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Blot Me Out
Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Tetzaveh

As we read this week's Torah portion, we note something very strange. Moses' name is not mentioned! Not even once! Even though the entire reading is G*d's instruction given directly to Moses! And there's more. Moses' name appears only once in last week's reading, in the very first verse of that reading, where the text (Exodus 25:1) tells us that **The Eternal spoke to Moses**. Well, it sort of makes sense; after all, the two Torah readings together constitute one speech of G*d to Moses. But wait a moment. In next week's reading, we find that G*d's instruction to Moses continues uninterrupted, and we find the formula **The Eternal spoke to Moses** at the very beginning of the reading (Exodus 30:11) and at the beginning of each paragraph, even though there is no interruption in G*d's speaking to Moses. Clearly, Moses' absence from this week's text must have some meaning.

The traditional explanation for the omission of Moses' name from these five chapters (and this is the only weekly Torah reading after Genesis from which Moses' name is absent) is that, after Moses found the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, he asked G*d for mercy for the people and said explicitly (Exodus 32:32), **If not, then blot me out of the Book which Thou hast written**.

Well, that's the traditional explanation, but it does seem just a bit strained. After all, the supposed cause hasn't been reported yet. The effect precedes the cause. Of course, as our sages tell us, there is no "before and after" in the Torah. That is, time sequence is rather fluid and causes may well be reported after their effects. But the events from which Moses' name is omitted actually – according to the plain meaning of the text – happened before Moses' peroration to G*d.

We can interpret it according to the tradition. G*d replied to Moses (this is not, of course, in the text, but we can imagine it, as the Midrash does), "Thou desirest to be blotted out of My Book? Turn, then to the chapters which have just been written; I have removed Thy name from five chapters. How does it feel? Be careful, Moses; thy wishes may well be granted, and the results may not always please thee."

Yes; that could be the explanation, but it still feels a bit strained, and we want a simpler explanation. (Occam's razor may not always provide us with a correct answer, but

it usually provides a more comfortable one.) And, indeed, we can explain it in a way that greatly exalts Moses and his well-known humility.

Moses had just experienced being absent from the narrative. He was absent (that is, his name was absent; his role was entirely passive) for five full chapters of the text. Moses knew what it meant to be blotted out, even if only temporarily.

I recall an experiment which my high school physics teacher conducted each year for his honor students. Five of us were selected to be blind for a day. Each of us put on a blindfold (well constructed to admit no light at all) for a full twenty-four hours, either bed-time to bed-time or awakening to awakening. We were then expected to go about all our regular daily activities while blind for a day. (Certain precautions were taken, of course. We were explicitly cautioned against trying to drive to and from school, and each of us was required to provide a list of companions who would be with us, in case of emergency, for the entire twenty-four-hour period.) It wasn't the same as really being blind – we knew we would regain our sight after twenty-four hours – but it did give us a hint of how it must feel to be blind.

Moses experienced “absent for a day,” and he had a hint of how it must feel to be wholly absent. And he still exhorted G*d to forgive the people, **and if not, then blot me out of the Book which Thou hast written.** Knowing how it would feel, Moses, in the deepest humility, declared his willingness to be made completely absent from the entire story!

Moses humility is legendary; the Torah states it explicitly. But Moses' humility was not self-effacing. Think about it. The Israelites had been guilty of a grave transgression, and G*d was ready to wipe them out. Moses did not declare, “Oh, I'm so insignificant, G*d will never pay any attention to me.” He did not think, “Argue with the Creator? Me? Who am I to argue with G*d?”

No; Moses understood that humility does not mean self-deprecation or self-effacement. Humility includes an awareness of one's value. One can assert oneself in all humility. (In the same way, pacifism does not mean “not doing anything,” but assuring that everything that one may do conforms to the principle of non-violence.)

To a genuine humility, without a trace of self-denigration, self-denial, or self-deprecation, may we all soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.

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