

When is Humility Not a Virtue?

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At the conclusion of Exodus 34, Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets unaware that “the skin of his face sent forth beams (radiated) as he spoke” (34:29). Upon seeing Moses’s beaming face, Aaron and the children of Israel were afraid to approach him, and Moses needed to reassure them that they could approach.

When Moses finished speaking the words of God to the children of Israel, he placed a veil on his face (34:33). However, whenever Moses came into the presence of God, Moses would remove the veil (34:33) and immediately thereafter relay the commandments of God to the children of Israel, who would once again briefly behold Moses’s radiating face. Moses would then put the veil back on his face until the next time “he went in to speak with Him” (34:35).

Moses’s actions are puzzling and confront us with two related questions: On the one hand, why did Moses need to place the veil on his face? And on the other, why did Moses remove the veil when going before God and when relaying God’s words to the people—only to replace it as described above? Biblical commentators offer some fascinating insights.

Interior World of the Leader

Keli Yekar (Shelomoh Efraim Luntschitz, Poland, Prague, 1550–1619) takes an approach focusing on Moses’s **interior world**—his **psychological state**. According to his interpretation, Moses placed the veil on his face because everyone was gazing at him. As we read in Numbers 12:3, “And the man Moses was very humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.” He was, consequently, embarrassed and uncomfortable when people were staring

at his radiant face. By covering his face, he would be able to prevent them from seeing the shining countenance he merited by having been in God’s presence when receiving the Torah. Moses was more comfortable when he was not subject to the constant attention of others.

Why then did Moses remove the veil whenever he came before God? According to Keli Yekar, Moses had to **literally and figuratively** remove the veil of modesty when coming before God to receive words of Torah and instruction, for “he who is bashful cannot learn” (Mishnah Avot 2:6).

Humility vs Assertiveness

Interestingly, Keli Yekar presents us with a kind of **values clarification exercise** by juxtaposing two **competing values**: the highly regarded character trait of modesty on the one hand and the paramount value of unencumbered and even assertive Torah study on the other. He implicitly challenges us to consider situations in our lives where modesty may not be appropriate and where we must valiantly struggle against our natural inclinations. And he, of course, takes a strong stance in one situation: when studying Torah we will not be able to make sufficient progress in our studies if we are not willing to be assertive and challenging at times, even at the risk of seeming less than reverential. What makes this lesson so powerful and perhaps radical at first glance is that in this situation the teacher is God! So what Keli Yekar is implying is the following: since reticence is not in place when learning with God, all the more so when learning from teachers or engaging with leaders of flesh and blood.

This attitude may encourage independent thinking and a willingness to challenge fundamentalist or autocratic leaders and teachers. It could also protect a person and society from

compliantly accepting dictatorial ideas or mandates which could lead to the sanctioning of unethical, illegal, and even violent behavior.

R. Akiva Eiger, Hungary, (1761–1837), like Keli Yekar, invokes the verse extolling Moses as “very humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). Moses, he notes, comported himself submissively with utter humility and abasement. However, since Moses was the king and leader of Israel, it was his duty to conduct himself in a regal manner in order to preserve order and guard his honor. Moses, therefore, had to conceal his natural humble and submissive nature with the veil of royal demeanor. On the other hand, when Moses came to speak with God, he removed his veil of regal behavior and once again assumed his natural humble and modest demeanor.

Public vs. Private Persona

Eiger’s comment highlights the issue of leadership, insisting that a leader must behave in a manner that instills awe of and respect for their position for the sake of the orderly conduct of government and for the leader’s own honor. Similarly, a teacher, parent, or employer must foster an environment that reduces the possibility of chaotic or anarchic behavior. If one is naturally reticent, or even permissive, one must battle against this natural inclination in order to maintain the order that is requisite for the conduct of government, a school, a home, a workplace.

Interestingly, Keli Yekar and Eiger are both dealing with competing values, and they both highlight the importance of struggling against our inclinations at times—in this case extreme humility—yet paradoxically they seem to reverse the situation. Keli Yekar suggests that Moses needed to overcome his humble nature when standing before God, while Eiger states that Moses needed to overcome his humble nature before the people.

How does Eiger differ from Keli Yekar in his understanding of Moses’s relationship with God and by implication our own relationship with God as well? According to Eiger, Moses removes the metaphorical veil of assertive, regal leadership when speaking with God for there is no need of

pretense or public image before God; God knows all—including our true nature. And furthermore, it is not appropriate to conduct ourselves assertively or regally before God. Submission before God is in order!

Yet, there may be an additional implied lesson in Eiger’s comment—one that is indeed comforting—there exists a place where we have an opportunity to feel secure, without wearing our veils: before God.