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Thinking back to high school, one clear image comes to mind: a small paperback book with a tattered cover. I must have read every page of Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes by Edith Hamilton. First published in 1942, (no, I was not in high school in the 1940's), it sold into the millions of copies. Countless students have schlepped this around in backpacks and perhaps read at least some of its pages.

And why did Hamilton's book come to mind? Because this week I encountered a familiar Greek myth:

There once was a blind seer named Tiresias. When Liriope, a Greek water nymph, gave birth to her son, she came to Tiresias asking, "Will my son live to be a ripe old age?" Tiresias replied, "He will, if he shall not know himself."

This was a somewhat puzzling answer to come from a wise Greek man, for one of the great Greek aphorisms was "Know thyself," written on one of the most important shrines in ancient Greece.

Time passed and Liriope's son grew into a beautiful shepherd boy. One day, he leaned down to drink at a quiet pool in the woods and saw his own reflection. As he drank and quenched his thirst, another thirst grew – he saw a form, a face and he loved what he saw. He fell in love for the first time in his life. He reached down to touch the beautiful face in the pool and it disappeared. And so he could not tear himself away from the pool to eat and there he eventually perished. What was left in his place was the white and gold flower we know as the narcissus. Yes, the shepherd boy was known as Narcissus.

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In the words of author Simon Blackburn, “selves are everywhere. I myself and you yourself are but two of them . . . we talk of self-abasement, self-awareness, self-belief, self-control, self-denial, self-disgust, self-esteem and so on through the alphabet, past self-hatred and self-love to self-respect, self-searching, self-trust. . . . “

Certainly a healthy sense of self is a good thing, but the story of Narcissus cautions us against its life-sapping force.

But here is the rub with narcissism – who among us would admit to it? As Blackburn points out in his book Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love, “selfish people need not be particularly self-conscious: indeed, sublimely selfish people are typically unaware of their elephantine footprints.”

So what is it that guards us against narcissism? What is the Jewish response to this Greek, Roman and now 21<sup>st</sup> century dilemma?

The antithesis of narcissism is found in this week’s parashah when we read a brief verse, less than ten words long, which is quietly sandwiched in the drama:

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו [עֲנָיו] מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה

The man Moses was very humble more so than any other man on earth.

This verse comes immediately following the dramatic scene when Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses. According to RASHI, the quintessential biblical commentator, Moses is called humble because he is patient. And the midrash tells us that this patience led Moses to refrain from responding when he overheard Aaron and Miriam speaking about his wife and about him. This is an interesting commentary on the correct time and place to hold one’s tongue.

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Considering the mitzvah of “speaking up,” Will wished that Aaron had not held his tongue in stopping Miriam from leading the brother-bashing.

The drama that follows this verse features God calling out Aaron and Miriam and condemning them what they did to Moses. The RAMBAN, another medieval commentator notes that Moses’ refraining from confronting his siblings is what led God to take Moses’ side and to rise to his defense.

So we see from the commentators that patience and restraint are certainly characteristics related to humility. But what else is it about Moses that keeps him grounded in humility and guarding against the narcissism that we see in so many powerful leaders?

One answer to that question may be found in later rabbinic literature known as *musar*, or the ethical literary tradition that emerged in the medieval period. A specific genre of rabbinic literature emerged in which ethical nuggets, embedded in previous works, were collected into anthologies for study by those who sought to hone their ethical behavior in the world.

One such work known as *Menorat Ha Maor* – The Lamp of Light, uses a seven-candle motif to outline seven areas of ethical growth. The seventh candle, some would say the most important candle, is devoted entirely to the character trait of humility. In the introduction to this section, we find a rabbinic disagreement about whether the trait of humility trumps other character traits:

After listing a long list of positive character traits, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, says, “חַסִּדּוּת - *hasidut* is the greatest of all of the traits.”

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Now *hasidut* is a difficult Hebrew word to translate. Perhaps the best way to translate it is “quietly doing the right thing.” One English translation is “piety” but unfortunately in English, the word “piety” carries some negative connotations. Not so in the Hebrew word *hasidut*, but perhaps it is best translated here at “quietly doing the right thing.” So Pinhas ben Yair says, “‘Quietly doing the right thing’ is the best of all traits.”

But Rabbi Joshua ben Levi says, “Humility is the greatest trait of them all.” Rabbi Jacob ben Elazar says, “Just as wisdom crowns a person’s head, humility encircles a person’s ankle.”

Most of us, when we see a person, are more likely to notice his/her head and then notice their ankles. While the ankles may seem unimportant visually, we can’t be ambulatory very easily without them. The humble ankle as it were, makes it possible for us to use the rest of our body in as full a way as possible.

Just as all of our body parts work together to make it possible to move, so too do our character traits function together, using our heart and mind and body in the fullest way possible. The rabbis are teaching us that without humility, we are not morally complete and we will not function as fully in our interactions with other human beings and with the world around us.

This is what Moses had – he had the anklet of humility as it were and because he had this, he had all of the other character traits that Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair listed: thoughtfulness and deliberation, spiritual purity, purity of body cultivates holiness and ability to avoid wrongdoing. The fundamental proof text for humility is our verse from this week’s portion: The man Moses was very humble more so than any other man on earth.

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So how do we do it? How do we aspire to be like Moses as the Talmud and the musar literature instruct us to do?

We can take a few cues from some surprising excerpts from Blackburn's book:

1. **A caution against overconfidence.** Blackburn tells us: "Self-esteem is not a single warm bath with a single temperature measure. It is at best an aggregate of a whole different raft of specific valuations of one's own abilities, talents or capacities." He points out that while most of us perceive that narcissism does not apply to us, overconfidence belongs to almost all of us. His data surprises us: 95% of British drivers rated themselves above average driver. Another study shows: 94% of professors rated themselves as better than average college professors. People say they are 100% percent confident of being right on tests on which they are in fact only 78% of the time.

Back to Moses – Midrash tells us that Moses had a speech impediment. He was a reluctant leader. He had plenty of self-doubt and this kept him humble. We are cautioned to not be over-confident.

2. **A caution against self-absorption.** It is part and parcel of narcissism. Moses didn't have it – he had too much responsibility for a community to have it. Being a part of a community helps to guard against self-absorption – another of my favorite quotes from the Blackburn book: "Religious practice is a kind of social yoga that cements and fortifies our aesthetic and moral stances toward our lives and the world we live in." I love this image – every time we are in community with others,

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expressing the values and the ethics that represent the best of who we are, we are strike another yoga pose that unites us as a Jewish community.

I close with sharing a wonderful Hasidic teaching that Rabbi Chai shared with us this past week. It highlights the value of seeing God in every human being. The alef, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, represents God and it is present on the face of every human being. So when a person beholds another, and sees the alef, he/she will continually keep the idea that God is in every human being. He or she will not easily go astray from these important values.

But as we behold each other, let us not look at a reflection of the alef in our neighbor's face but rather the alef itself. Because if we see the reflection of an alef, as we would when we look down into the pond, as Narcissus did, the alef will be backwards. We will not see the essence of the human being in front of us but will behold our own reflection, a backward alef. And then, we will only be seeing ourselves and our needs instead of the living human being and God's presence in front of us. As we walk our life path, let us be mindful of Moses' voice urging us to humility in all we do. Shabbat Shalom.