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By

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In this Shabbat's Torah reading, Vayelekh, Moses passes the mantle of leadership to his disciple, Joshua. In verse 31:7, we read: And Moses called unto Joshua and said unto him in the sight of all Israel: be strong and of good courage." The usual understanding of this verse is that Moses transferred his leadership to Joshua in the presence of all Israel, publicly charging him to strengthen himself for his coming responsibilities.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef offers an insightful interpretation of this verse based on its musical notations (ta-amim). The traditional musical signs actually divide the words of the verse as follows: And Moses called unto Joshua and said unto him: in the presence of all Israel be strong and of good courage. According to this reading, Moses was concerned about Joshua's ability to assume leadership. Joshua was a humble person, accustomed to working in a subservient role. Humility is a good quality: yet, for Joshua to lead his people, he needed to demonstrate strength and courage. So Moses said (according to Rabbi Yosef's interpretation): Joshua, it's fine and noble to be humble and self-effacing while you are in private. But when you are in the presence of all Israel i.e. when you are functioning as a leader of the nation, you need to be strong and of good courage. You need to give the Israelites confidence that you can lead them. You can't be wishy-washy and uncertain.

This advice to Joshua is relevant to all of us. Of course we must maintain genuine humility, and not seek to aggrandize ourselves. Quiet piety and self-effacing righteousness are great virtues. Yet, there are times when we need to show strength and courage. When we are "in the presence of all Israel"--i.e. when we need to make a public stand on behalf of our people--then we should set aside our humility and step forward with self-confidence, confidence that can inspire our people to courageous action. When the honor and well-being of our people are at stake, we dare not shy away from responsibility. When evil persists in the world, we may not let humility get in the way of forceful resistance to evil.

This message is also echoed in the symbols of this holiday season. The shofar, which is bent over into a curved shape, symbolizes the need for humility. We bow ourselves in contrition before the Lord. Yet, on Succot we take the lulav (palm branch), which must stand tall. A lulav that is bent over is not kasher for the fulfillment of the mitzvah. The lulav reminds us that we must stand tall on behalf

of our people and our teachings , that we must not be cowed by the attacks and taunts of enemies, that we must defend our interests and our ideals with strength and courage.

Our inner virtue must always be marked by genuine humility. But humility must not prevent us from taking proper action and demonstrating public courage. For the sake of our people and our Torah, we always need to stand tall.

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