"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 ‘thi’ and ‘Adam’, for ‘man’, as well as the related ‘adamah’, the term for the earth” out of which man is fashioned. In the story, unlike in life, unmarred by the history of Creation, it must always have been and remain a well-known adage, an ancient epitaph.

But what is the significance of this characterization of Moses as "very humble"? In ancient poetry, adages and epigrams 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? In the passage, this character is imbued with a future role in the redemption in the last chapter, as well as in those before and yet to come, so it makes sense to be justified in telling Moses he needs to be more forceful in his leadership (cf. 11:28), though Moses does justify himself. Moses optimizes this trait of humility, "to a fault," as it were. The trait is his hallmark, evaluated positively overall, it is drawn back, but whenever it has its drawbacks God sees it to its worst but well in the end.

Throughout Jewish and Christian Biblical (such as Ps. 37:11 "And the humble/wicked shall inherit the earth") and post-Biblical thought, this emphasis upon humility would return to its roots in Judaism, where the emphasis is 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 Sophists seems to play at being humble regarding his arguments in wisdom, Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics does not list humility among the virtues. Quite the contrary. Aristotle (V:3) lists a virtue of "megalo psyche," 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 it is the other virtues of Aristotle that make sense of Galatians 6:5, making nothing to excess.

The Greek development of the human aristocratic warrior-h英雄 character required that Aristotle required a corresponding glorification of his strength, pride, and aspirations. But Judaism had idealized Moses as the prototype for the Rabbinic sage such as saying that "Be very, very lowly of spirit." Hence, Maimonides, whose listing of virtues seems to follow the themes in his Mishne Torah, excludes the trait as being necessary to followers of God, but it is still something that nothing to excess.

Our contemporary Western secular society requires us, for better or for worse, to cultivate Greek megalo psyche 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 Torah itself gives us some clue. Moses’ humility is directed towards treating others, such as his slaves among the people, such as his slave family among his people, with who could aspire to be like the high priest, like Eliad and Masala, 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 dissent, political and the powerless, to all others whom he had the power to dominate and crush. Not does his humility in this seem the least bit, self-aggrandizing or arrogant. It is a "false humility" where the person really thinks that he’s better than others. But here there are false forms of charity, where the recipient is not deemed worthy of receiving but rather the giver donates to show off his piety to others. There is, in other words, a corresponding sense of "false humility." Perhaps this is why our tradition describes humility with the intensified "very." It must be sincere, or else it’s just armoured, 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 cover more episodes, but rather is sincere, and to the point to others. The theme of humility and lowliness are used as "proofs" of righteousness and goodness. At the same time, a humility which does not aspire to greatness, which takes no pride in greatness, is also a false humility, an excuse for laziness, depression, and lack of work and life. To be great, to add to oneself, to take pride in one’s greatness, and toimon, and to monothel, is more righteous, and to work and to foster the greatness of others. That is the true humility, which is also the true pride and greatness of soul.
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 ehidary@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/ira-rohde25

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 preschool to PhD! In addition to feasting 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 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
PTIS Hebrew School—Starts October 18, 2015
shearithisrael.org/hebrewschool

WEBSITE JUDAIC EDUCATION

View all our spring classes at shearithisrael.org/education

Sunday
◊ Transcendental Meditation and Halakha: A Responsum by Rabbi Haim David Halsey | Rabbi Hiday | 8:40 am | Last Class June 14
◊ Saadia Gaon’s Emunot ve-Doot on Revelation and Commandments | Simon den Hollander | 9:30 am | Last Class June 14

Monday
◊ YL Monday Night Learning | 7:15 pm
◊ Hebrew Program* | 7:15 pm
◊ Living Jewish | Rabbi Morris | 7:30 pm
◊ Ramah Rules for Young Professionals | Rabbi Morris | 8:30 pm
*In partnership with JICNY

Tuesday
◊ Shulchan Arukh | Rabbi Hiday | 7:45 am | Last Class June 23

Wednesday
◊ Parashat Hashabua | Esther Hiday | 10:00 am | Last Class June 2

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal Tov 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 Alexander Berg’s reading of the Haftarah.

Halah U’Barukh to our dear member Rabbi Raif Mallah, who is receiving his ordination from Yeshivat Chevesht 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.

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Refuah Shalem 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.