

# NOTHING AND EVERYTHING

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

What was the secret of the greatness of Moses? What special qualities made him stand out as the greatest spiritual leader in the history of the Jewish people? How did he reach the supreme level of prophecy, far surpassing all previous and subsequent prophets? In this week's reading, the Torah gives us the answer. Moses may have been the greatest person in the history of the world, but he was also the most humble. In fact, his humility was the key to his greatness. The commentators, however, are puzzled by the context in which the Torah chooses to record this endorsement of Moses.

Towards the end of this week's portion, we read that Aaron and Miriam took their brother Moses to task for separating from his wife. Why was it necessary, they contended, to withdraw from ordinary life? After all, they were also blessed with the gift of prophecy and they still had normal spousal relationships. At this point, the Torah interrupts the story to tell us about Moses's humility. Then the story is continued. Hashem reprimands them severely for their slander, and Miriam is punished.

Why does the comment about Moses's humility belong right in the middle of this episode?

The commentators explain that very often people who set off in pursuit of spiritual greatness remove themselves from human society and isolate themselves from contact with other people. This, however, is not the path towards spiritual growth that the Torah advocates. Such people may indeed expand their awareness of the Creator, but at the same time they are also expanding their awareness of themselves. By focusing on their own goals, ideals and aspirations at the expense of other people, they are inevitably channeling their lives into a selfish direction. This is not what the Torah wants.

Miriam suspected that Moses had separated from his wife because he hoped this would bring him to higher spiritual levels. She suspected he was selfishly willing to sacrifice his spousal relationship to advance his own personal spiritual goals, regardless of how his wife was affected. Therefore, she took him to task for being so focused on his own goals that he became insensitive to the needs of others, in this case his own wife.

Not so, the Torah bears witness. Moses was the ultimate humble man, without a single selfish bone in his body, and his decision to separate from his wife was clearly not for his own aggrandizement but for the greater good of the Jewish people.

*A young fellow once traveled to a faraway land to study in the academy of a great sage. After the first*

*day, he heard two of the older students conversing about the wisdom of the sage.*

"Oh, the words of the sage are like the sun," said one of the students. "When I listen to him I realize that I am absolutely nothing. That's all I am. A great big nothing."

His friend nodded sagely. "I know exactly how you feel. I feel exactly the same way. When I sit at his feet, listening to the pearls of wisdom pouring from his lips, I realize am just a nothing, a living, breathing nothing."

The new student was very moved and inspired. "Me, too," he cried out. "When I look at the glowing face of the sage, I realize that I too am just a nothing."

One of the older students turned to the new student and fixed him with an eagle stare. "Listen to this!" he exclaimed. "This fellow has just arrived in the academy, and already he presumes to be a nothing."

In our own lives, we often find ourselves taking the high ground in various circumstances and professing moral indignation about the behavior of other people. In such cases, we would do well to take out a little time for introspection and examine our motivations. If there is even the least bit of self-interest involved, if we seek to show that we have a higher standard than other people, then we would do better to remain silent. Text Copyright &copy 2009 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

Rabbi Reich is on the faculty of [the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum Education Center](#).