

Essential Humility: Thoughts on Parashat Vayishlah, November 20, 2010

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"I am not worthy of all the mercies and all the truth which You have shown unto Your servant." (Bereishith 32:11)

Jacob had a remarkable curriculum vitae. He was the patriarch of a large family. He possessed an impressive amount of livestock and was quite wealthy. By external standards of success, Jacob had achieved a lot during his years with Lavan.

Many people, when feeling they have been successful, become egotistical. They take pride in their wealth, or power, or superiority in their field of endeavor. They may come to feel that they are somehow immune to the vagaries of life, that they aren't bound by the rules and regulations that govern the masses of people, that they have the right to impose their wills on others. Such people border on idolatry--the worship of their own selves!

Jacob, however, set a different example. Although exceptionally successful in his worldly endeavors, Jacob came before God with the admission of "katonti"--I am not worthy of all the blessings I have received. "Katonti" implies that Jacob thought of himself still as a child dependent upon God his Father. He did not become inflated with egotism and self-adulation. On the contrary, he continued to worry about the future challenges he would be facing; he recognized his limitations and his need to turn to the Almighty for help.

The 23rd Psalm ends with a puzzling verse: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for length of days." Even if God had shown abundant kindness to David in the past, how could David be so certain that this goodness and mercy would surely follow him all the days of his life? I think the verse can properly be understood if we translate the word "akh" differently. Instead of meaning "surely", it should be translated "even if". The verse then should be understood as follows: Even if goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, I shall not abandon God; I shall not leave the presence of the Lord; I shall humbly receive these blessings and acknowledge God as their source. I will not become arrogant or egotistical, no matter how successful I may become in worldly matters.

In our morning prayers, we confess before God that we are cognizant of our ultimate smallness. "Are not the mightiest as naught before You, people of renown as if they were not, the wise as if without knowledge, the intelligent as if lacking in understanding?" This prayer reminds us to keep our lives in focus. No matter how much wisdom we have attained, no matter how powerful we are, no matter how much wealth we have accumulated--it is all as vanity in the face of eternity.

It is precisely when we understand our ultimate smallness, that we can begin to relate more honestly to God and to our fellow human beings. We can do our best to serve God and humanity--not for the sake of glorifying ourselves, but for the greater glory of God.

The strife, violence and warfare that plague humanity stem largely from human arrogance and egotism, from jealousy and greed, from the desire to exert power and demonstrate lordship. These qualities are evident in our every day interactions with fellow human beings, as well as in national and international relations. We cannot achieve redemption--not individually and not as nations--until we learn to say "katonti", until we learn basic humility, until we see our lives in context with the eternal God.

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