

Humble Like Moses

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Decades ago, I officiated at an adult Bat Mitzvah on the Shabbat of reading the portion known as *Korach*, which is coming up in a couple of weeks. A band of rebels initiate an insurrection against Moses and Aaron, claiming that the brothers have consolidated too much power in their own hands, raising themselves above the rest of the community.

In her *D'var Torah*, the Bat Mitzvah discussed instances when Moses assumes too much power. She suggested that Moses's flawed leadership style had contributed to the rise of the rebellion.

At the end of the service, I was approached by an angry couple whom I did not know. Describing themselves as Orthodox Jews, they criticized me harshly for permitting what they considered to be slander of *Moshe Rabbeinu*—our rabbi, Moses—from the *bimah* of a synagogue on Shabbat, no less.

Some people need their heroes to be perfect and their villains to be without redemption. I explained to the couple that I am inspired by Moses's imperfection. If a flawed person such as he could be God's primary partner in liberation, then other flawed human beings—that is, all of us—have the potential to partner with God to build a better world.

In this week's Torah portion, *B'haalot'cha*, we read: “Now Moses was very humble, more so than any other human being on earth.”ⁱ “Humility, though, isn't the quality that first comes to mind when considering a great leader. To reach their lofty positions, presidents and prime ministers typically imagine that they are the single best person suited to lead a nation. Who could reach such a position without working diligently to convince others that they ought to be so exalted?

If we reflect on Moses, though, he does not start off by asking to lead the Children of Israel. God calls him to that role, and Moses tries several tactics to convince God otherwise. Still, as my long-ago adult Bat Mitzvah pointed out, we know examples when Moses behaves haughtily. He repeatedly loses his temper with the stiff-necked people.

The context in which our portion calls Moses exceedingly humble is illuminating. Moses's siblings, Miriam and Aaron, insult Moses's choice of a wife, and they ask, “Has Adonai spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not spoken

through us as well?”ⁱⁱ The pronouncement of Moses’s superlative humility immediately follows this attack, so the sages interpret it in that context.

Nachmanides, a medieval Sephardic commentator, emphasizes two important factors: “Moses never sought superiority over any person,” including his siblings. Moreover, Nachmanides notes that Moses does not react to the insult; instead, “he restrained himself about the matter.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Not reacting harshly to offense may indeed be a hallmark of humility. I recall another instance, again years ago in another community, this time during a Board meeting, when one member accused me of dishonesty. I defended myself, but not angrily. After the meeting, though, I was livid. Why hadn’t the president defended me against this scurrilous attack? The president explained that she understood why I was upset, and rightfully so. However, she noted that nobody had taken up the cause of the woman who defamed me. She assured me that was because other members of the Board thought poorly of this woman and that they trusted me. She said that everybody’s honor was best preserved by not calling out the accuser. That Temple president taught me an important lesson about humility, one that we can also learn from Moses. Accused of assuming too much power, Moses does not appear to be affronted. A nineteenth century scholar, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, explains that Moses’s humility could be seen in his lack of concern for other people’s opinion of him. As long as he conducted himself honorably, he was unbothered by whether they honored or insulted him.^{iv} That kind of humility is indeed rare.

Writing about this week’s portion in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Max Weiss asks, “What does humility mean in the context of leadership? How can one be both humble and powerful?” Moses’s role is extraordinary, not the kind that conjures thoughts of humility. Rabbi Weiss elaborates: “Moses stands at the center of the Torah. He, more than any other person, connects heaven and earth. He is the translator, interpreter, and messenger of God’s word. He is judge, builder, arbiter, and community organizer. Moses mediates between God and the people of Israel, even as he stands in the midst of the people, working among them as connector...Moses’s humility is based on his recognition that he lives his life among and with his people, not at the center and not above them. His humility flows from his knowledge of his proper place in the world.”^v

Still, Moses struggles to find the right balance, to be the humble leader he needs to be. You may recall, back in Exodus, Moses’s father-in-law Jethro observes that Moses has taken too much responsibility and authority. He believes that he must personally resolve every dispute, no matter how small. He doesn’t see any alternative. With hundreds of thousands of Israelites, though, Moses is excessively

burdened. Worse, his lack of humility—specifically, his assumption that he is the only one who can do this job—grossly inconveniences the people. They must wait around all day for their turn to have their cases heard. Jethro suggests that Moses appoint qualified individuals “as chiefs of thousands, hundred, fifties, and tens,” who may resolve disputes, bringing only the most vexing cases to Moses.^{vi}

Exodus tells us that “Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said,”^{vii} which is a sign of humility.” Nevertheless, by the time we get to this week’s portion in Numbers, Jethro’s system has apparently gone by the wayside. This time, Moses recognizes his limitations, telling God, “I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me.”^{viii}

This time, God intervenes directly, instructing Moses to gather seventy elders to support and assist him,^{ix} and Moses does so. Rabbi Weiss emphasizes that Moses “is humble enough not only to recognize his limits, but to accept what is best for his community, even if that diminishes his personal authority. Moses allows himself to be smaller so that others can be larger. Arrogance would have pushed Moses to do it all by himself; self-abasement would have made him think himself incapable of doing anything. Humility helps him recognize a solution that works. Moses understands, despite a moment of despair, that sharing the leadership is ultimately best for his community and for himself.”^x

Humility, perfectly in balance, does not come naturally, even to Moses. Whether we tend toward thinking too little of ourselves or too much, most of us are at pains to set the balance correctly. We may take comfort in knowing that even Moses struggled. Beginning by describing himself as wholly unfit for leadership, he then goes to the other extreme, hoarding responsibility and authority to his own detriment and that of the community. Finally, Moses matures as a leader and as a human being only when he accepts wisdom that would come to be recorded in *Pirkei Avot*, Sayings of the Sages: *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*, “You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”^{xi} We all need helpers to accomplish the work that God has designated for us in this lifetime. Let us all seek to find the right balance, sharing the burden and its reward—humble, like Moses.

ⁱ Numbers 12:3.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 12:1-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nachmanides (Ramban) to Numbers 12:3, citing Ibn Ezra and *Sifre*.

^{iv} *Haamek Davar* on Numbers 12:3.

^v Rabbi Max Weiss, “*Anavah—Humility in Leadership*,” *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, p. 225.

^{vi} Exodus 18:13-23.

^{vii} Exodus 18:24.

viii Numbers 11:14.

ix Numbers 11:16.

x Weiss, p. 227.

xi Avot 2.16.