

Help Wanted

Dr. Shira Epstein, Dean, William Davidson School and Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, JTS



In recent years, Jewish institutions have joined efforts to address issues of equity in the workforce, encouraging transparency in publicized pay scales, promotion criteria, and job requirements. This endeavor has been facilitated by pioneering organizations such as the Gender Equity in Hiring Project that did not exist when I negotiated salary for my first classroom teaching position. I reflect back on the hiring process, which felt at the time like a puzzle for which I was meant to know the solution but could not access; I now understand that these feelings of isolation were common, particularly when no formal pay scale existed. Today as an activist for workplace equity, I benefit from the wisdom of current advocacy; at the urging of some of our alumni, The William Davidson School weekly newsletters have recently begun to only post descriptions that include salary ranges. This seemingly small change enables a level playing field, putting employers and job candidates on more equitable negotiating grounds.

Part of the success of such current advocacy efforts lies in educating search committees to recognize their biases in who they view as a strong candidate, or when they might be adhering to outmoded ideas of what makes one qualified for a position. Organizations have also been challenged to rethink job descriptions. For example, how does inclusion of a line such as “must have experience with organizational budgeting” serve as a barrier to attracting a range of candidates who might not yet have this skill, but would shine in other significant areas of leadership, and would readily learn on the job? Parashat Beha'alotekha offers an opportunity for considering bias in age and ability, in detailing one of the most ancient and structured job descriptions that exists: that of the Levite.

The Levites are a privileged group, selected for service to God. They are specially prepared for this position through intricate steps, which the Torah outlines for Moses and Aaron as their supervisors. God first instructs Moses in how he will step-by-step ready the Levites for their role: cleanse them with water of purification, shave their whole body with a razor, and wash their clothes (8: 6–10). Moses and Aaron will then bring the Levites before the Tent of Meeting, and the Israelites will be part of the ceremony and ritual that marks the moment the Levites have transitioned into this venerated position. The Levites are now distinct from the ordinary Israelites: “Thus you shall set the Levites apart from the Israelites, and the Levites shall be Mine” (8:14).

Immediately following this detailed description, God makes clear that this privilege and status will have a ceiling, a firm “ageing out” threshold:

This is the rule for the Levites. From twenty-five years of age up they shall participate in the work force in the service of the Tent of Meeting; but at the age of fifty they shall retire from the work force and shall serve no more. They may assist their brother Levites at the Tent of Meeting by standing guard, but they shall perform no labor . . . (8: 24–26)

Ramban's commentary on the above verses highlights how age limits on one aspect of a role can bias perceptions on what makes for an overall productive and effective worker. He references Rashi's interpretation of an earlier passage that designates a specific age-band for the Levites for carrying burdens: “from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who were subject to duties of service and portage relating to the Tent of Meeting” (Numbers, 4:47), and refutes Rashi's assertion that the Levite can also “close the

gates, or...sing, or...load the wagons.” Ramban ties one core element of the Levite role (singing) to another (preparing and facilitating burnt offerings), and in doing so, makes a case for Levites aging out of *all* Levite roles at age 50; if their bodies could not support the laborious work of presenting offerings, they could not perform any part of the job, including singing:

. . . And this indeed appears correct [that a Levite above the age of fifty was not allowed to take part in the singing] . . . And since the Kohathites [who were the only ones permitted to carry the ark] were counted from thirty to fifty years old, even for singing, they were all counted in this manner . . . so [it is clear that] when there was [the duty of] bearing the burdens upon the shoulders, the Levites were disqualified from singing as well [after the age of fifty] . . .

This distinct age-band (and Ramban’s position on the Levite’s mandatory retirement from all duties at age 50) beckons questions of relevance for contemporary job equity efforts. What biases might we hold today toward what qualifications and abilities should be seen as indispensable for a job? For example, many early childhood teaching positions include a line such as, “Requires heavy physical work; heavy lifting, pushing, or pulling required of objects up to 50 pounds.” Might this statement preclude a more senior candidate who possesses all other qualifications and experience to be discounted? How might we best uplift what more experienced candidates can contribute—of discernment and ability to train the next generation? The Levite job description offers opportunity for continued dialogue about expansiveness of age range, abilities, and manifold ways to contribute to Jewish community.

The Importance of Being Humble

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs

An unfortunate incident mars the otherwise solid familial bond between Moses and his siblings in Parashat Beha’alotekha. While in Hazerot, Aaron and Miriam engage in disparaging talk about their brother’s marriage to a Cushite

woman. Jealousy sparks their venom as they malign their brother and declare, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?” (Num. 12:2). To Aaron and Miriam’s dismay, God “hears” their provocative words, holds them accountable, and punishes Miriam with a plague of leprosy. In the midst of this troubling episode, we receive a striking description of Moses and the depth of his relationship with God: “Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth” (Num. 12:3). God continues, “With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord” (Num. 12:8). What is the import of such a qualification of Moses and his intimate relationship with God? How may we better understand Moses’s essence?

Yeshayahu Leibowitz writes in *Accepting the Yoke of Heaven* (134–135): “No place in Torah does it state that Moses was wiser than any man, nor does it say that he was more righteous than any man, nor does it say that he was mightier than any man, even though we can deduce from events that he was wise, with the greatest comprehension of any man and that he was righteous and mighty. But the Torah finds it proper to stress only one thing: that Moses was more humble than any other man . . . Humility without any doubt, is a high level of human perfection. Human nature is such that each person considers himself to be great and important—if not consciously, at least subconsciously. In other words, it is not natural for a person to be humble . . . It is only one who attains the level of Moses, and who really “understands and knows God,” that really realizes that no man can understand and know God. He attains the truest and greatest humility.”

To be humble, as Leibowitz explains, is to strive for the one of the highest levels of “human perfection.” Pridefulness too often becomes a stumbling block in the pursuit of power. Learning to become humble allows one to internalize the discipline of self-contraction, and in so doing, makes space for the wisdom and inspiration of others. Each of us contains only part of an eternal Truth. By Moses’s modeling what it is to be humble and the Torah’s keen emphasis on this quality, we are encouraged to strive to emulate one of the great leaders of the Israelites and the Jewish People.

This piece was published originally in 2013.