

HE WHO AVOIDS HONOR FINDS HIMSELF HONORED

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"He called to Moses..." [1:1]

The first word of this book, that which identifies the Sefer as "Vayikra," contains an unusually small letter Aleph - as if the word were spelled "VAYIKRa."

Our Sages blame Moshe for the miniature Aleph. He could have written a normal one, but he didn't. Why not? Because G-d called Bila'am with "Vayikar," without the Aleph, which Rashi describes as an off-hand and denigrating call. Moshe wasn't interested in self-promotion, and was in fact so humble that he did not want to make himself greater than even the evil Bila'am.

So Moshe wanted no greater than "Vayikar" for himself. But our Kabbalah says that G-d gave Moshe the shining beams which radiated from his face - the very symbol of his greatness - in exchange for the ink which Moshe left over in his humility.

A member of our program called me this week, and he came to the subject of a particular (unnamed) individual who was caught misbehaving. The misbehavior was bad enough, said the caller, but he lost all respect for him when the latter continuously attempted to downplay and excuse what he had done, rather than admitting wrongdoing. This person's pride simply wouldn't let him apologize for his actions.

Look at the contrast between Moshe, and this anonymous individual! One ran away from honor, and found it; the other pursued it, and lost it! This is, in fact, precisely what our Sages say about pride.

Precisely: pursue honor, and it runs away; run away, and it pursues you.

My teacher Rabbi Yehoshua Bertram sent me an email just this week, which fit this subject perfectly - emphasizing the extent to which our Torah obligates us to avoid pride in favor of humility.

The Rambam says that we must pursue the "middle path" in every aspect of our character - except when it comes to humility. Regarding humility, one must go to the extreme. Extreme humility is the one character trait that Moshe Rabbeinu was praised for. In fact, says Rabbi Bertram, the small Aleph tells us that the key to Moshe's success in drawing close to HaShem was his absolute humility before his Creator and his fellow Jew. Then Rabbi Bertram quotes the early authority, Rabbeinu Bechaya, who defines humility as requiring a person to have shame and patience, to honor people, and to take insult graciously. He says that four things come as a result of humility: 1) fear of Heaven, 2) wealth, 3) honor, and 4) life. The humble person acquires fear of Heaven, because he realizes that

he cannot succeed on his own - all his sustenance, both physical and spiritual, comes from G-d. He realizes his smallness in relation to his Creator.

The humble person, who fears Heaven, becomes wealthy, because he is happy with his lot; this man is happy with what he has and seeks no more than he needs. As the Chapters of the Fathers says, "Who is a wealthy person? He who is contented with his lot."

The humble person, who fears Heaven and is happy with his lot, will also come to honor, because when he is happy with what G-d has allocated to him he curtails his passions and desires. This Rabbeinu Bechaya says, is honor.

Humility leads a person to life. When a person desires extras, he is always concerned about his possessions: will the stock rise, will the property values increase, will I get the promotion? Worries and concerns follow him all of his days and his "life" is one of agony and apprehension about tomorrow. Worry and concern shorten a person's life. So, says Rabbeinu Bechaya, let not a person be worried about tomorrow, because he knows not what today will bring, and he may not be there tomorrow. So a person who worries, is worried about a world that is not his! The humble person, devoid of such worries, lives in this world. This humble person has life.

Look at the unusual definition of honor - curtailing passions and desires. Isn't pride something we desire? So it's all connected. Again, our Sages tell us, the person who is unwilling to set aside his pride, but who desires and pursues it, finds that pride runs away from him - and he is denigrated by others. While on the other hand, one who runs away from honor, finds himself honored!

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