

Humility: The Essential Ingredient in Great Leadership

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Leadership is one of the most coveted qualities in the world today. In business, academia and communal affairs, leaders play an invaluable role, and as such we go to all lengths to develop and prove our leadership ability and capacity to others. Students join clubs just for the sake of demonstrating their leadership skills on their resume. Universities market themselves as building the leaders of tomorrow. Businesses try to breed leaders from the moment their newly hired employees walk through the door. It is almost irrelevant who you lead and what you're leading them toward; strong leadership is, in itself, viewed as an independently valuable quality.

At the same time, the term "leader" has all but lost its meaning. We don't really know what we want in leaders anymore. On the one hand, it seems that our most prized leaders must have strength, intelligence and charisma. Celebrities, politicians and CEOs are the people society looks to as its leaders. On the other hand, we often hear that they cause turmoil in their own lives and the lives of others.

If leadership is not about strength, intelligence and charisma, then what are we looking for in a leader? You cannot achieve a goal if you cannot define it. If we all want to be leaders, whether in our community, business or personal lives, we have to understand what exactly we're looking for.

The place to get the answer is the Torah, where the Creator of the Universe teaches us what makes the perfect leader.

The Torah is filled with strong leaders: prophets, scholars, kings, queens, heroes and villains. You can't turn a page without reading an intimate account of the dramatic trials and triumphant victories of Jewish leaders. Yet, the Torah is clear that among all of these impressive leaders, one rose above the rest.

That person is Moshe, and G-d refers to him as the greatest leader in history. The Torah states:

Never again did a prophet like Moshe come up in Israel, who G-d knew face to face.

Devarim 34:10

וְלֹא-קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּמֹשֶׁה, אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ ה',
פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים.
דְּבָרִים לַד':

No one ever did or ever will achieve what Moshe achieved.

Moshe was the leader at the most monumental moments in Jewish history. He led a group of slaves to become a nation poised to conquer the Promised Land. He fought Pharaoh, one of the most powerful men in history. He was G-d's agent to bring the plagues, split the sea, make bread fall from the sky and make water flow from a magical well. Moshe was the liaison between the Jews and G-d in the giving of the Torah. Moshe was the leader of leaders.

However, it seems that Moshe was unqualified for the position as a savior for the Jewish people. His resume was less than impressive. To highlight a few seemingly disqualifying factors:

1. The Jews were enslaved and oppressed by the very person that Moshe called "Dad."
2. Moshe wasn't "of the people." He grew up in the palace, protected from the pain and agony the Jews faced.
3. He had no Jewish education.
4. He was a convicted felon.
5. He married the daughter of an idolatrous priest from another country.
6. He wasn't articulate or charismatic.

In truth, if Moshe was alive today, he probably wouldn't even get an *aliya* in shul, let alone be our leader. There was a nation full of people that G-d could have chosen to be the leader. Why did He choose Moshe?

The answer, I believe, is found in *Parshas Beha'aloscha*.¹ At the end of the *parsha*, there is a short story that gives us an insight into the essence of Moshe's leadership quality.

Moshe, Miriam and Aaron were all siblings and prophets. Miriam and Aaron had normal marital relationships with their spouses, but Moshe disengaged conjugally from his wife, Tzipora. Miriam disapproved of Moshe acting differently from them, and commented to Aaron:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he married, for he married a Cushite woman. And they said: Has G-d only spoken to Moshe? Hasn't He spoken to us too? And G-d heard.

Bamidbar 12:1-2

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכְּשִׁיית
אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי אִשָּׁה כְּשִׁית לָקַח. וַיֹּאמְרוּ, הֲרַק אֲדָ-
בְּמִשְׁחָה דִּבֶּר ה'--הֲלֹא, גַם-בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר; וַיִּשְׁמַע, ה'.
במדבר יב: א-ב

The Torah then does something unusual. It interrupts the flow of the story with commentary:

Moshe was more humble than anyone else on the earth.

Bamidbar 12:3

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה, עֲנֹו מְאֹד--מִכָּל, הָאָדָם, אֲשֶׁר, עַל-פְּנֵי
הָאָרֶץ.
במדבר יב: ג

Weren't we in the middle of the story? Why did we suddenly shift to commentary?

¹ This idea is based on a comment of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Covenant and Conversation 5768: Beha'aloscha-Humility," available at: <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/2008/06/14/>.

The Torah, the ultimate lesson book, was highlighting a fact that we would have otherwise overlooked. Initially, it seems that the conversation was between Miriam and Aaron, and nobody else. But that wasn't the case. There were actually three people present. Moshe was sitting quietly as Miriam was wrongly criticizing him.

Moshe had every reason to defend himself. He knew that Miriam was wrong. He understood that his relationship with G-d was different from theirs. His prophetic ability was "face to face" and therefore he needed to take precautions that the other prophets didn't need.

So why didn't he interject when Miriam accused him? In the past, Moshe showed no hesitance in standing up for truth. He confronted Pharaoh, the Jewish people and even G-d.

Anticipating the question, the Torah jumps in with commentary to make sure we don't miss the point. It explains that Moshe's lack of protest was due to his unique quality of humility.

We mistakenly associate humility with being passive or incapable. In fact, the English word humility stems from the Latin word *humilitas*, which means "grounded," "from the earth," or "low." However, according to Jewish thought, humility is not meekness. A humble person can be strong, assertive and proactive. Humility is not downplaying our strengths. Humility is appreciating our G-d-given talents and focusing them on the needs of others.

Moshe knew Miriam was wrong. However, he just didn't care to defend himself. He had little concern for his honor or reputation. In fact, he had little concern for himself.

This quality of humility seems to be what separates Moshe from the rest. From the moment we are introduced to Moshe, the Torah shows us just how much he sacrifices his own well-being for others.

The first time we meet Moshe as an adult, the *pasuk* states: "וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה" And Moshe grew up." (Shemos 2:11). Rashi on that verse asks the obvious question: The previous verse already stated "וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד" the boy grew up." Why does the very next verse repeat the fact the Moshe grew up? Rashi explains:

Didn't it already state "the boy grew up"? R. Yehuda b. Ilai answered: The first time refers to his physical growth and the second time refers to his stature, Pharaoh appointed him a leader of his house.

Rashi, Shemos 2:11

והלא כבר כתיב ויגדל הילד אמר רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי הראשון לקומה והשני לגדולה, שמינהו פרעה על ביתו.
רש"י, שמות ב:יא

According to Rashi, the first time the verse mentions growth was referring to when Moshe grew in age. The second mention of growth was in stature. He rose in the ranks of the Egyptian monarch. He became a man of stature, responsibility and power.

What was the first thing Moshe did in his newfound status? Order new business cards? Buy a leather couch for his corner office overlooking the Nile?

No. The verse continues: "וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם" He went out to his brethren and he saw their suffering." He was completely unconcerned with himself. He went out and focused on the pain of the Jewish slaves.

Remember that Moshe was a prince living in a luxurious palace. He could have turned a blind eye. He could have read the horrible stories about Jewish bondage in the Egyptian newspapers and, over coffee and eggs, shrugged his shoulders the way many of us do when we read about someone else's suffering.

In the book *Timeless Healing*, Dr. Herbert Benson, famous for his studies on the connection between medicine and spirituality, shows that what we focus on can actually change our reality. Moshe chose to focus on the pain of the Jewish people because that's who he was. He couldn't focus on himself. He couldn't turn a blind eye. He just cared about others too much.

The Midrash on this verse states:

What is meant by the words, "And he (Moshe) saw"? He would see their suffering and weep, "Woe is to me for you, would that I could die for you." For there is no work more strenuous than molding bricks; and he used to shoulder the burdens and help each one of them ...

Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean said, "He [Moshe] saw a child carrying the load of an adult, and an adult bearing the load of a child; a woman bearing a man's load, and a man bearing the load of a woman; a young man carrying the load of an old man, and an old man with a young man's load. He would overlook his high office [as Prince of Egypt] and go and rearrange their burdens and pretend he was doing it for Pharaoh's sake ... Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'You put aside your own affairs and went to share in Israel's suffering and acted like their brother. Therefore, I will put aside the higher and lower worlds and speak only to you.'"

Shemos Rabbah 1:27

מהו וירא שהיה רואה בסבלותם
ובוכה ואומר חבל לי עליכם מי יתן
מותי עליכם שאין לך מלאכה קשה
ממלאכת הטיט והיה נותן כתיפיו
ומסייע לכל אחד ואחד מהן ... ר'
אלעזר בנו של רבי יוסי הגלילי
אומר ראה משוי גדול על קטן
ומשוי קטן על גדול ומשוי איש על
אשה ומשוי אשה על איש ומשוי
זקן על בחור ומשוי בחור על זקן
והיה מניח דרגון שלו והולך
ומיישב להם סבלותיהם ועושה
כאלו מסייע לפרעה ... אמר הקב"ה
אתה הנחת עסקיך והלכת לראות
בצערן של ישראל ונהגת בהן מנהג
אחים, אני מניח את העליונים ואת
התחתונים ואדבר עמך.
שמות רבה א:כו

Moshe is introduced to us with this unique quality of caring for others more than himself. Moshe's humility becomes the *raison d'être* for his role as a leader.

Because of his sacrifice, Moshe went from being an Egyptian prince to a Midianite shepherd almost overnight. It started when he saw an Egyptian officer hitting a Jewish slave. Undeterred by the disastrous personal implications of attacking an Egyptian in defense of a Jew, Moshe killed the Egyptian. After fleeing Egypt to escape persecution, Moshe ended up in the neighboring country Midian. You would think that these consequences would have changed his approach to conflict, namely avoiding it.

Not Moshe.

When Moshe arrived to Midian he saw male shepherds harassing the daughters of Yisro. True to his character, he came to their defense. Upon realizing his inherent selflessness, Yisro invited him to their home and eventually gave him one of his daughters, Tzipora, to marry.

There is another Midrash that demonstrates Moshe's profound care for others:

Once, while Moshe Rabbeinu was tending Yisro's sheep, a lamb ran away. Moshe ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool of water and began to drink. As Moshe approached the lamb he said, "I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You must be tired." So he put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said, "You tend the flock which belongs to a human [Yisro] with such overwhelming compassion. I swear to you, as you live today, that you will tend the flock which belongs to Me – Israel." This is what is meant by the verse, "and Moshe was a shepherd."

Shemos Rabbah 2:2

אמרו רבותינו כשהיה מרע"ה רועה צאנו של יתרו במדבר ברה ממנו גדי ורץ אחריו עד שהגיע לחסית כיון שהגיע לחסית נזדמנה לו בריכה של מים ועמד הגדי לשתות כיון שהגיע משה אצלו אמר אני לא הייתי יודע שרץ היית מפני צמא עיף אתה הרכיבו על כתיפו והיה מהלך אמר הקב"ה יש לך רחמים לנהוג צאנו של בשר ודם כך, הייך אתה תרעה צאני ישראל הוי ומשה היה רועה:

שמות רבה ב:ב

It was immediately after demonstrating this tremendous humility—by putting the needs of his flock over his own comfort—that G-d appeared to Moshe in the burning bush and chose him as the leader of the Jewish people.

The Torah seems to be pretty clear that the core ingredient for leadership is humility. The more you think you should be a leader, the less you are qualified. The more your leadership role involves your own interest, the less of a leader you are. Leadership, according to G-d, is stewardship. Leaders serve the people, and not vice versa. Therefore, the most appropriate leader is the one who cares less for himself—the one who is humble. This applies to every dimension of life. It applies to our roles as parents, spouses, teachers, friends, Jews and humans.

Even the business world has recognized the impact of humility. Jim Stengel, in his book *Grow: How Ideals Power Growth and Profit at the World's Greatest Companies*, created an index called the "Stengel 50," based on a ten year study of 50,000 brands. He found that the world's 50 highest performing businesses were financially successful in proportion to their ability to connect with consumers' emotions and values. Consumers that felt that they were being given to, not being taken from, created a deeper affiliation with the brands, which led to increased success for the business.

Bestselling business author Jim Collins, who wrote the blockbuster *Good to Great*, studied almost 1,500 companies' performance over 40 years. In his research, he isolated the qualities of top business leaders. His findings were that one of the top two qualities of a great business leader is humility. The other is fierce resolve.

Famed author and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi found similar findings in his research. As discussed in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi discovered that business people that are the most likely to get the highest ratings are the ones that think about their organization or their colleagues before themselves. He found that every single indication of long-term strategic growth in the personal, communal and business lives all align on the same principles.

Victor Frankel wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be

pursued; it must ensue ... as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself."

Each of us is a leader, whether it's for a business, an organization, a family or even ourselves. To be great leaders we have to examine the motivation behind our actions. Is it for our glory? Is it for our grandeur? If it is, we won't be able to be successful leaders.

Are we pushing our kids to succeed at school or sports for their sake or for ours? Are we upset with our spouse because he/she is not doing what we want? Are we frustrated with our communal leaders because they're not serving our needs or the community's? Are we positioning our professional lives to get as much as possible or give as much as possible, to our employers, colleagues and customers? Do we turn to G-d when we want something? Do we ever consider what we can do for Him?

When our outlook is focused on how a set of circumstances will affect us, it is impossible to become the leaders we are meant to be. To be real leaders, we have to think about others' needs. Our own desires become a faint backdrop to our mission in life, which is to serve others.

Humility is not something that we turn on in shul and turn off in the boardroom. Humility is a form of true strength to be used at every moment of life. It is the secret to a great marriage, business, friendship and ultimately, a strong relationship with G-d. As much as we endlessly chase after and worry about our own needs, the legacy of Moshe teaches us that there is only one way to truly lead: to strive, with all your strength, to worry about someone else's needs.

Shavuot reminds us not just *that* we received the Torah, but *how* we received the Torah. The Torah was given to the Jews as a group, not by chance, but specifically to show us that our greatness as individuals is dependent on our ability to humble ourselves to each other. On a grand scale, we are servants of Hashem, but we are also servants of each other—from the people closest to us to the strangers on the street. When we live with this credo, when we model the qualities of Moshe, the Jewish über-leader, we will merit to truly reach the level of “כאיש אחד בלב” כאיש אחד as one man with one heart.”