

## Bruce Greenberg: Humble, Like Moses

### *Shabbat B'ha'a lot'cha 5784*

June 21, 2024

Rabbi Barry H. Block

“Moses,” this week’s Torah portion tells us, “was a very humble man, more so than any other human being on earth.”<sup>i</sup> Moses? Really? The guy who refuses to share leadership of the Children of Israel—making the Israelites wait around for him day and night—until his father-in-law cajoles him into getting help?<sup>ii</sup> And then there’s the time when the people have no water. God tells Moses to speak to a rock, and water will flow. Instead, Moses castigates the people, as if grumbling were unreasonable when they are threatened with dying of thirst in the desert. Next, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses crashes his rod down on it, making it look like he, not God, is causing the water to flow!<sup>iii</sup> Are these the hallmarks of humility?

There is context to the declaration that Moses is humblest man in the world. Entirely out of character, Moses’s siblings castigate him. Miriam and Aaron slander Moses’s wife before asking if God really communicates **only** with Moses.<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps the declaration of Moses’s humility is meant to suggest that Aaron and Miriam are being unfair—Moses, after all, did not ask God to speak to him, certainly not exclusively. That’s God’s doing. Moses doesn’t react to his siblings’ insults, which many see as an example of humility. I’m not so sure. As a student of Mussar, I have learned that humility can be out of balance in either direction.<sup>v</sup> In this instance, Moses is not haughty, but the opposite—self-abnegating, by not defending himself—which is to say, not properly humble.

Rabbi Andrea Goldstein points to a different episode, this one shortly before Moses is called the humblest person in history. Moses gathers seventy elders at the Tent of Meeting. God’s spirit descends upon them all. Then, “Two men, .. Eldad and ... Medad, ... remained in camp[--that is, they were not elders called to the Tent of Meeting--]yet the spirit rested upon them...and they spoke in ecstasy in the camp. A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, ‘Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!’ ...Joshua...spoke up and said, ‘My lord Moses, restrain them!’ But Moses said to him, ‘Are you upset on my account? If only all the people of Adonai were prophets, that Adonai put [the divine] spirit upon them!’”<sup>vi</sup>

This incident occurs shortly before Moses’s siblings ask if God speaks only to Moses. Moses, though, has already answered that question, affirming that God has communicated with the seventy elders, Eldad, and Medad. More than that: Sferno, a medieval commentator, sees Moses as rejoicing that, Eldad and Medad encounter God entirely on their own, unlike the elders whose experience of God’s

spirit is Moses's doing.<sup>vii</sup> Moses is humbly grateful that his people can experience the Divine, even without his intervention.

Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller puts it this way: "Rather than attempting to curb the activity of Eldad and Medad, Moses insists that they ought to be celebrated as examples of the spiritual potential within every Israelite. Eldad and Medad's ecstatic speech did not constitute a threat. On the contrary, it presented an opportunity to encourage each member of the community to nurture their own spiritual potential.

"This perspective is consistent with an intriguing passage in Exodus, where we read: 'Now Moses would pitch the Tent of Meeting, and whoever sought God would go out to the Tent ... **that was outside the camp**... According to Professor Yisrael Knohl" that means there were two tents—one inside the camp, the *Mishkan*, the priestly desert sanctuary called the Tent of Meeting where sacrifices were offered; and the other, outside the camp, where Eldad and Medad meet God. "It was a place specially designated for those individuals who sought intimate and direct access to God. Moses was committed to providing these spiritual seekers with a setting that was conducive to their personal growth. He created an inclusive framework that supported both a rule-dominated ... official Tent of Meeting, and a simple prayer hut open to anyone with a desire to cultivate their spiritual experience, which functioned as an alternative Tent of Meeting."<sup>viii</sup>

What you may be wondering, does all of this have to do with our new Temple President, Bruce Greenberg?

Bruce has articulated two goals of his presidency—a more horizontal leadership structure and increased social engagement. Each of these goals may be linked to Moses's celebration of Eldad and Medad.

The first connection is clear. Just as Moses expresses that he does not reserve access to God to himself and those closest to him, Bruce seeks to share "the wealth" of Temple leadership.

Admittedly, there are limits. Article 1 of our congregation's bylaws begins, "The President shall act as the chief executive officer of the Congregation." As Bruce has seen repeatedly over the last two years, situations arise then a decision must be made, and the president is the decider. Bruce's style is to seek broad input, whenever time allows, rather than simply follow his first instinct about the correct course of action.

Bruce symbolizes this goal with his plans to serve as our *bimah* officer only about half the time, sharing that spotlight with other officers and trustees. That’s an example of humility like Moses’s, when Moses is eager to share his access to God.

Let’s consider, too, Professor Knoll’s suggestion that Moses valued two tents—one for observing God’s commandments and the other for spiritual connection. One could compare that to Bruce’s evaluation that we have done well in one “tent”—that is, a wide variety of Shabbat and festival observances, as well as Religious School—while we have not as fully erected a second tent, this one for increased friendships in our congregation through social engagement. The priests, Levites, and elders valued only the tent where the *mitzvot* were fulfilled. Eldad and Medad stayed away from that first tent, finding spirituality elsewhere, just as some aren’t attracted to worship and study. Bruce, like Moses, is the rare leader who sees and articulates the value of both “tents,” fulfilling *mitzvot* and building the community.

One quirk of being a synagogue professional is that, while remaining in the same jobs, Eileen and I acquire a new “boss” every two years. Some view that as a curse. Even in the best of circumstances, a change in leadership can be unsettling, as everyone becomes accustomed to a new style and a particular president’s priorities.

Now, though, we welcome a new president whose hallmark attribute is humility—following another president whose humility is also in balance, albeit with different manifestations. A transition like ours brings Congregation B’nai Israel from strength to ever greater strength, and that is cause for blessing.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Numbers 12:3.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 18.

<sup>iii</sup> Numbers 20.

<sup>iv</sup> Numbers 12:1-2.

<sup>v</sup> Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter, 2007, pp. 46-7.

<sup>vi</sup> Numbers 11:26-29.

<sup>vii</sup> Sforno on Numbers 11:29.

<sup>viii</sup> Text taught by Rabbi Andrea Goldstein, meeting of the CCAR Board of Trustees, June 20, 2024.