

MOSHE RABBEINU—NOT GOALEINU (גואלנו)

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At the beginning of *parasha* (Torah reading) Vayeilech, we find Moses at the end of his mission and his life, since God has told him he's not going to be the one to lead the people over the Jordan.

What remains for him to do is to say goodbye to his people, present his successor Joshua to them, say a few words of encouragement to Joshua, and write down the Torah.

And so, as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) tells us, Moses does not call all the people to him as he had in the past, by having the bugles blown, but the Torah says simply, ויֵלֶךְ (he went) to the assembled people, in the simplest manner, in a way that characterizes the most modest of men.

Of course, this is not the first time that we are hearing about Moses' humility. The scripture says: "The man Moses was more modest than any other person on the face of the earth." (Numbers 12:3)

That same characteristic of humility is further revealed in his preparation of Joshua as his successor. The Midrash tells us that from the first day of the month of Shevat to the sixth of Adar, the day before Moses' death, 36 days, Moses served Joshua from morning until evening. These 36 days during which Moses served his former disciple correspond to the number of years that he had been served by Joshua. (*Legends of the Jews*)

The way in which Moses ministered to Joshua was as follows: Every night he got up at midnight, went to Joshua's door and opened it with a key. Then he took a shirt, from which he shook out the dust, and laid it out near Joshua's pillow. He then cleaned Joshua's shoes and placed them beside his bed. Then he took his undergarment, his cloak, his turban, his golden helmet, and his crown of pearls, examined them to see if they were in good condition, cleaned and polished them, and arranged them on a golden chair. He then fetched a pitcher of water and a golden basin and placed them before the golden chair, so that Joshua upon awakening would find water with which to wash. Also, he made sure that Joshua's rooms were swept and put in order.

After all these preparations, Moses told the herald to proclaim: "Moses stands at Joshua's gate and announces that whosoever wishes to hear God's word should go to Joshua, for he, according to God's word, is the leader of Israel."

What's so important about this quality of humility? And at the same time, if Moses is such a

nice guy, Mr. Modesty, why doesn't he get to lead the people over the Jordan?

About the quality of humility, Rabbi Hirsch says: The word ענו (modesty) indicates a complete selflessness and dependence of one's existence on the will of others.

But does it mean selfless and dependent in regard to God or in regard to other people?

The answer is both.

In regard to selflessness toward other people, if we read a bit further in the Midrash about Moses and Joshua, we find these words: "The hour of the morning came when Joshua was used to getting up, and Moses entered his room and extended his hand to him. When Joshua saw that Moses served him, he was ashamed to have his master minister to him and, taking the shirt out of Moses' hand and dressing himself, trembling, he threw himself at Moses' feet, saying: It's not right that you should be waiting on me!"

But Moses replied: "Fear not, my son, it's not a sin that you should be served by me. With the measure that you gave to me, so I am giving to you. You served me with a pleasant face. So shall I serve you. Remember, I was the one who taught you: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Where there is no humility, there can be no love of a neighbor. And our love of each other as neighbors is what makes possible our survival as a people. It's as if we have to make a space for kindness. As long as we're full of ourselves, there's no room in us for kindness.

But Rabbi Hirsch also teaches that humility is the negative preliminary condition for the positive character of *chasidut*, piety. As long as we're full of ourselves, there isn't any room for God either. Which makes sense, because *chesed*, kindness and *chasidut*, piety, come from the same root in Hebrew—ח-ס-ד.

What about the question, why shouldn't Moses get to lead the people over the Jordan?

Well, there was this moment back in *parasha* Chukat (Numbers 20:10), what we might think of as a momentary lapse. Moses had been ordered by God to sanctify God's name in front of the entire people, about a million and a half of them, before making water come forth from a rock for the thirsty. But Moses, tired and frustrated, hits the rock and, in a momentary lapse of his humility, tells the people: "Listen up you fools." So, the scripture tells us, Moses doesn't get to go over.

Perhaps a more interesting question would be: What would it mean if he did get to enter the Land?

In Vayeilech, we read the verse: “When I have brought them [the people] into the land that I swore to their fathers, that flows with milk and honey, and they eat and are satisfied and get fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them and mock Me and break My covenant.” (Deuteronomy 31:20)

What has a verse about idol-worship got to do with Moses or with us?

First consider how differently we might think about Moses if he had been allowed to go over. What would it mean for us? What would be the lesson in it—that Moses was special, so he got special treatment? Would we think of him as some kind of a god, who wasn’t required, like the rest of us, to suffer the consequences of his own behavior? After all, the so-called wilderness generation didn’t get to go over. And then consider what it might or might not have to do with us. We don’t worship idols, do we?

Do we, or our children, ever make gods out of our celebrities and heroes? And even if we don’t, don’t we all, at some point, want to believe in someone who will carry us up to the heights—above the ordinary hum-drum of our lives? And so what if we do, what’s the danger in it?

The first danger is this: What will we tell our children when they discover that their heroes or heroines have feet of clay—that they steal, or assault their spouses, or abuse their children? What will they believe in then?

But there’s a still greater danger. We refer to Moses as Moshe Rabbeinu—Moses our teacher, not Moshe *goaleinu* (גואלנו)—Moses our savior! But if Moses were not like us, if he were treated as some kind of god, then what would anything he did or said have to do with us who are mere humans? How would we learn from him? After all, we could always write off anything that happened to him as being special.

But if he is human, then we can learn even from his mistakes. Then his humility, or lack of it, means that we can acknowledge that neither our heroes nor we are gods.

Thus it is that Moses ends his mission by saying: You will not miss me. It is God, not me, who is really your leader. It is the hand of God that holds you fast. And that is the meaning, we believe, of his humility.

Our last question: If not the heroes, then who will take us up to the heights, out of our humdrum existence? How will we get there?

Well, what most of us have always suspected is true. We have to get up the mountain on our own steam.

In the third century C.E., Bar Karpara taught: “God said to man: ‘My light is in your hand, and your light is in My hand.’ ‘My light is in your hand’: this refers to the Torah; ‘and your light is in My hand’: this refers to the soul. If you guard My light, I will guard your light, but if you extinguish My light, I will extinguish your light.” (Deuteronomy Rabbah 4:4)

It’s in our hands.

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