Praise and Praiseworthiness: Thoughts for Parashat Pekudei

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“And Moses saw the entire work [of the Mishkan], and behold, they [the Israelites] had accomplished it; as God had commanded them, so had they done; and Moses blessed them.” (Shemot 39:43)

The great 18th century economist and thinker, Adam Smith, distinguished between praise and praiseworthiness. In his book, “The Theory of Moral Sentiments,” (III.I.32) he noted that “the love of praise is the desire of obtaining the favorable sentiments of our brethren. The love of praiseworthiness is the desire of rendering ourselves the proper objects of those sentiments.”

One should act in a praiseworthy manner and this should result in receiving praise from others. An example of this is found in this week’s Torah portion. The Israelites completed the building of the Mishkan just as God had commanded—i.e. they performed in a praiseworthy fashion. Moses then offered them a blessing—i.e. he praised their work.

Adam Smith observes, however, that praise and praiseworthiness do not always go together. There are people who seek and receive praise even though they have not acted in a praiseworthy fashion. Charlatans, fakers, and egotists may behave in unseemly ways, and yet they receive praise from hangers-on or from a misguided, misinformed public. Such people, though, must know that they are not deserving of the praise. If they would be honest with themselves, they would recognize their own hypocrisy. Yet, since they are egotists after all, they rarely will give themselves an honest evaluation. They want praise, even if they are not praiseworthy. Such people are to be pitied, not praised.

Adam Smith also notes that there are those who behave in a praiseworthy manner, but who receive no adequate praise for their good work. While this may well be frustrating to these individuals, they have the satisfaction of knowing that they performed admirably and correctly, even if they did not receive proper acknowledgment for their deeds. Indeed, one should behave in a praiseworthy manner without expecting or demanding anyone's compliments or blessings. Still, isn't it nice to actually be thanked and appreciated!?

Moses well understood the importance of being praiseworthy…and of giving praise to those who have conducted themselves well. In blessing the Israelites, he acknowledged their good work and their sacrifices. He let them know that their efforts were appreciated. In so doing, he validated their efforts; he praised their praiseworthiness; he gave them the satisfaction of being recognized and thanked for their work.

What blessing did Moses actually utter to the Israelites? The Torah does not record his words. The Midrash, though, offers a suggestion: "He said to them: May it be the will of God that the Shekhinah may rest upon the work of your hands, and may the bliss of God, our God, be upon us." (Tanhuma, Pekudei, 11)

Moses prayed that the Israelites would merit to experience God's presence in their work, and that the Divine presence would be a source of bliss and inner satisfaction.

If people act in a praiseworthy fashion, they should—ideally—feel the presence of God in their work. They should realize that their thoughts, words and deeds are inspired by a Higher truth, by a Higher source of ideas and ideals. They behave in a praiseworthy fashion not for the sake of personal glory, and not in the hope of attaining fame and fortune. They behave admirably because they feel the presence of God in all that they do. While it may be nice to receive praise in return for praiseworthiness, one seeks to be praiseworthy by feeling God's presence in one's life and in one's work. That feeling of spiritual bliss is the ultimate human fulfillment.

May the Shekhinah rest upon the work of our hands…that is a blessing for which all good people aspire.