

If you've spent any time at all online or even reading editorials in the newspaper, it won't be foreign to you, but in case you've never come across it, I want to tell you today about the "the Humble Brag". It has become about as ubiquitously annoying as pretty much any newly created term in the past 5 years. Couched in subtle, perhaps self-deprecating language, the humble brag is a unctuous way of championing yourself while not coming across as overly self-righteous.

As a recent article in the Atlantic put it, "It is a boast in sheepish clothing, *kvelling* dressed in *kvetch*. And, like nearly all forms of multi-tasking, the drive to satisfy two goals at once typically results in double-failure." People want others to simultaneously feel impressed and sympathetic toward them but mostly they come across as disingenuous and self involved. In a way, it could be a

symptom of a social media driven society, one that is constrained by character limits and short attention spans that requires us to pack in as much density to simple statements as possible. Whatever the reason though, it comes across as incredibly ingratiating and somehow continues to grow in usage!

An extension of this has been uptick in usage of the word “humbled” to describe moments of success in life. It was something I noticed in people’s speech and then came across in a recent New York Times Magazine article. In it, they quoted from Lincoln’s first political announcement in 1832 where he said the following:

“I am young and unknown to many of you,” “I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life.” If the people of his county saw fit to elect him to the Illinois State Legislature, he said, “they will have conferred a favor upon me, for which I shall be

unremitting in my labors to compensate.” Lincoln’s humility would become legendary, setting the standard for a certain kind of political persona: a figure from the “humble walks of life” offering devoted service to the public. But the humble part, you’ll notice, came first: As a self-educated frontier jack-of-many-trades, he was humble to begin with, not humbled by his own political success”

Of course we all know you can learn humility through years of practice and intentionality. Ideally, it’s a value we were all taught as children or hopefully learned as adults. But what Lincoln’s phrasing suggests is that humility should come first-An anachronistic “I’m not worthy.”

We don’t generally conceive of humility as something we feel when we’ve been honored or celebrated. In fact, the opposite generally happens and it’s not, in and of itself a bad thing. You feel

good. Your pride swells. Your ego grows. Assuming you can reign it in and harness it, there's nothing inherently wrong with that.

However, if you paid attention to the way folks speak these days, you could argue we are living in the humblest of times. People are humbled all over the place. Lately it's pro forma — possibly even mandatory — for politicians, athletes, celebrities and other public figures to be vocally and vigorously humbled by every honor awarded, prize won, job offered, record broken, pound lost, shout-out received, “like” given and thumb upped

But, when you start to throw around “I'm so humbled” when you're awarded with something, it rings hollow and perverts the true meaning of humility. Oh yeah, also, it's wrong. To be humbled is to be brought low. You can be humbled by a particularly difficult life event that reminds you of your fragility or diminished stature. Or

you can be humbled by the awe-someness of something in nature---think seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time or perhaps, dare I say it, feeling the Divine Presence in your life.

Yet, through a quick read through or viewing of any tv show you'll find humbled more being used as a verbal pat on the back, an I'm-so-proud-of-myself kind moment.

So how do we get back to that level of actual humility and veer away from sanctimonious piety? The answer, my friends can be learned...from one little Aleph.

The first word of Parshat Vayikra is unsurprisingly Vayikra. But when you look at it in the scroll, you'll notice that the Aleph at the end of the word looks very different, as it's in much tinier printing than the other letters. And God spoke to Moses-a seemingly innocuous sentence, once that is repeated over and over again in the

Torah. Yet, beneath its surface, there is something much more meaningful going on. There are a number of small and letters in the Torah. Each of them in their small little packaging contain an immense amount of Rabbinic commentary because hey, what's the more Rabbinic than coming up with 100 interpretations based on one small letter?

In our case here, I want to share with you a teaching of the Ba'al Haturim, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher from Medieval Spain. In this verse, he claims this aleph is an allusion to an intimate conversation that Moses and God shared as Moses was transcribing God's Torah.

According to the midrash, God was dictating the text of the Torah to Moses. When he arrived at the words in question, "And then God called to Moses," Moses hesitated.

"Who am I that God should call me?" asked Moses.

Moses emended God's words to read *vayiqar* - ויקר. Leaving off the aleph changes the meaning from "And then God called to Moses" to "And then God happened upon Moses" as if by coincidence. According to this midrash, Moses, in his abundant humility, wanted posterity to assume that it was a chance occurrence that God called to me and not some special designation.

But God insisted that Moses write the aleph. For God, it was important that generations know that God called to Moses. Moses, in his abundant humility, asked permission to write this alef smaller than all the other alefs in the Torah. Thus, the aleph we see in the text is a compromise between the two positions.

Our sage Moses, the paragon of humility embodies it right here. Even though he has the whole backing of the book of Exodus and his long and arduous journey to support him, he doesn't want people to think that he is, any way, special or overly chosen for this role. Or perhaps he's battling his own ego a bit and needs the reminder that all of this could just be by happenstance.

No matter what the underlying theory is, this belief of Moses flies in the face of the humble brag. Even at this point, he has much to pat himself on the back for. Yet instead he wants to nullify himself from the equation.

With perfect balance, we too need to strive for this... to make space for Godliness in our lives, we need to diminish the "aleph" that is our own ego. The "I" that gets in the way of serving "You." So



often our own obsession with the self impedes on our ability to serve others. We live in a culture of selfies and the celebration of individualism. We celebrate and reward certified egomaniacs in our celebrity culture and in our politics. Moses's story reminds us that the key to his leadership was his humility. That's what made him qualified to be called.

Yet, the 2nd part, where God and Moses compromise is the crucial pivot point and also where it gets sticky, because becoming overly humble can also be dangerous.

To remove yourself, the essence of who you are, from your being is problematic and God knows this at the moment. God didn't allow Moses to deny his critical role in being God's partner in this world. God cannot go it alone. The almighty, the Holy Blessed

One, needs something from us. This is what Heschel calls the "mysterious paradox of faith - God is pursuing man." Heschel writes, "It is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and God has chosen man to serve." We are essential partners in God's plan.

This is the duality in which we live. We have to remind ourselves that who we are shouldn't be the only thing we ever focus on. The other side of the coin though is to remind ourselves that we were put into this world to partner with God. The research shows that this notion of humblebragging has spread partly because people feel like it's an effective way to self-promote yet the study also shows that those humble braggers are highly denigrated.

It's fitting that this reading of the small aleph to open up Vayikra comes on Shabbat Zachor where we just read the

proscription to blot out Amalek. In the Torah, Amalek is a nation that preys on the weak and the vulnerable. In the Purim story, their descendant is hell bent on destroying the Jewish people. Our current world is replete with supposed leaders who continue in these nasty traditions.

The chasidic masters also see Amalek battling within us. In the verse Noah read earlier, Amalek attacks us “in our way out of Egypt,” mi’mitzrayim. While Mitzrayim is usually understood as narrow straits, Hassidic teaching calls it the “narrowness of the neck” which interposes between the mind and the heart. in the spiritual-psychological sense.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, picking up on this notes the following: Every Jew has to negotiate the narrow straits of one’s

internal “neck,” to overcome the material enticements, the emotional subjectivity, the ego and self-interest which undermine the mind’s authority over the heart and impede its influence on the person’s character and behavior.

The narrowness of the neck allows the humble brag to bubble forth too often. It prevents the mind from stopping the heart’s self-driving desires. But when we can practice making space for others and understanding that there is awe in this world greater than us, we can begin to break that bottleneck. Remembering is an active process. If we are constantly engaged in memorializing what they, the internal and external Amaleks, did and do, we are doing our part in making sure we don’t fall prey to the same insidious urges. May we all merit a world in which we have so many wonderful deeds to

shout from the mountain tops but may we also merit to have the  
wisdom and humility to keep some of them to ourselves!

Shabbat Shalom

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