

Shemot: Hero Worship

- Nisson Shulman.

The debate about history; does the great man mold history does history's inexorable flow create great men? Neither side, however, understand the Jewish view. What makes a people consider a person great? Not only what he does but what they see in him. Our standard of greatness throughout history has been the lamdan and the tzaddik. This speaks volumes about who the Jewish people are.

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Today we begin to read the book of Shemot. From today till next Simchat Torah, one name is repeated constantly. Moses, the Shepherd? prophet of Israel.

Moses looms, a giant amongst the great. The conditions of his birth under threat of the most terrible danger; his adoption by the daughter of Pharaoh, with his own mother as his nurse; his rise in the household of Pharaoh to great power and prestige due to his obvious gifts; his renunciation of all this, as he comes to the aid of the persecuted Jew, slays the Egyptian taskmaster, thus identifying himself with his people; and is forced to flee Egypt. His new life as a shepherd in the wilderness, where he is called upon by God to be His messenger in freeing God's people. His humility, his feelings of unworthiness, to fulfil his mission; his defiance of Pharaoh and the might of Egypt; his ascent to the mountain of God, where this man stood with the angels before the Almighty; his life as a shepherd again, this time of the difficult flock of the children of Israel, guiding them through the wilderness for forty years, judging them, teaching them, suffering through them; his disappointments, and especially the tragedy of his death where he saw Israel from afar, but alas, could not enter therein. That surely was a great man!

Philosophers for years have argued: Does the great man make the times, or do the times make the man?

Carlyle, Emerson, Nietzsche, maintained that the great man, by his intellect, personality, ability, changes the history of civilization.

Other philosophers, McCauley, Spencer, maintained that the march of civilization creates the great man. Tolstoy wrote his greatest work, War and Peace, to prove that even Napoleon the Great, was no more than a pawn in the inexorable march of civilization.

Both groups, however, fail to see one thing, pointed out by Jewish thinkers. What makes a people consider a person great? Not only what he does, but also what they see in him.

People say a man is great when he expresses their ideals. Why did the Romans make a hero of Caesar? because he possessed an ability that was their ideal.... He was a military conqueror. Why did Germany make a hero of Bismark? Because he was a strong diplomat and a ruthless politician. Why did our people make a hero of Eliyahu HaNavi? Because he loved justice and

was dedicated heart and soul to serving God. Why do we consider the Gaon of Vilna a hero of our people? Because he loved learning above all else in life.

If, then, the things which makes a person great is the way they express the ideals of a people, that he is what they would like to be, then the best way to know a people is to consider the character of its heroes, those whom it calls its great men and women.

Moses is the greatest man of our people. What did we see in him?
Hatred of oppression. VAYARE ITSH MITZRI MAKE ISH IVRI.

Love of justice. TZEDEK TZEDEK TIRDOF.

Mercy. The story of the lamb in the desert Moshe tenderly carried back to the flock and the watering place, after realizing its flight into the desert was in search of water.

Humility – VEHAISH MOSHE ANAV MEOD.

Readiness to sacrifice for his ideals and for his people – VEIM AYIN, MEHENI NA
MISIFRECHA ASHER KATAVTA.

We call Moshe great because he possessed character of the sort we admired. But that is not all about Moses. We call him RABENU, our teacher. He taught us the wisdom that comes from the Lord, and that, especially, made him great.

Moses was the Jewish ideal, the key to Jewish aspiration. From him we can see the traits the Jews admired and for which they dedicated themselves, heart and soul: Righteousness, and learning.

All of Jewish history proves that. Observe our Jewish heroes, and see that almost all of them have two characteristics. The LAMDAN and the TZADDIK. That is what Jews strove to be. These were their heroes. That is the key to the Jewish soul of the past.

What are we like now? What is our present character? What kind of souls do we possess today? The answer is: Whom do we honour today; whom do we consider "successful?"

Many still revere the LAMDAN and the TZADDIK, but many more now consider heroes people who made fortunes, or people who excel in politics, in secular government, or people who were honored by Gentiles. The old standards are lost somehow, and replaced by something of far less value.

One of our formidable tasks is to reinstate the LAMDAN and the TZADDIK as heroes of our people for future generations. It appears to me that on such a rearrangement of values depends the spiritual life or death of many of our young people.

To me it appears that we can still find it in our hearts to admire the people who came from LAMDANIM and TZADDIKIM. And if we can, then there is hope that we can regain these

ideals for ourselves or our children.

If we are truly successful in rebuilding the spirit of Judaism here in this country, how shall we know it?

There will be one test of our success. Whom shall we then call great? If the many Jewish people here hold as heroes its men of moral character and intellectual attainments, its LAMDANIM and TZADIKIM, then, and only then, shall Jewish life have returned to its old ideals.

We shall be truly Jewish when we admire and imitate, our Vilna Gaon, our Eliyahu Hanavi.

When once again we call Moshe RABENU. For the heroes of a people reveal its ideals. Its great men mirror its soul.
