

“L’eggo Yo’ Ego”: Garments of Glory, to Those Who Seek None. Rabbanit Yael Smooha - Class of 2021

Moshe’s name makes no appearance in this week’s sedra. In fact, it is the only parsha in the books of Shmot, Vayikra, and Bemidbar that makes no mention of his name. All of the instructions are addressed to Moshe, yet there is no mention of his actual name.

One of the first passages of *Tetzaveh* instructs Moshe to have honorary garments designed for his brother Aaron the High Priest. These garments are instructed to be designed by the best and brightest artisans, from the finest red, purple, and blue dyed wool of the times, and adorned with gold and gems. Not only is Moshe instructed to dress his brother in these extravagant garments, but he is also instructed to have his four nephews, Aaron’s sons, dressed in a dignified priestly wardrobe as well. Bear in mind that Moshe’s own sons have not, and will never be, appointed for leadership.

In short, the parsha asks Moshe to strip himself of his ego, his name, put all feelings aside, and lavish upon his brother and his brother’s children garments whose sole purpose is to bring “honor and adornment” (Shmot 28:2)

Among the accessories that Aaron wears is the breastplate with 12 gemstones, each representing an Israelite tribe. According to the rabbis, Aaron earned this beautiful breastplate through *his* generosity of spirit. When Moshe was chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, his older brother Aaron welcomed him back to Egypt with open arms, and joy in his heart (Shmot 4:14). Rashi brings the midrash from Shabbat 139a there:

And when he [Aaron] sees you [Moshe, he will be glad in his heart: not as you [Moshe] believe, that he will be angry with you because you have attained a high position. In consequence of this, Aaron was privileged to wear the ornament of the breastplate which was placed over his heart (Shabbat 139a).

וראך ושחמ בלב: לא קשאתה סבור, שיהא מקפיד עליך שאתה עולה לגדולה; ומשם זכה אהרן לעדי החשן הנתן על הלב (שבת קל"ט)

This relates to a general principle stated by the rabbis in Eruvin 13b:

Anyone who humbles himself, the Holy One, Blessed be He, exalts him, and

שכל המשפיל עצמו הקדוש ברוך הוא מגביהו וכל המגביה עצמו הקדוש ברוך הוא משפילו כל המחזר על הגדולה גדולה בורחת ממנו וכל הבורח מן הגדולה גדולה מחזרת אחריו

Anyone who exalts himself, the Holy One, Blessed be He, humbles him.

Anyone who seeks greatness, greatness flees from him, and, conversely,

Anyone who flees from greatness, greatness seeks him.

Indeed, the Torah asks Moshe to bring “Aaron close” (Shmot 28:2), implying that Aaron shied away from honor and needed a bit of encouragement to accept his prestigious role.

Moshe, at the end of the day, is a strong candidate for ego-shrinking challenges. Called the most humble of men (Numbers 12: 3) Moshe’s ego seems to be nonexistent as well. This is most abundantly clear when Moshe’s attendant Joshua observes men prophesying freely in the camp. He fears that Moshe’s authority is being threatened, since Moshe’s capacity for prophecy is now shared by others, and seeks for Moshe to have them restrained. Meanwhile, Moshe’s response is (Numbers 11:29):

But Moshe said to him, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD put His spirit upon them!”

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה הַמְקַנָּא אֶתְּהָ לִּי? וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל־עַם יְהוָה נְבִיאִים כִּי־יִתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת־רוּחוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם:

In other words, “Are you really upset on my behalf? How amazing for other people to prophecy too! What’s the threat?” Because where there’s no ego, there is no threat.

This theme of ego comes up in Megilat Esther too. Haman insists that everyone prostrate himself before him, literally making more space for his presence in the universe, as it were. And when Mordechai refuses to bow, Haman becomes obsessed with the one man who won't respect him. As he gains political power, his irritation towards Mordechai swells larger than life.

He tells his family and friends (Esther 5:12-13):

"What is more," said Haman, "Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am invited by her along with the king.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּן אִף לֹא־הִבִּיֵּאָה אֶסְתֵּר הַמֶּלֶכָה עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ
אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה כִּי אִם־אוֹתִי וְגַם־לְמַחֵר אֲנִי
קָרוּא־לָהּ עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ:

Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate."

וְכָל־זֶה אֵינְנוֹ שׂוֹה לִי בְכָל־עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה
אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכָי הַיְהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ:

Haman himself sees the smallness over which his ego drives him mad: While he should be flattered and honored by his exclusive invitation to the Queen Esther's private party, he is instead overtaken by rage in the face of the one Jew who refuses to show him respect. Interestingly, it is the very next day in which Haman is forced by King Achashverosh to dress his most hated enemy in *royal garb* and have him ride on His Majesty's horse.

Mordechai, on the other hand, is willing to accept an imperfect approval rating, describing himself at the end of the megila as accepted by most of his brethren, not all. The last pasuk of the megila reads (Esther 10:3):

*For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the **multitude of his brethren**; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of **all his kindred**.*

כִּי מֶרְדֵּכָי הַיְהוּדִי מִשְׁנֵה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ
וְגָדוֹל לַיְהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרַב אֶחָיו דָּרַשׁ טוֹב
לְעַמּוֹ וְדָבַר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל־זָרְעוֹ:

While Mordechai subtly admits that he never did gain 100% popularity, that doesn't stop him from devoting himself to interceding on behalf of all his fellow Jews, a feat that's easier to accomplish when one's ego doesn't take itself too seriously.

Like Moshe, Aaron, and Mordechai, let us let go of our egos, give fearlessly of ourselves, and lavish "garments of glory" upon those closest to us even as they remind us of our vulnerabilities.



Born in Haifa and raised in Allentown, Pennsylvania in a Hebrew speaking home, Yael Smooha grew up enchanted by the stories of the Torah. Yael studied at Breuers and then at Teachers College, Columbia University, ultimately teaching public school and then at Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan and of Westchester. She cares deeply about the integration of arts and education. Yael currently heads the Jspace Hebrew School at Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - the Bayit. Yael currently lives with her family in Teaneck, NJ.