Staying Grounded: Thoughts for Parashat Beha'alotekha, May 25, 2013

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Ancient Greek legend tells of Antaeus, a giant wrestler of incredible strength. He challenged anyone who passed his way to a wrestling match, and he invariably destroyed his opponents. But then Antaeus met a foe that he could not defeat: Hercules.

How did Hercules vanquish Antaeus? Hercules lifted Antaeus off the ground! As long as Antaeus stood firmly on earth, he was unconquerable; but once he was uprooted, his strength left him. Hercules was victorious because he understood that a rootless Antaeus would be sapped of power, unable to stand against the strength of Hercules.

This legend points to an important lesson: people who are well grounded are able to withstand opponents; people who lose their footing, who become rootless, are sapped of power.

In this week's Parasha, we read a perplexing passage. Miriam and Aaron spoke disparagingly of Moses. Moses—the greatest prophet, the greatest leader, the selfless shepherd of his people—was confronted by many challenges during the course of his career. But now his own sister and brother—those closest to him and upon whom he surely relied—spoke against him. How could Moses bear this betrayal?

The Torah informs us: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men upon the face of the earth." This is usually interpreted to mean that Moses was so humble that he overlooked the insult from Miriam and Aaron. He did not rise in self-defense but was willing to let the matter drop. But I think the verse is alluding to something more.

The verse could simply have stated: Moses was humble and paid no attention to the insult. But instead, the verse goes out of its way to inform us that Moses was a humbler person (adam) than anyone on earth (adamah). By highlighting the words adam and adamah, the Torah is alluding to the essential nature of

humanity going back to Adam (adam) who was created from the dust of the earth (adamah). Human beings are dust, mortal, transient visitors on this earth. When humans truly recognize their own finitude, they are humble (the Latin root of humble means earthy, from the earth).

The verse, therefore, might be understood as follows: Moses was very humble, Moses was grounded, Moses was fully aware of life's transience. Moses was able to overlook slights and betrayals because he knew that in the long run, none of this unpleasantness matters. Life is too short to fritter away by worrying about things that ultimately are nonsense.

Moses' great wisdom was in understanding the transience of life and the importance of staying grounded. He did not allow himself to be uprooted from his basic serenity. He did not let petty insults or slanders make him flighty or upset.

The Torah reminds us that Moses was humbler than anyone else. Most of us (all of us!) cannot attain that stoic mindset that keeps us calm, grounded, and confident even in the face of betrayals. Yet, the Torah cites Moses as a paradigm to which we can and should aspire. Even if we can never achieve his level of humility, at least we can try to emulate him to the best of our ability. Moses stayed grounded; unlike Antaeus, he could not be uprooted or torn from his source of strength.

Just as individuals need to stay grounded and not let others uproot them from their source of inner wisdom and strength, so too institutions and nations need to stand firmly on the ground. They need to know who they are and where they've come from and what is the real source of their strength. Once they are uprooted, they lose their power, they lose their identities. Like Antaeus, they flail helplessly in the air, disconnected and deracinated.

Carl Sandburg once observed: "We know that when a nation goes down and never comes back, when a society or civilization perishes, one condition may always be found. They forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what brought them along. The hard beginnings were forgotten and the struggles farther along" ("Remembrance Rock," 1948, pp.18-19).

Staying grounded allows us to maintain our identities and our strengths…and to soar to great heights.

Angel for Shabbat