

PARASHAS TZAV

Humility Breeds Respect

While the inaugural service of the Mishkan was certainly a long and intricate process, each of the individual steps was not particularly difficult. Each act was fairly simple and straightforward, and the Torah's instructions are really quite clear. One would not expect that Aaron, the High Priest, would have any difficulty following instructions and performing the service in the proper manner.

And yet, the Torah makes a point of praising Aaron for following the instructions precisely, for doing that which was expected of him without any deviation. Why was this such an exemplary accomplishment? Why did he deserve praise for performing a series of relatively uncomplicated tasks, albeit a rather long series, without error or deviation?

The commentators explain that an important emotional dynamic was at work here. The instructions for the inaugural service came directly from God, of course, but they were delivered by His messenger Moses, Aaron's younger brother. Moses had originally been reluctant to accept the role of redeemer of the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt, because he feared his older brother would feel slighted for having been passed over for this honor. God, however, assured him that Aaron would not be offended, and indeed he wasn't. He welcomed Moses with open arms and assisted him at every step of the way. But the inaugural service presented Aaron with a special challenge.

Until then, Aaron had subordinated himself to his younger brother by accepting the role of second in command. But during the inaugural process, he had to accept a much different role. Aaron and his four sons performed their duties under Moses' didactic direction, like children guided by a patient teacher. At each step of the process, Moses gave them detailed instructions, and all Aaron and his sons had to do was follow obediently without any innovation and without any creative input.

To a lesser man, this would have been demeaning, especially in front of his children. But Aaron was not a lesser man. He accepted his role with absolute humility and joy, with no thought of his personal honor or prestige. It did not occur to him to assert his ego through even the slightest deviation from Moses' instructions.

Paradoxically, Aaron's extreme humility brought him great honor. The Torah praises him for his sterling character and humility, and the people respected and revered him all the more for it. In fact, the Torah later on remarks how deeply all the people mourned his passing.

Humility breeds respect. By his humility, Aaron had gained the respect of the Torah and the respect of the people.

Two brothers traveled together to a great sage and studied under his guidance for several years. Afterward, they returned to their city, and each of them established his own congregation. As the years passed, the younger brother's congregation flourished. There was an empty seat during the prayer services, and when he gave his sermons, there was barely any standing room. The older brother, however, did not fare well. His congregation remained meager in number and soporific in spirit.

One day, the older brother decided he could not endure the situation any longer. He returned to the sage to ask his advice.

"I don't understand it," he complained. "I am as learned and talented as my brother, if not more, and my sermons are at least as good. Why do they flock to him and avoid me?"

The sage smiled. "You know, my son," he said, "your brother was here a few months ago, and he asked me the exact same question. Apparently, the same question is on both your minds, and the people in your city see it. When your brother asks the question, people admire his humility and flock to him. When you ask the question, people are put off by your self-importance and stay away."

In our own lives, we sometimes tend to criticize authority figures, such as rabbis and community leaders. These people are nominally superior to us, and our instinctive reaction is to level the playing field by criticizing them. But what kind of message does that send to our children, family and associates? It shows us as mean-spirited and malicious, and we lose respect in their eyes. On the other hand, if we are graciously humble and speak kindly of others, we are the ones who gain the most. Instead of demeaning ourselves, we earn immeasurable respect.