

**Parshat Beha'alotekha**  
**Make Our People Humble Again**  
**Rabbi Marianne Novak - Class of 2019**

לא קם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה עוֹד, נְבִיא וּמַבִּיט אֶת תְּמוּנָתוֹ...

*'Never in Israel has there arisen another like Moses, a prophet who beheld God's image.'*

These lines from the lyrical Yigdal prayer, based on Maimonides Thirteen Attributes of Faith, assert that we have not had and will not have anyone quite like Moshe. His uniqueness among the leaders of Israel begins with his close relationship with God, as he was the only prophet to speak directly, face to face with Him. But there are other qualities that make Moshe a true leader and we see them most sharply not when things are going smoothly with others but rather when he is tested sharply by those he is supposed to lead, namely B'nai Yisrael and those closest to him, his siblings.

In Parshat Beha'alotekha, Moshe's leadership is tested in many different ways that threaten his legitimacy as a leader. The narrative begins with the fine details of Aharon and his son's service to God in the *Mishkan*, Tabernacle. Moshe is given all the instructions and performs himself the ritual of inducting the Levi'im as a sacred role. Yet Moshe himself will not have a priestly legacy. The Priesthood reflects Aharon's everlasting heritage, not Moshe's. Yet, Moshe understands his limits and doesn't ask to have the Priesthood as well. Moshe understands that this part is not for him, but this in no way takes away from his power as leader.

As the parsha continues, the limits of Moshe's leadership are tested again. It is the second year of the Jewish people's sojourn in the desert, and God instructs the people to celebrate the Pesach sacrifice and ritual as they had done the year before in Egypt. A group of men who were ritually impure from contact with a dead body realized that they couldn't observe Pesach now and asked Moshe and Aharon for advice. Moshe tells the men to

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה עֲמְדוּ וְאִשְׁמְעוּהָ מֵה' יְצִיָּהּ ה' לָכֶם (9:8)

*Moses said to them, "Stand by, and let me hear what instructions the LORD gives about you."*

Moshe asks for assistance and does not worry that this lessens the power of his leadership. Again, he understands his limits and by doing so is able to solve this problem and lead.

When confronted by the people's desire for meat, Moshe, at first, seems to flag in his leadership, asking God why He chose him to lead such a difficult people. Moshe is so overwhelmed by these complaints, that he begs God to kill him.

וְאִם-נִכְחָה אֶת-עֵשֶׂה לִּי הֲרֹגֵנִי נָא הַרְגֵם אִם-מַצְאֵתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאֶל-אֶרְצָה בְּרַעְתִּי:

*If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" (11:15)*

God, seeing Moshe's limits, enlists seventy elders to help him and assures Moshe that He, as God can bring the meat and teach B'nai Yisrael a lesson for giving into their most basest desires. God's punishment of sending the copious amount of quail brutally teaches the people the dangers of not knowing one's limitations.

The parsha ends with a final test for Moshe that comes from his own family.

Chapter 12 begins:

(1) וַתְּדַבֵּר מֵרִים וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל-אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשָּׁה כֻּשִׁית לָקַח:

*Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: "He married a Cushite woman!"*

(2) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֶךְ-בְּמֹשֶׁה דִּבֶּר ה' הֲלֹא גַם-בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע ה':

*They said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" The LORD heard it.*

Miriam is listed first and it is quite shocking to see her, a leader on par with her brothers, who had protected Moshe so fiercely as a baby, complain in such a way. It is not completely clear from the text itself what the point of contention is. Rashi citing the Midrash in the Sifrei gives us a clue:

וּתְדַבֵּר מֵרִים וְאַהֲרֹן. הִיא פְתוּחָה בְּדַבּוּר תַּחֲלָה, לְפִיכֶךָ הַקְדִּימָה הַכְּתוּב, וּמִנֵּן הִיְתָה יוֹדַעַת מֵרִים שֶׁפָּרַשׁ מֹשֶׁה מִן הָאִשָּׁה? רַבִּי נֶתַן אוֹמֵר מֵרִים הִיְתָה בְּצַד צְפוּרָה בְּשָׂעָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר לְמֹשֶׁה אֶלְדָּד וּמִדְד מִתְנַבְּאִים בְּמַחֲנֶה, כִּיּוֹן שֶׁשְׂמֵעָה צְפוּרָה, אָמְרָה אוֹי לְנִשְׁוֹתֶיהֶן שֶׁל אֵלּוֹ אִם הֵם נִזְקָקִים לְנִבּוּאָה, שִׁיְהִיוּ פּוֹרְשֵׁי מִנְשׁוֹתֶיהֶן כְּדָרָךְ שֶׁפָּרַשׁ בְּעַלִּי מִמֶּנִּי, וּמִשָּׁם יִדְעָה מֵרִים וְהִגִּידָה לְאַהֲרֹן; וְיִמָּה מֵרִים שֶׁלֹּא נִתְכַּוְּנָה לְגִוּוֹת כָּרָע נֶעֱשֶׂה, קָל וְחֹמֶר לְמַסְפָּר בְּגִוּוֹת שֶׁל חֲבֵרוֹ (ספרי):

And Moshe and Aharon spoke— She opened the conversation, therefore Scripture mentions her first. And whence did Miriam know that Moses had separated himself from his wife (for this was the statement she made; cf. Rashi below)? R. Nathan answered: "Miriam was beside Zipporah When it was told to Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp' (Numbers 11:27). When Zipporah heard this, she exclaimed, Woe to the wives of these if they have anything to do with prophecy, for they will separate from their

wives just as my husband has separated from me!" It was from this that Miriam knew about it, and she told it to Aaron. Now what was the case with Miriam who had no intention to disparage him? She was punished thus severely! How much the more will this be so in the case of one who intentionally speaks in disparagement of this fellow" (Sifrei Bamidbar 99).

While Miriam believes that she is advocating for her sister-in-law Zipporah, a wife and mother, she steps outside her boundaries as a leader by going after Moshe, the one she worked hardest to save, knowing of his future greatness. But lest you think that Moshe's greatness is only from the special way he speaks with God, the Torah text interrupts the narrative with a bold statement: (12:3)-

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲבִיב מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

*'Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.'*

What makes Moshe great, the Torah tells us here, is not only the nature of how he receives prophecy but because he is humble. Humility, as the Rambam tells us in *Mishnah Torah, Hilkhot Deot* (2:3) is a character trait that one should try to embody in the extreme, as Moshe was not only humble but *'very humble.'* The Rambam goes on to explain that if someone is so arrogant, so full of themselves, if everything is about them, they have violated the fundamental principle of God's authority or presence. When one doesn't know where they begin and end, what their limitations are, they cannot listen, have true empathy and they cannot truly lead.

James Kugel, in his book "On Being a Jew", has a wonderful anecdote that explains the real nature of humility. The book is structured as a short conversation on various Jewish issues between a fictional Jew and his friend. The structure of the book echoes that of the *Kuzari*, the great medieval work by the poet Yehudah Ha-Levi, which records the imaginary conversations between a learned Jew and the King of the Kazars. In Kugel's book, the conversations are between a young banker Judd Lewis and Albert Abadi, an older bank manager. The young banker Lewis asks the older gentleman Abadi on the true nature of Jewish prayer.

Mr. Abadi explains as follows: (p.109-111)

'Let me see how I can explain it to you...It has to do with two Jews, Klein and Gross. Gross is very fat-or rather, he overlaps his outline, like a child's drawing...It is in this manner that Gross is fat, he overlaps, and as a consequence he is always getting in the way of himself. Even if he tries to whirl around very quickly and see what is behind him, all he will actually see is that part of himself that overlaps whirling around to meet him. Klein, on the other hand, is small. Not physically small, but discrete, held perfectly inside his own outline. And so he can see and walk about in a different way.

Mr. Abadi continued-

'Gross is the way we are. I do not know why it is so, perhaps it is connected to evolution, but it is the way we are. And it is a fine way to be, swashbuckling at times, save that it is quite unreal, this overlapping, and so hinders us from what is real...You wish to rush up to that which is kadosh, holy and pick it up and examine it. But this has never been done. Gross and kadosh cannot meet...What does it mean to Klein?...to fit within your borders and be small...'

When Miriam lodges what she believes is a righteous complaint about Moshe on Tziporah's behalf, the complaint really becomes all about her. She has for a moment forgotten the limitations of her power and influence and receives a harsh punishment as a result. But the love of the people for Miriam and her specific kind of leadership is not diminished by this incident. Miriam is sent outside the camp for seven days, and the people wait for her before embarking upon their journey again. They can empathize with Miriam for they too had been taught the harsh lesson of going beyond one's boundaries and lines.

For us to be great as a people again and to improve and strengthen our relationship to God requires a discipline of humility. We need a spiritual practice that doesn't mean we see ourselves as nothing or as powerless but rather understand our limitations and what spaces we should and should not inhabit. It means seeing beyond ourselves so that we can truly listen to those around us and let in the voice of God. And with that, we can become great again and achieve great things and maybe be as greatly humble as Moshe Rabbeinu.





Rabbi Marianne Novak received her AB in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women's Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Rabbi Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Rabbi Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Rabbi Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.