

Humility and Hierarchy • Parshat Beha'alotcha

Moses' signature character strength, the most significant for his success as leader, teacher, and prophet of Israel, was humility. He personified this virtue, which is one of the most aspirational traits in all of Biblical and Rabbinic literature: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). What exactly does this mean?

At first glance, this description of Moses as very humble does not make sense in context. In the preceding verses, Miriam and Aaron criticize Moses because, "He took a Cushite woman;" they claim they are on equal prophetic level to Moses since God has spoken to them as well (Num. 12:1-2). We are then told that Moses was humble, followed by God's rebuke of their behavior and amplification of Moses' superior prophetic status. How does Moses' modesty fit in with the narrative flow?

One possibility is that Moses' humility explains why his siblings thought they were of equal status. He never revealed his prophetic superiority to them. Alternatively, Nahmanides points out that Moses was humble because he ignored his siblings' insult. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm similarly writes in *Derashot Ledorot* that humility is reflected in "... dignity in response to humiliation, restraint in the presence of provocation, forbearance and a quiet calm when confronted with calumny and carping criticism."

While this moral message is important, it misses an essential element in the definition of humility. David Konstan, a scholar of ancient Greek

philosophy, describes the ideal character of a successful Greek nobleman: "People who really do excel... whether in regard to family, power, wealth ... expect deference from their lessers on account of their superiority and are especially likely to become angry if they suffer a slight instead." Aristotle deemed it a character flaw if someone of a higher stature does not feel indignant in defense of his honor when offended by someone of a lesser status.

In his book, *Before Honor is Humility: The Ideal of*

