

Greatness Where Least Expected: Thoughts for Parashat Va'era

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Va'era

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Amram took into his [household] as wife his father’s sister Yocheved, and she bore him Aaron and Moses” (Shemot 6:20).

Amram and Yocheved were Israelite slaves; they lacked wealth, social status, or political influence. Yet, this seemingly undistinguished couple gave birth to Aaron and Moses (and later to Miriam). Their children were among the most outstanding figures in human history.

Moses became the greatest prophet and religious leader. Aaron was Moses’s partner in confronting Pharaoh and working for the redemption of the Israelites; Aaron went on to become high priest. Miriam was gifted with prophecy and was a significant leader of the people.

We might have expected that these illustrious siblings would have had an impressive background. Such heroic figures might more naturally have arisen among nobles and parents of great distinction. But the Torah specifies: they were children of slaves.

The Bible often describes outstanding leaders, prophets and teachers as having derived from humble beginnings. The lesson: greatness is not inherited; it is not the preserve of a royal class; it cannot be purchased. Each individual, regardless of background, has the possibility of rising to great heights.

The Talmud (Nedarim 81a) instructs: “pay attention to the children of the poor, for from them the Torah will emerge.” Many of the most remarkable scholars and teachers of our people came from poor, uninfluential families. They rose to greatness by dint of their own strivings. They lacked the seeming advantages of wealth and family distinction; but they succeeded eminently.

“Humble beginnings” may be difficult in some ways; but they may also be blessings in other ways. Parents who are poor in finances and status may be rich in faith, wisdom, and lovingkindness. They may not have been able to give their children an abundance of material assets, but they conveyed wonderful values, idealism, love of learning, spiritual dignity.

Even the least affluent and influential parents can raise outstanding children. Even children born without great material advantages can rise to preeminence.

The Torah tradition teaches us that greatness can emerge where least expected.