

“Respect Has Got to Be Mutual”
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I must say that I am not a big fan of the Academy Awards. To me these awards are not unlike the Espy awards which were created to shower our already egocentric athletes with even more accolades. In fact, I find that just like the SAG Awards or the Golden Globe Awards, this industry is obsessed with self-importance and iconoclastic self-indulgence and I don't quite understand why we are all so obsessed with all of their egomania and narcissism. As if fame and money were not enough, now we have to get together and watch every move they make, every facial expression, nuanced hand gesture and lipstick color. Not only do we spend nearly four hours watching them congratulate themselves for a job well done, we now arrive an hour early to see who came with whom, who is wearing what, and who is talking to whom.

Don't get me wrong, I love the theater, I love movies and I love television. I think these medium share important stories. They provide inspiration, they describe the human condition in ways that are enlightening and they elevate society. Not all of it, but as a whole they do. I am often moved by what I see and, as well, I appreciate the craft of acting. I do value the art of acting and I get pleasure from watching people who are really good at what they do. There are people who move us with their performances, and they should be commended on their capacity to do this to us. That is why I was pleasantly surprised by how the best actor nominees were introduced around midnight.

Each introduction was delivered in a very elegant manner and with soft tones, speaking not only of their person but their performance as well. The “Best” actor had been expanded from accolades over a specific role to just short of a lifetime achievement award. The standards seemed to shift in just a small but perceptible measure - and I was impressed. Each of the nominees had an approving colleague who offered what appeared to be heartfelt admiration for the person and not just the performance. The introductions seemed to come from somewhere deeper than a script, they seemed private and special - and I was moved. We were treated, not just to the nominee but to the presenters as well. You could hear the admiration and the appreciation for the craft as well as the person. It was well worth the four-hour wait. In an evening filled with many shallow observations, superficial glances, and snide comments, it was just a sincere moment.

In this morning's reading we are offered a similar moment. Please join me while I turn to pages 568 and 569 of our Humash. Once the work of the tabernacle has been completed, Moses turns to the people and blesses them. Can you imagine that? After all of the aggravation they've caused him, Moses blesses them. Even through the insurrections, the complaints about food and the golden calf and after all of the disappointments and frustration, he turns to the people and says, “good job.” He may even have gone so far as to say, “I am proud of you.” Moses doesn't respond by ignoring the achievement and I know it is hard to hear tone with a text. I imagine a sincere congratulations is delivered. I don't hear any of the sarcasm that we all hear so often in our lives today. I hear genuine love, admiration and maybe even pride.

I believe the Rabbis of the Midrash are listening in the same way as when they offer the comment on the bottom of page 568. When they say, “May it be God’s will that the divine Presence rest upon the work of your hands.” These are the words with which Moses blessed the people. Moses isn’t holding on to the fights, the disappointments, and the frustration. No, Moses has moved on and I am forced to ask, “How?”

Then it dawned on me. Please turn back to page 564 where Moses has collected the donations for the construction. Moses has asked and he has received the gifts of the hearts of the people. Numerous times we see the words *kol nadiv libam*, “they gave what they wanted to.” They voluntarily gave to Moses and when he receives these gifts, I say he receives them. He accepts their gifts and it is more than enough. He takes it in, but he really takes it in. When they offer their gifts, he accepts them, but he really accepts them. He adds them up and does the accounting. As you can see on the bottom of this page, the rabbis suggest that Moses is careful to account for every contribution so there would be no misappropriation of funds, but I believe there is something far deeper going on.

Last week I spoke of the mistakes we all make and the missteps we all take. Today, I am talking to you about truly receiving each other. So, Moses steps back and says to himself, “Look at the many blessings and the bounty of our lives. We are a nation of former slaves wandering the desert and yet we are still blessed with surplus. In so many ways, we are deficient and lacking, but oh, how blessed we really are.” This comes from how well we are able to accept gifts offered from an authentic, deep and committed place. What a blessing it is to open ourselves up and accept these gifts!! Then, in response, we too can offer a gift or a blessing.

The relationship between Moses and the Jewish people is unique. It is not like the relationship we have with our leaders of today, but it is a model from which we can learn. Too often we hear about political leader after political leader accepting gifts unethically. We have, in my estimation, a disproportionate number of elected officials who behave badly and are not deserving of the praise or even the offices they hold. I imagine they will all be held accountable.

So, I understand that some of our leaders let us down. I wish the mutual respect that Moses and the Jewish people had for each other was replicated today in our society. So easily, they disappoint and so do we. I ask you today not to learn a lesson about leadership – it is far too complicated. Today, I ask you to learn a lesson about how we relate to each other as people, as members of a community, as friends and as a family.

We must be prepared to offer these gifts of admiration, respect and love and, in response, we must be ready to accept them as well.

Please join me on page 361:

True Love is always free.
I did not merit it
That God call me
From the infinite void
To give me life

And adorn me
With His image,
Enabling me
To think and dream,
To feel and serve.
I did not merit
The love of those who raised me
All lavished love on me
Beyond my deserving.

When I rise
To higher love
I, too, shall bestow it free.
Love is the soul's answer to God,
Calling me to be like Him.
The gift of love nourishes the world.

Ben Zion Bokser

Shabbat Shalom!