

OF HUMBLE ORIGINS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth. (Bamidbar 12:3)

Humility is the trait that keeps on giving, to the person who has it and to everyone with whom the humble person comes in contact. There are a lot of very good and important traits in the world, but humility tops the list.

It receives some serious attention in this week's parshah. After Tziporah complained to Miriam about her husband's, Moshe Rab-beinu, lack of attentiveness, Miriam complained to Aharon. As they consulted about what they thought was a real problem, God dropped in to straighten them out:

"Please listen to My words. If there will be a prophet among you, [I] God will make Myself known to him in a vision. I will speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moshe. He is faithful throughout My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of God. So why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moshe?" (Bamidbar 12:3-8)

Lest one question the importance of the trait of humility, it says:

Rebi Yochanan said: Wherever you find the greatness of The Holy One, Blessed is He, there you find His humility. (Megillah 31a)

It is interesting that Rebi Yochanan phrased it this way. One might have thought it should have been stated in reverse:

Wherever you find the humility of The Holy One, Blessed is He, there you find His greatness.

One might have thought that it is humility that leads to greatness, and not the other way around. Could it be that Rebi Yochanan was not teaching us about humility, but about true greatness? Is he really saying that you can recognize true greatness if it is accompanied by true humility?

Perhaps this is why God began His criticism of Moshe's brother and sister with a comment about Moshe's humility. Perhaps God was telling them, "You question Moshe's priorities, as if the excellence he seeks is flawed. Stand corrected: His extreme humility proves that all he does, he does for the right reason and in the right way."

It has been said, "Humility is the wisdom of accepting the truth that you might just be wrong." By

confirming Moshe Rabbeinu's level of humility, God told Aharon and Miriam that they could be sure that if Moshe was wrong about anything, he would have taken note and changed his way. If he didn't, it was because he was right.

Why is it so hard to be wrong, especially when the only consequence is a damaged pride? We've all felt the answer to that question at one time or another. Having to admit error sometimes feels like a violation of self. This is why some people will defend themselves to the point that they lose the very things they value most, including the very pride they are trying to preserve. No one looks sillier and more immature than a person who acts right when he is clearly wrong.

It's a defense mechanism. The attack on the person's position is perceived as an attack on the person himself. Their opinion under siege, he or she feels compelled to come out firing. They and their opinion are one, inseparable in the person's mind. Their stubbornness, which can easily be construed as arrogance, is their way of holding down the emotional fort.

Without question, we are our beliefs. We build our lives on them and act based upon them. We sacrifice for them, and when necessary, even our lives. A person is truly the sum total of all they believe, right or wrong.

Right AND wrong. We can become our beliefs, but our beliefs can never really become us. We are different from what we believe, inasmuch as our beliefs can be changed but we cannot. The core of every human being is his or her soul, something we cannot choose or change.

Furthermore, each soul is a Divine spark. As such, it is truth and only wants truth. It's prime interest is to rectify itself, and to contribute to the rectification of Creation. It wants to be a partner with God in the perfection of Creation, and nothing else fulfills a soul more than accomplishing such a goal.

The problem is the body. It is the body that feels. It feels the pleasure and it feels the pain. It wants to survive just as the soul does, except that its understanding of survival tends to translate into the avoidance of pain. It learns early what pain is, and almost just as early about avoiding it.

The interesting thing about the body is that, as much as it hates pain, it is prepared to suffer some if it sees a benefit in doing so. Just ask any businessman who makes great physical sacrifices for success, or any athlete who dreams of stardom. Their grimacing faces portray the pain their bodies willingly endure for a goal they have learned to cherish.

This is why a person has to be in touch with his soul. He has to know who he really is, what really drives him. A person has to understand what it is that counts most to them in life, what they would rather die for than violate or do without. Without such knowledge a person ends up sacrificing the wrong things for the wrong things. It happens all the time in everyday life.

This is what made Moshe Rabbeinu the humblest person ever. Few people, if any, ever knew their soul as well as Moshe Rabbeinu knew his. Few, if any, ever knew what it was that drove them in life as did Moshe Rabbeinu. This allowed him to prioritize his life in the most meaningful and useful way

possible. He knew the truth about life, and how much it mattered to him to preserve it. This is what gave him the courage and wisdom to do what was right, even if it meant admitting that he was wrong.

This means that humility is not simply a trait that one works on to achieve. It is a result of a process of seeking out truth and committing oneself to it. A person for whom the truth matters more than anything else, who identifies himself with the truth, is someone who will become humble. Humility is the inevitable result of being a truth seeker.

This is the greatness of God. He is the Truth of Truths, there is none higher. Nothing else matters to God other than the truth, at all times. God and truth are one, in the ultimate sense. Truth is greatness and therefore God is, by definition, the greatest of greatness. By definition, He must also be humble.

The Talmud says regarding Moshe and Aharon:

Rava, others say Rebi Yochanan, said: "More significant is that which is said of Moshe and Aharon than that which is said of Avraham. Regarding Avraham it says, 'I am but dust and ashes,' whereas regarding Moshe and Aharon it says, 'And we are nothing.' Rava, others say Rebi Yochanan, also said: "The world exists only on account of [the merit of] Moshe and Aharon; for it is written here, 'And we are nothing,' and it is written there [of the world], 'He hangs the earth upon nothing'." (Chulin 89a)

It is quite a statement to make. What it is really saying is that the world exists on account of humility. But, if humility is the ability to bow to the truth at all times, how can it be any other way? History, for the most part, has been about arrogant people who would rather impose their version of truth than to humble themselves to the real one. This is why history has also been about death, destruction, and tremendous waste.

Here's the other thing. If the world exists for the humble, because the humble exist for the truth, then a world that strays far from the truth is one that is vulnerable to Divine decree. Political Correctness only flies if it supports the truth, not if it undermines it, as it has done in so many ways.

In fact, the Talmud states that one of the signs that Moshiach is not too far away is the amount of falsehood in the world. It's pervasiveness indicates that Creation is reaching a boiling point, and that is never good. True, it will result in Moshiach and a more perfect world, but only after crossing a deadly and dangerous threshold called "The War of Gog and Magog."