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Parshat Beha'alotekha: On Not Knowing

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It is challenging for people to admit ignorance. “I don’t know” is often the most difficult and vulnerable answer that one can give. And yet, Moshe Rabbeinu models, almost effortlessly, the value of not knowing. There are at least three times where Moshe is asked a questions and he does not know. In our parsha, Beha’alotcha, there are a group of men who became *tamei* (contaminated) by a dead body and were not permitted to bring the *korban pesach* on the right day—the 14th of Nissan. They ask:

לָמָּה נִגְרַע לְבַלְתִּי הַקְּרִיב אֶת קֶרְבַּן יְהוָה בְּמַעַדוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Why should we be excluded so as not to bring the offering of the Lord in its appointed time, with all the children of Israel? (Bamidbar 9:7)

Moshe responds:

עֲמְדוּ וְאֶשְׁמָעָה מִה יִצְוֶה יְהוָה לְכֶם:

Wait, and I will hear what God instructs concerning you. (9:8)

Moshe had the humility to admit that he did not know. There are two more times in the book of Bamidbar when Moses had to turn to God to provide an answer. In the episode of the *mekoshesh* - the man who gathered sticks on Shabbat - the accused was brought to Moshe, and he had to turn to God for guidance (Bamidbar 15:34). And, when *B'not Zlophchad* requested that they inherit their deceased father’s land, there too, the Torah says that Moshe “brought their claim before God” (Bamidbar 27:5).

Lack of knowledge can be interpreted as weakness and even stupidity. However, Moshe’s ability to admit ignorance gives us permission to do the same. If Moshe, who experienced the highest level of prophecy, who engaged with God *panim-el-panim* (face to face), could model lack of knowledge, how much more so should each of us, in our humanness, admit “I don’t know.”

Even Rashi, who elucidates almost every pasuk of the Torah and explains the *pilpul* (analysis) of the Talmud, had the humility to say “I don’t know.” Towards the end of the story of Yaakov and Esiav, the Torah repeats that Rivka is “the mother of Yaakov and Eisav” (Beresihit 28:5). Rashi, in trying to explain the repetitious information exclaims:

אם יעקב ועשו: איני יודע מה מלמדנו:

I do not know what this teaches us

It's hard to imagine how difficult these simple words must have been for one of the greatest teachers of Torah to admit. And yet, Rashi is modeling an entirely human trait. We cannot know everything. In fact, when Yehoshua Ben Nun is unable to admit vulnerability and show that scholars and leaders alike may not know everything, he is immediately punished. The Gemara (Temurah 16a) imagines the dialogue between Teacher and student, Moshe and Yehoshua, just as Moshe is about to depart from this world. Moshe turns to his student and says; "Ask me concerning all the doubts you have." Yehoshua responds: "My Master, have I left you for even one hour and gone elsewhere?" In other words, Yeshoshua suggests that there is nothing that he doesn't know. Everything that Moshe has learned, he has learned. All halakhot are crystal clear. The Gemara goes on to say that immediately, Moshe passed away, and Yehoshua forgot "three hundred laws and there arose in his mind seven hundred doubts concerning the law." What a lost opportunity. If Yehoshua had submitted to the humanness of not knowing, how much more would he have ultimately been able to learn?

The ability to say "I don't know" is immeasurably greater than the fear of humiliation. When a person candidly admits his lack of knowledge, he presents himself as a person whose words can be trusted, since when he does not know something, he is not afraid to admit it. When we admit that we don't know, we convey a lack of arrogance.

And yet, even though Moshe and Rashi both exhibited the ability to admit ignorance, the humanness of not knowing is hard to profess. And so, as the Gemara advises, we must proactively:

דאמר מר למד לשונך לומר איני יודע

Teach your tongue to say I do not know! (Talmud Brachot 4a)



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.