For the Greater Glory of God: Thoughts on Parashat Shemoth, January 12, 2012

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The great 19th-century English writer and art critic, John Ruskin, wrote an impressive work on gothic architecture. In carefully studying the details of classic gothic-style churches, he noticed a phenomenon of the deepest religious significance.

As could be expected, the craftsmen who worked on the churches' facades demonstrated remarkable skill. They obviously devoted tremendous effort and talent to make the churches' exteriors as beautiful as possible. Yet, Ruskin noticed that the craftsmen who worked on parts of the church buildings that were not visible to passers-by—high up on the roof, or behind walls, or eventually to be covered by ivy—were equally careful in producing magnificently beautiful designs. Even though these workers knew that no one would ever see their work, they nonetheless maintained the highest possible standard of workmanship. Ruskin was amazed. Why would workers be so diligent in creating art that would never be seen or admired by others?

The answer: these workers were not creating art to impress people. Rather, they were creating art as a sign of devotion to God. They were motivated by the purest love of God, by the desire to serve God with all their ability and all their emotion. They worked with such diligence not to gain accolades from human beings, but from a desire to serve the Lord anonymously and purely.

The greatest religious gestures do not stem from egotism or the desire to impress others: the greatest religious gestures arise when one is able to focus purely on love of God, humbly and quietly, without the slightest expectation of approbation from others.

When religious observance is tainted with egotism, the desire for power, the yearning for recognition—it is deficient. When religious devotion is expressed selflessly and modestly, it can rise to the greatest heights. This is true not only in one's private religious expression, but also in one's interpersonal relationships.

This week’s Torah portion gives us a keen insight into the religious greatness of Aaron, the brother of Moses. It offers a model of genuine spirituality and humility.

At the dramatic scene of the burning bush, God appoints Moses to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt. Moses is reluctant to accept this responsibility and asks God to choose someone else. He claims that he is not articulate enough, perhaps reflecting a more general feeling that he was not up to the task.

God insists that Moses take on this responsibility. He tells Moses that his brother Aaron will be at his side, and will be able to speak on behalf of Moses. God informs Moses that Aaron will come to meet him, "vera-akha, vesamah belibo", and he will see you and rejoice in his heart. These three Hebrew words have tremendous meaning, and tell us much about the greatness of Aaron and why he became the beloved High Priest of the people of Israel.

Aaron was older than Moses. Aaron had been living in Egypt all these years when Moses was living in peace as a shepherd in Midian. Aaron had to deal firsthand with the slavery of his people, and obviously had a much clearer understanding of the situation than did Moses. One might have thought that Aaron was more entitled to have been chosen by God to be leader; he was older, more experienced, and more directly involved with the people of Israel. And yet, God chose Moses!

How would we imagine Aaron's reaction upon learning that God had chosen his younger brother, a shepherd in Midian, to be leader of Israel? We might have expected that Aaron would be jealous, angry, insulted, resentful. But God tells Moses: Aaron will see you and rejoice in his heart! Not only was Aaron not upset, but he genuinely rejoiced in Moses' success. Aaron was not an egotist, he was content with his lot. He was not just superficially courteous to Moses, but he "rejoiced in his heart", sincerely and totally. Aaron had a unique capacity: the capacity to love, to rejoice fully in the success of others without feeling a grain of jealousy or ill-will.

It is not easy for people to rejoice in the success of others. People think: I should have received that honor, I am more deserving, I am more qualified. It is not easy for people to rise above egotism, jealousy, resentfulness. To do this requires tremendous self-confidence, spiritual poise, serenity--and love. It requires the ability to transcend one's own ego, and celebrate in the virtues and successes of others. Aaron had these virtues.

The artwork of anonymous craftsmen of the gothic churches demonstrates love of God without ulterior motives. Aaron’s piety shows the way to a religious life that fosters love and inner harmony in our interpersonal relationships. Purity in our religious devotion to God must be accompanied by purity in the way we conduct our lives. Our thoughts and deeds must be directed to the greater glory of God--in purity, humility, selflessness and love.

Angel for Shabbat