

“Lessons From The Most Humble Of All People”

Rabbi Yehuda Appel

A wonderful passage in the Talmud describes the greatness of Sages of previous generations. In poetic prose, the Talmud states: "The death of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa saw the end of men of action. The death of Rebbe Yossi Katanta saw the end to righteousness. When Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai passed away, the glory of wisdom was no more. When Rebbe [Judah the Prince] died, humility and the fear of sin ceased."

The Talmud continues with a surprising comment by Rabbi Yosef. He challenged the statement that humility had disappeared, saying: "But I am still here!"

This comment is difficult to understand. How can Rabbi Yosef claim to be humble - while at the same time proclaim his own humility?!

At first glance, while Rabbi Yosef's statement might appear as the opposite of humility, this is not the case. Because "humility" is not defined as a poor self-image. Judaism says that humility is a clear, objective understanding of exactly who you are. The truly humble person recognizes his strengths and weaknesses relative to himself, to others, and to G-d. He entertains no false notions about his place in the scheme of things.

Seeing oneself in an unfairly low light is a problem of "false humility." One popular story tells of a yeshiva dean who reprimanded a student for walking around with an air of humility. "You're not so big that you can act so small," the rabbi told him.

Beyond this, false humility can even be dangerous. If one views himself unfavorably, he might fail to take necessary action when it is called for. Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, a great Chassidic rebbe, used to say that the mistake of the righteous is that they see themselves in too small a light - and thus fail to do all they otherwise could to bring about the redemption.

What is the Torah's primary description of Moses, the greatest prophet of all time? He was "the most humble of all people." (see Numbers 12:3)

It is precisely due to this quality that Moses was chosen as the transmitter of G-d's Torah. As someone dedicated to truth and untouched by the self-delusions that blind others, Moses knew his place - and as such rightfully deserved to deliver G-d's truth to the world.

At the same time, Moses was keenly aware that despite one's position, a person must be cautious in dealing with others. Over and over again - despite an awareness of his own relative greatness - Moses shows himself to be of lowly spirit when interacting with others.

A beautiful example is found in this week's Torah portion, which begins by describing G-d's call to Moses from within the Tabernacle Sanctuary. As Rashi explains, the word used to describe G-d's calling out to Moses - "vayikra" - attests to a very intimate contact. For while G-d openly "speaks" to very few, those He "calls out" to is even rarer.

Curiously, the word "vayikra" is written in Torah scrolls with a small letter Aleph. If we would disregard the small Aleph, the word would read "vayikar" - a word associated with a "chance encounter" - i.e. a much lower level of intimacy. The Midrash says this small Aleph was due to a scribal modification by Moses. Uncomfortable with the word "vayikra" - a statement which proclaimed his preciousness in G-d's eyes, Moses sought to downplay this in a way that did not compromise the meaning of the original text, yet made clear to others that he was still a man of lowly spirit.

Moses epitomized the heights of humility - because while fully aware of his own greatness, he was careful not to flaunt it in the face of others.

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