Intellectual Humility: Thoughts for Parashat Beha’aloteha

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beha'aloteha

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Some years ago, a seventh grade student in a yeshiva day school asked me a serious question. His Rebbi was teaching the class about the sin of embarrassing another person. The Rebbi stated that if A embarrasses B, then Hashem transfers all the mitzvoth of A to B, and all the sins of B to A. The student was puzzled by the severity of this punishment, and he asked me: “Is this really true?”

While not wanting to undermine the authority of the Rebbi, I also did not want this student to think that the Rebbi’s words were literally true. Indeed, the Rebbi’s statement is problematic in various ways. 1. Does anyone (except for a prophet) have first-hand knowledge as to how God decides on rewards and punishments? Isn’t it pretentious in the extreme to attribute policies to God, when in fact there is no way to verify such claims? 2. Is it proper religious education to present God in such a way as to make Him appear egregiously unjust? How is it fair to deprive a person of all his/her mitzvoth and to transfer them to one he/she has embarrassed? How is it fair for God to transfer all the sins of the victim to the one who embarrassed him/her? 3. Does the Rebbi imagine that his simplistic lesson will be accepted blindly and unthinkingly by his students? Does he really think they will now be less likely to embarrass one another because they fear such dire consequences from God?

I told the seventh grader that the Rebbi was drawing on a classic Midrashic style of rhetoric. The lesson is not to be taken as literally true, but is a figurative way of saying: embarrassing another person is a very bad thing to do. Similarly, Hazal taught that embarrassing someone is akin to murder. They did not mean that one was literally guilty of murder and subject to a death penalty; they used hyperbole to express the seriousness of the transgression.

When teaching the words of our Sages, we need to have the literary tact to know how they used language. If we teach hyperbolic statements as being literally true, then we not only misconstrue the teachings of our Sages, but we unwittingly mislead our students into believing problematic things. As they grow older and wiser, they may say to themselves: if our Rebbis were mistaken on this, perhaps they were mistaken on many other matters.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: "And the man Moses was very humble, more than any other person on the face of the earth" (Bemidbar 12:3). When we read the accounts of Moses in the Torah, we do indeed see instances where he displayed humility. But we also see many examples of strong public action: he confronted Pharaoh fearlessly; he led the Israelites with fortitude. Although he described himself as having a "heavy tongue" and lacking eloquence, Moses spoke to the Israelites with strength and great oratorical skill. In what sense was Moses "very humble?"

We generally identify humility with meekness, shyness, quietude. Yet, perhaps the Torah is indicating another perspective on true humility. Moses was the most humble person specifically because he was the person who came closest to God, who spoke to God "face to face." Because he confronted God on such a high level, Moses was the human being who best understood the ultimate limitations of humanity. While others were living on the mundane level—filled with competitiveness and jealousy and interpersonal strife—Moses lived on an entirely different plane. He achieved exceeding humility by being as close as possible to the eternal and infinite God. His grand vision transcended petty human jealousies and strife. The closer one is to God, the loftier one's religious vision becomes. The loftier one's religious vision, the more humble one becomes.

This humility does not necessarily manifest itself in meekness and shyness. Rather, it manifests itself in a spiritual wisdom and serenity that rises above the human fray, and in an overwhelming desire to live life in context with eternal God. It necessarily leads to an honest evaluation of what we know, and what we do not know, and what we cannot know.

I believe that this lesson very much applies to the way we live and teach Torah. While none of us will reach the level of Moses, all of us can aspire to a true humility that entails intellectual honesty, compassion, and a genuine knowledge of our limitations. Since we are not prophets, we should not speak as though we are prophets; we should not speak with certainty of supernatural things beyond our ken; we should not make claims about how God does or doesn't mete out punishments. When we read rabbinic teachings that go beyond these basic

guidelines, then we should understand them in their literary, rhetorical spirit.

As we learn in Pirkei Avot: "Sages, be very careful with your words." Just as proper words can bring people closer to Torah, improper words can ultimately alienate people from Torah.

Angel for Shabbat