

"Humility" and "Greatness of Soul"

Hazzan Rabbi Ira Rohde

"And the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was upon the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3)." This is a sweeping statement. The statement is added parenthetically from the narrator's perspective, breaking the "action" of the story. It incorporates poetic echoes of words from the beginning of Genesis: "very" and both "ish" and "Adam" for "man," as well as the related "adamah," the term for the "earth" out of which man was fashioned. Moses looms larger than life, unmatched in the history of Creation. It must always have been and remained a well-known adage, an ancient epithet.

But what is the significance of this characterization of Moses as "very humble?" In ancient poetry, adages and epithets would be used to recount the virtues of a protagonist, but in the context of this story, it's not clear that this "humility" of Moses is a good thing: Is it a virtue, or is it a weakness? Moses seems to have turned a deaf ear and made himself oblivious to the grumblings of his sister and brother, and it is left to God to miraculously step in, quash the dissidence, and restore proper obeisance and respect to Moses. And this is not the only part of the story where this "humble" character is implied to be a fault; in the previous rebellion in the last chapter, as well as in those before and yet to come, Joshua seems to be justified in telling Moses he needs to be more forceful in his leadership (cf. 11:28), though Moses does justify himself. Moses epitomizes this trait of humility "to a fault," as it were. The trait is his "hallmark," evaluated positively overall, although it clearly has its drawbacks. But whenever it has its drawbacks God sees to it that it works out well in the end.

Throughout Jewish and Christian Biblical (such as Ps. 37:11 "And the humble/meek shall inherit the earth") and post-Biblical thought, this emphasis upon humility would remain characteristic, despite the fact that its drawbacks were known and implicitly acknowledged. Judaism shares this emphasis upon humility with some Eastern thought, and it may be one of the ways Judaism remains "Oriental" in character. But in non-Christian Western thought, although Plato's Socrates seems to play at being humble regarding his attainments in wisdom, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics does not list humility among the virtues. Quite to the contrary: Aristotle (IV:3) lists a virtue of "megalopsychia," literally, "greatness of soul," also translatable as "pride," "aspiration," or our modern "self-esteem." Of course, such "self-aggrandizement" had to be cultivated in moderation, but no more than the other virtues of character, in all of which it was necessary to follow the Golden Mean, taking nothing to excess. The Greek elevation of the human aristocratic warrior hero to demigod status required a corresponding glorification of his strength, pride, and aspirations. But Judaism had idealized Moses as the prototype for the Rabbinic Sage in such sayings as "Be very, very lowly of spirit." Hence Maimonides, whose listing of virtues seems to follow the Ethics in his "Shemonah Perakim" (although with theistic obedient and penitential adaptations), felt obliged to completely omit Aristotle's "megalopsychie" from his list and substitute Mosaic "humility," as various commentators point out.

Our contemporary Western secular society requires us, for better or for worse, to cultivate Greek megalopsychie in more forms than ever, in terms of pride in oneself, development of self-esteem, strength, confidence, and ambition. At the same time, we come out of a Judaism which values humility, the virtue of the other extreme. How can we bridge the two?

Perhaps the Parashah itself gives us some clue. Moses' humility is directed towards treating his fellow leaders among his people, such as his siblings, or others among the Israelites who could aspire to prophesy, like Eldad and Meidad, with deference and respect. Even in Korah Moses was prepared to see a potential leader. There is indeed magnanimity here: Moses is being mercifully magnanimous, forbearing, and charitable towards dissidents, political rivals and enemies whom he had the power to do away with and had every right to silence and crush. Nor does his magnanimity in this seem the least bit condescending or arrogant. It's not a "false humility" where the person really thinks that he's better than others. Just as there are "false" forms of charity, where the recipient is not deemed worthy or deserving but rather the giver donates to show off how great he is, there are corresponding "false humilities." Perhaps this is why our tradition describes humility with the intensifier "very:" it must be sincere, or else it's just camouflaged haughtiness, which may be judged to be an even more egregious form of arrogance. But Moses' humility, Joshua found in the last episode, is really sincere; Moses does not covet more power or higher station than anyone else: "And Moses said to him: 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets; that the Lord would put his spirit upon them (11:28)'" What makes this all the more impressive is that Moses is clearly aware of his own greatness and specialness, as the Prophet and Lawgiver of God. One form of false humility is when outward displays of humility and lowliness are used as "proofs" of righteousness and goodness. At the same time, a humility which doesn't aspire to greatness, which takes no pride in greatness, is also a false humility, an excuse for laziness, depression, and low qualities of work and life. To be great, to aspire to greatness, to take pride in one's greatness, and to nonetheless sincerely wish for and work to foster the greatness of others: That is the truest humility, which is also the truest pride and greatness of soul.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

June 5-6, 2015

Shabbat Behaalotekha

Hertz Pentateuch: p. 605; Haftarah p. 620
Kaplan Living Torah: p. 702; Haftarah p. 1188

CANDLE LIGHTING | 8:05 pm

MINHAH | 6:45 pm

ZEMIROT | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

SHAHARIT (NISHMAT) | 9:00 am | Rabbi Hidary delivers a lecture entitled: "Reigniting Our Multigenerational Mission"

MEANING AND MELODY | 10:00 am | Rabbi Morris | Little Synagogue

TOT SHABBAT | Ages 0-4 | 10:00 am | Levy Auditorium

YOUTH GROUPS | Ages 5-12 | 10:00 am | Children's Library

JR. CONGREGATION Ages 5-12 | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

**The last Assigned Jr. Congregation of the year will be next Shabbat, June 13*

KIDDUSH LUNCHEON | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by Alexander and Muriel Seligson in honor of their son Jacob's Bar Mitzvah*

TEEN CLASS | Rabbi Hidary on the topic "The Torah of Space Travel" | 4:00 pm | For high school students | Levy Auditorium

SEUDAH SHELISHIT & AFTERNOON CLASS

Rabbi Hidary on the topic "Comparative Reconnaissance: It's All a Matter of Prophetic Perspective" | 7:00 pm | Elias Room | *Sponsored by Alexander and Muriel Seligson in honor of their son Jacob's Bar Mitzvah*

MINHAH/ARBIT | 8:00 pm

KETER SHEM TOB | Rabbi Hidary | Main Sanctuary

HABDALAH | 9:06 pm

**Sign up for parts with Rabbi Morris (smorris@shearithisrael.org) and for Torah reading with Lisa Rohde (lrohde-csi@yahoo.com).*

Summer Shabbat Schedule

Starting Saturday, June 27, Shabbat morning services will be held in Levy Auditorium.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND INITIATIVES

From Slave to Merchant Princess: The Remarkable Journey of Sarah Brandon Moses

Tuesday, June 9 | 8:00 pm | *Sponsored by the Haberman Family*

Dr. Laura A. Leibman, professor of English and Humanities at Reed college and author of *Messianism, Secrecy, and Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life*, winner of the 2012 National Jewish Book Award, shares her most recent research into slavery in early American Jewish life and how it impacted the personal lives of our community's early families.

Shearith Israel Book Club

Wednesday, June 10 | 8:00 pm

Held in a private home | Esther Hiday

Join us for the last meeting of the year. We will discuss "The UnAmericans" by Molly Antopol. RSVP to ehiday@gmail.com.

End of the Year Picnic

Saturday, June 13 | Following Shabbat Services

Join us for our annual Family Shabbat Picnic Lunch in Central Park. Bring a sheet to sit on, appropriate clothing, and we'll provide the food. There will be activities with "Roll Joel" for the children, Liz and Shanade will play with the toddlers and there will be a class for the parents. As long as the sun is shining, we'll be outside otherwise, we'll bring the party indoors. RSVP at shearithisrael.org/picnic.

Pay Tribute to Rabbi Ira Rohde for 25 Years of Devoted Service as our Hazzan

Saturday, June 20 | Following Morning Services

Join us for a special tribute to Rabbi Rohde and a kiddush luncheon in his honor. To view and join our growing list of sponsors go to shearithisrael.org/irarohde25

Celebrate Our 2015 Graduates

Saturday, June 20 | Following Morning Services

Let's spread the good news and celebrate the success and accomplishments of all our graduates from pre-school to PhDs! In addition to feteing our guest of honor, Rabbi Ira Rohde, we will also recognize our 2015 graduates. Go online to ensure your graduate is listed on our scroll of honor (for free!) and consider honoring your graduate by co-sponsoring (\$180) or contributing (\$36). For listings and sponsorships, visit shearithisrael.org/graduation.

Now is the time to register your children

Summer Toddler Program- Starts June 23, 2015

shearithisrael.org/content/summer-toddler-program-2015

PTTS Hebrew School- Starts October 18, 2015

shearithisrael.org/hebrewschool

WEEKDAY JUDAIC EDUCATION

View all our spring classes at shearithisrael.org/education

Sunday

- ◇ Transcendental Meditation and Halakha: A Responsum by Rabbi Haim David Halevy | Rabbi Hiday | 8:40 am [Last Class June 14](#)
- ◇ Saadia Gaon's Emunot ve'Deot on Revelation and Commandments | Sjimon den Hollander | 9:30 am [Last Class June 14](#)

Monday

- ◇ YL Monday Night Learning* | 7:15 pm
 - ◇ Hebruta Program* | 7:15 pm
 - ◇ Living Jewish | Rabbi Morris | 7:30 pm
 - ◇ Rambam Rules for Young Professionals | Rabbi Morris | 8:30 pm
- *In partnership with JICNY*

Tuesday

- ◇ Shulhan Arukh | Rabbi Hiday | 7:45 am [Last Class June 23](#)

Wednesday

- ◇ Parashat Hashabua | Esther Hiday | 10:00 am [Last class June 9](#)

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal Tob to Jacob Seligson on becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Congratulations to his parents, Alexander and Muriel Seligson.

Welcome to West End Synagogue's 11th grade confirmation class from Nashville, TN, visiting us this Shabbat.

Thank you to last week's Kiddush sponsors: the Tikvah Fund and Esme and Roger Berg in honor of Louis Alexandre Berg's reading of the Haftarah.

Hazak Ubarukh to our devoted member Rabbi Raif Malhado, who is receiving his ordination from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and was just announced as the next rabbi of Kahal Joseph Congregation, a Sephardic Baghdadi synagogue in Los Angeles, California. We wish much happiness to Raif, his wife Jessica and their daughter Penny.

Hazak U'Barukh to Sjimon den Hollander who will be playing with the New York Andalus Ensemble on the JCC Manhattan's rooftop on Sunday, June 14 The New York Andalus Ensemble is a multiethnic, multifait group that performs in Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, and Ladino drawing upon repertoire from the ninth century to the 1960s, from Andalus and the Maghreb. Go to jccmanhattan.org for tickets.

Refuah Shelaymah to our longtime member Esther Shear. She would very much appreciate a few friendly visits to cheer her up. Contact Rabbi Hiday at rhiday@shearithisrael.org for details.

Houston Flood Relief

The Jewish community of Houston needs our help to recover from recent severe floods. Help us show our support as a community by donating to an earmarked fund of Rabbi Soloveichik's Discretionary Fund. Donate at shearithisrael.org/discretionaryfund indicating "Houston relief" by Sunday, June 14.