

FALSE HUMILITY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Moshe said to G-d, 'Who am I, that I should go before Pharaoh, and that I should take the Children of Israel from Egypt?' And He responded, 'For I will be with you, and this is the sign for you that I have sent you: when you take the nation out from Egypt, you will worship G-d upon this mountain.'" [3:12]

Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki] explains Moshe's question: "who am I -- am I an important person, to go speak with Kings?"

If so, we must wonder at God's answer to the question. Moshe did not ask for a sign! He was speaking about his humility, his smallness. G-d will be with him, but G-d could also be with someone else -- how is this a response to Moshe's protest that he is insignificant?

The Ateres Yeshuah is said to have given the following answer: sometimes, a person needs just a tiny bit of haughtiness -- as found in Chronicles II [17:6], "and he lifted up his heart [became haughty] in the paths of G-d."

We are told that the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, which was a low mountain. This was designed to teach us humility -- just as the Torah was given on this humble mountain, the Torah is given to humble people. But if so, we should ask why the Torah was not given in a valley instead. Why was it given on a mountain at all? Again, the answer is that a tiny bit of haughtiness is occasionally needed in the service of G-d.

Moshe is praised by the Torah itself as the most humble person on earth [Numbers 12:3]. In accordance with this trait, he said "who am I to go before Pharaoh?"

To this, G-d answered that Moshe needed to elevate himself, for He Himself would be with Moshe. Even though the Talmud records that G-d says about a haughty person: "he and I cannot coexist in this world," even so, He would be with Moshe when Moshe became haughty for Divine purposes. And how did G-d prove that it was acceptable to be just a little bit haughty? "When you take the nation out from Egypt, you will worship G-d upon this mountain" -- specifically on a mountain, to hint that sometimes a bit of haughtiness is necessary, and this is not the time to be too humble.

How can humility and haughtiness coexist? How could Moshe be haughty, yet remain the most humble person on earth? Rabbi Meir Landesman explains in his book Kavod Atzmi.

In the Chovos Halevavos, in the introduction to the "Gate of Humility," Rabbeinu Bechaya distinguishes between true humility and self-degradation. To ignore one's own needs, and consider

oneself worthless -- this is not humility. Humility is something that comes after self-elevation, after recognizing positive traits and the value of every human soul in the eyes of G-d.

How, then, does one acquire this humility? The Malbim answers in his commentary to the verse in Proverbs [22:4]: "on the heels of humility comes Fear of G-d." "The root of humility comes from recognition of the greatness of the Creator, and His tremendous power, and the universe that He Created -- until one recognizes that he is vanishingly small in comparison to even a small part of Creation. And even if he achieves kingship, wisdom and strength in this world, and all greatness, he knows that he is like a tiny worm before the Great King who stands over him, and is like nothing in comparison to even the smallest of Angels. This thought will bring Fear of G-d into his heart, fear of doing anything against His will."

So we see, says Rabbi Landesman, that self-respect is no contradiction to humility -- on the contrary, according to the Chovos Halevavos one is part of the other. True humility comes when we recognize all that we have, and recognize that it all comes from G-d.

This is how it was possible for Moshe to be "haughty" -- because it was only and entirely in the service of G-d. When we are confronted with challenges to our own religious values and ideals, we cannot claim to be "humble" if we surrender those ideals. On the contrary, this is the time when that worst of all traits, haughtiness, suddenly becomes appropriate!

Good Shabbos,
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