

On the Side of Merit

ל"ה

Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Devarim

I said to you, “How can I bear the burden of leading you . . . all by myself? Choose for yourselves individuals who are wise, knowledgeable, and well-respected, and I shall appoint them as your leaders.” (Deuteronomy 1:9-13)

But that’s not how it was reported at the time! Back in Exodus 18, we read that it was Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, the pagan priest, who pointed out to Moses that he was exhausting himself by acting as the sole authority. It was Jethro who suggested that Moses name leaders, and it was Jethro who proposed the structure, the hierarchy, of the leadership system. And it was Moses who chose the leaders; Exodus 18 does not mention any consultation with the tribes or with the people by Moses in making the choices. So what’s going on here?

Moses is described (Numbers 12:3) as **very humble, more so than any human** [אדם, *Adam*] **who stands upon the humus** [אדמה, *Adamah*]. Yet even Moses, the most humble man in the world, had an ego and allowed his ego, at least on occasion, to direct his actions and his words.

Indeed, it seems that this entire Parshah, the beginning of Moses’ final discourse to the people, is little more than a self-serving justification. Moses wants to leave a legacy; he wants to be remembered as the ideal leader, and, in

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this, his final speech, he retells the story of the Exodus and of the forty years' wandering in a way that will enhance his image.

Let us not be too hard on Moses, however. In fact, we can take this ego-trip of Moses' as a lesson to all of us. Moses may have been the most humble human of all (although we can as easily take the citation in Numbers as Oriental hyperbole), but it seems that even the most humble are not immune to desiring to leave a positive legacy.

What, then, is the lesson? Is it to justify our own ego trips? After all, if Moses, the most humble person of all, could indulge his ego in his effort to leave a legacy, how can we – who do not have Moses' humility – be criticized for doing the same?

Well, that's perhaps an easy way of interpreting it, but there is, it seems, another way, one that requires substantially more work on our part (and perhaps the very fact that it requires more work is a sign that it is a better interpretation).

We want to find Moses above fault. He was not, of course, but we want to see him so. Yet even Moses was subject to human failings. If we are to give Moses the benefit of the doubt, then how much more must we give others the benefit of the doubt.

As Rebbe Nahman of Breslov teaches us, we are obligated always to judge others on the side of merit, doing everything we can to find the positive in them.

Shabbat Shalom.

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