



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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The Stigma of Fame

People are motivated by many things. The search for pleasure is certainly one of the great motivators of human beings. So are the search for power and the search for riches. There are also those among us who seek to be liked by others, to the extent that the search for adulation is their primary motivation in life.

Others, and this is particularly true with religious people, hope for a place in the World to Come. For them, a vision of eternity is a major motivation. Still, others devote their lives to the search for meaning, wisdom, or spiritual enlightenment.

For me, while all of the motivations listed above are interesting and deserve study, there is yet another human motivation that is more noteworthy: the search for fame.

We all know individuals who are devoted, sometimes even obsessed, by their urge to become famous. For them, just to be mentioned in a newspaper article

or to be glimpsed on television for a fraction of a minute is a powerful reward.

This particular motivation is hard to understand. Fame does not necessarily bring material rewards. Not every famous person is rich, nor is he powerful. Famous people are often not popular people; indeed, they are often disliked. And there are certainly no spiritual or intellectual achievements that come with fame. Furthermore, fame is notoriously fleeting. Yesterday's famous person often dwells in oblivion today.

Since the beginning of the *Book of Exodus*, we have been reading about Moses. Surely he is the most famous person in the Jewish Bible. Yet for him, fame was of no consequence whatsoever. He was not motivated by a need to make headlines, to be immortalized for all eternity, or even to be popular and well-known. He would be the last to be concerned if a weekly Torah portion did not even contain his name.

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Tetzaveh*, is the only one, since we are introduced to the newborn Moses, in which he is not mentioned by name. *Tetzaveh*, a Torah portion rich in all sorts of particulars and details, fails to mention Moses.

Long ago, some keen Torah scholar noted this fact and attributed it to a verse in next week's *parsha*, *Ki Tisa*. There, we read of how Moses pleads to God to forgive the Israelites who worship the Golden Calf. He says, "If You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the book which You have written."

May the Torah learned
from this issue of Torah Tidbits
אמי מורת' לע"נ

Helen Winkler a"h
חיה אסתר בת ישראל משה ע"ה
”ח אדר א”

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“Erase me from the book!” I have no need for fame. Insightfully, this keen scholar found *Tetzaveh* to be the book from which Moses was indeed erased.

I suggest that Moses learned how unimportant fame is from his personal experiences with stigma. For you see, just as fame is no indication at all of the genuine worth of the famous person, so too negative stigma does not reflect the genuine worth of the stigmatized individual.

One of the most perceptive observers of human relations was a writer named Erving Goffman. Almost fifty years ago, he authored a classic work entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. There, he describes the psychology of stigma and of how society assigns negative labels to people, spoiling or ruining their identities as valuable members of that society.

A person who has suffered from being stigmatized learns how meaningless the opinions are that other people have of him. Should he shed these stigmas and gain the positive opinions of others, he would know full well how meaningless those opinions are.

Moses was a stigmatized individual earlier in his life. Goffman distinguishes three different varieties of stigma, and all three were experienced by the young Moses.

The first of these conditions, Goffman termed “abominations of the body.” Physical deformities result in such a stigma. Moses had such a physical deformity; he stammered and stuttered.

The second condition, Goffman called “blemishes of individual character.” In the eyes of the world, Moses was a fugitive, a criminal on the run, who was wanted by the pharaoh for the murder of an Egyptian citizen.

Finally, the third source of stigma: “tribal

identities.” Moses was a Hebrew, a member of an ostracized minority.

In contemplating what the life of Moses was like in the many decades he spent as a refugee before returning to Egypt as a redeemer, it’s clear that he suffered from a triple stigma: fugitive, stutterer, and Jew.

I suggest that one of the greatest achievements of Moses, our teacher, was his ability to retain a sense of his true identity, of his authentic self-worth, in the face of the odious epithets that were hurled at him.

This is how, in his later life, when fame and prestige became his lot, he was able to retain his self-knowledge and eschew fame. This is what enabled him to say, “Erase me from the book...” This is why he was able to not only tolerate but to value this week’s portion, where his name is not mentioned.

“The man Moses was humbler than all other humans.” (*Numbers 12:3*) The deeper meaning of Moses’ humility was his ability to understand himself enough to remain invulnerable to the trials of stigma and insult, and to remain equally unaffected by the temptations of glory and fame.

When we refer to Moses as *Rabbenu*, our teacher, it is not just because he taught us the law. Rather, it is because he told us how to remain impervious to the opinions of others and to value our own integrity and character. It would be wise to be his disciples in this teaching. ■

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