

Leading with Humility

Jews have no king. At least, not for the past two thousand years. During this time, our people have been led by Torah, not by tyrants.

The greatest model of Torah, the mythic exemplar of Jewish virtue, is Moses. In this week's Torah portion, we read וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, "Now that man Moses was very humble, more than any other human being on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). Moses displays his humility when he learns of two other prophets who emerge in the Hebrew camp while he was away:

Numbers 11:26 Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them ... and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, "Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!" ²⁸ And Joshua son of Nun, Moses' attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, "My lord Moses, restrain them!" ²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Eternal's people were prophets, that the Eternal put the divine spirit upon them!"

Moses is delighted to discover more prophets among the people and happily welcomes them to his side. They pose no threat to him, only the promise of more access to the divine word.

Thus Moses is our paradigmatic teacher, the humble servant of truth whose every action is attuned to the greater good rather than his own promotion.

He is not, however, a ruler.

Now in the time of the Israelite kings, which lasted several centuries, the greatest was King David. Under his leadership, the Bible tells us, the tribes of Israel were united under a single banner; and as Jews have yearned for political redemption for the past two millennia, it is the restoration of David's line for which we continue to pray.

The Hebrew Bible, though, paints two very different pictures of King David. He is, on the one hand, a mighty warrior, rising to fame by slaying Goliath, and a shrewd politician, attaining the throne through royal marriages and promises of power. Yet on the other hand, he is a musician and a poet, a mellifluous harpist and, purportedly, the author of 150 Psalms. Our tradition has an uneasy, cautious relationship with King David, condemning his adultery, hubris, and murder while exalting his piety, devotion, and love.

A passage from the Talmud places these two leaders, Moses and David, on a pedestal together: שְׁנֵי פְּרִנָּסִים טוֹבִים עָמְדוּ לָהֶם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: מֹשֶׁה וְדָוִד, "Two good leaders arose for Israel: Moses and David." However, the text immediately contrasts them, pointing

out that “Moses said ‘let my disgrace be written’ ... [but] David said, ‘do not let my disgrace be written.’” Moses, as we have seen, is humble; David wants only to be revered.

And so it is that another passage from elsewhere in the Talmud erases the memory of David as an ideal leader: “Three good leaders arose for Israel, and they were: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Ta’anit 9a). This passage tells how, on Aaron’s account, the Hebrews had shelter, on Miriam’s account, they had water, and on Moses’s account, they had food. Their virtue, and their modesty, supported and sustained the wandering Jews.

Thus Jewish tradition insists that good leadership requires humility. Since Judaism *also* bears fealty to the kingship of David, we often emphasize his best qualities and, with some poetic license, expand upon them.

As one example, Psalm 131 opens:

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד

A song of ascents by David.

O Eternal, my heart is not proud

nor my look haughty;

I do not aspire to great things

or to what is beyond me.

And on this verse, the Zohar teaches:

King David said this. He was a great king, supreme over all kings and rulers from east to west, and yet it never entered his mind to turn from the right path, for he was ever humble before the Eternal. When he studied the Torah he summoned up all his strength like a lion, and his eyes looked down at the same time to the earth, out of awe to his Lord, and when he went about among the people he displayed no haughtiness (Zohar Mishpatim 3:143).

So surely, David had his moments of pride, but it’s true – as this text points out – that he was also humble. This humility is exaggerated by Rabbinic lore but is still authentically true to the Biblical text. And this humility can perhaps best be seen in a surprising moment in David’s leadership: a military parade through the streets of the capital city.

Here’s the scene:

David brings the rescued Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem with a retinue of soldiers and musicians, accompanied by “shouts and blasts of the shofar” (2 Samuel 6:15). David wildly dances, “whirling with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14), dressed only in a simple shirt. He personally offers many sacrifices and distributes breads and cakes to all the people.

When David comes into his palace, his wife, the princess Michal, accosts him. She accuses him of acting basely, exposing and humiliating himself before his subjects. But David replies, "I will dance before the Eternal and dishonor myself even more, and be low in my own esteem; but among the servants that you speak of I will be honored" (2 Samuel 6:21-22). David models true humility, directing all his actions to the glory of God and seeing himself only as a vessel for the divine. This military parade is not conducted for David's honor or the glory of his throne. Rather, it points beyond all human affairs to the source of all blessing.

And this lesson applies not only to the king but to people as well, for one midrash suggests that every one of us is party to our own kind of parade: "Whenever a person is walking on their way, a procession of ministering angels walks before them, proclaiming, 'Make way for so-and-so, an Icon of the Blessed One'" (Midrash Tehillim to Psalm 17:7). We are honored by God and in turn are called upon to reflect that honor back. No human is inherently better than anyone else, and the truly humble walk each day with this basic truth in mind.

That's why David doesn't care if people think he's a fool. That's why Moses isn't bothered when those other prophets begin to prophesy. That's why any truly humble person makes room for others and feels genuine joy when they succeed.

Dena Weiss, a contemporary teacher of Torah, writes:¹

A humble person strives to see themselves through the eyes of God, not the eyes of other people. And it is because the humble person is always looking towards God, that God is always seeking the humble one. And this is why the humble merit receiving prophecy. They tune out the noise of other people and tune in to the will of God. And just as the humble person is looking to God, God is also looking to connect to and communicate with the humble person.

May we strive for this humility in our daily lives. May we inspire humility in those around us and search for humility in the leaders of our land. And if we strive to be or be like or be near kings, let us do so for the sake of the King of Kings of Kings, the Holy One of Blessing, in whose image every human being is made.

¹ "Truly Humble." <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/truly-humble>