neighborhood. The rabbi had tried to attract young Jewish couples to the synagogue by arranging for low-cost federal housing. He had also arranged for the synagogue to be renovated. The young couples never came, and the years of accumulated dust on the scaffolding in the sanctuary testified to renovations that were never completed.

They conducted High Holiday Services in the little weekday chapel. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we waited two hours for a *Minyan*, (required quorum of ten for religious Services) and on the second day, there was no *Minyan* at all! I considered not coming back for Yom Kippur, but I had already made the commitment to the rabbi, and I couldn't let him down. But I wondered: What will we do if there is no *Minyan* on Yom Kippur? Services on Yom Kippur continue throughout the day. These people are not that religious. They won't stay all day. How can we conduct services on the holiest day of the year without our required quorum?

Hoping for the best, and bracing for the worst, I went back to this relic of a synagogue for Yom Kippur. We had our *Minyan*, but just barely. There were, perhaps, twelve or thirteen of us.

The Cantor on the High Holidays recites a very moving introduction to the Musaf Service. "Here I am, poor in deeds... I have come to stand and plead before You in behalf of Your people Israel, who have appointed me, although I am not worthy or qualified for the task..."

The thought crossed my mind, that although it is appropriate to be humble, one should also be realistic. True, I thought, I am far from righteous, but, under the circumstances, I AM worthy. Look at this congregation, I thought. These people are not learned, many of them are barely religious, the group itself is tiny. Who would want to spend Yom Kippur here?!! I am a rabbi, a full-time student of Torah, a person who is willing to give up spending the Holidays in a more inspiring environment. Look what I am doing for them! In spite of the text of the prayer I am currently reciting, I AM worthy of representing this congregation!

As the day progressed, I became more and more concerned about our *Minyan*. Who will stay for the afternoon service? What will we do when these people start to go home?

They never left. These simple, uneducated Jews, hungry from fasting, never left us without our *Minyan*.

I began to rethink my analysis of worthiness. I went to Yeshiva all my life. I'm a rabbi. I KNOW that you're supposed to be in Shul all day on Yom Kippur. It goes without saying. But what should I expect from this group? They were not highly educated. Some of them had recently come to America from Russia. Some of them were retired people who had worked hard all their lives, never having had the opportunity to study much about their religion. A number of them couldn't even read the prayers in Hebrew!

And yet, these simple people, these wonderful, holy Jews, refused to take a break from the *Shul* and deprive us of our *Minyan*. That's when I thought again of the words of the Cantor's Prayer: "... I have come to stand and plead before You in behalf of Your people Israel, who have appointed me, although I am not worthy or qualified for the task..."

It was true! For all my Torah scholarship, or, perhaps BECAUSE of my scholarship, I was EXPECTED to stay all day. It would have been understandable if they had not stayed. I truly WAS unworthy of such a congregation.

The question can be analyzed in the following way: A genius takes a test without studying and gets an "A-," while an average and unremarkable student studies and gets a "B." Who is the better student? Who is working to potential, the "A-" student, or the "B" student?

Moses was the most humble of men. That doesn't mean that he didn't realize that he was the greatest prophet who ever lived.

Humility does not require one to naively deny one's greatness. Humility means that a person recognizes his potential for greatness, and constantly challenges himself to meet that potential.

Have a great Shabbos.

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