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חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

The planks that formed the walls of the Mishkan were 10 *amot* long, according to Exodus 26:16. Assuming that an *amah* is 18 inches long (the low end of the halakhic range of values), this means that the carpets that formed the ceiling and roof of the Mishkan needed to be lifted into place at least 15 feet above ground.

Not an impossible feat by any means. For example, the carpets might have been attached to ropes and winched into place by a team of oxen. Or the planks might have been lain on the ground, and the carpets placed on them. When the planks were raised into place, again likely by oxen and pulleys, the roof and ceiling would have been raised into place automatically.

However, a hyperliteral reading of Shemot 40:18-19 tells a different story. Mosheh first assembled and raised the walls of the mishkan. **Afterward**, he spread the ceiling and then the roof over them. Assuming that these actions were all done by Mosheh personally, it follows that he was tall and strong enough to manipulate huge carpets more than 15 feet above ground. On Bekhorot 44a, Rav uses this argument to conclude that Mosheh was at least 10 *amot* tall.

אמר רב:

משה רבינו עשר אמות היה,

שנאמר:

ויפרש את האהל על המשכן,

מי פרשו - משה רבינו פרשו,

וכתיב:

עשר אמות אורך הקרש

אמר ליה רב שימי בר חייא לרב:

אם כן, עשיתו למשה רבינו בעל מום,

דתנן:

גופו גדול מאבריו או קטן מאבריו!?

אמר ליה:

שימי [את]?! באמה של קרש קאמר.

Said Rav:

Mosheh our Teacher was ten *amot*

as Scripture says:

He spread the tent over the Mishkan.

Who spread it? Mosheh our Teacher spread it,

and it is written:

ten cubits the length of a plank.

Said Rav Shimi bar Chiyya to Rav:

If so, you have made Mosheh our teacher blemished,

as a Mishnah is taught:

(Among the blemishes that disqualify a *kohen* for Temple Service are:)

"If his body is larger than his limbs or smaller than his limbs"!?)

Rav said to him:

Are you Shimi?! What I said was in plank-*amot*.

Rav's initial argument is straightforward, but every line of his subsequent dialogue with Rav Shimi seems mysterious. In what way does making Mosheh taller imply that he was disproportionate? And what are "plank-cubits"?

Rashi explains that an *amah* can be measure either objectively or subjectively (the length of a forearm). Rav Shimi initially thought that Rav meant that Mosheh was ten times as tall as his forearm was long, which would certainly have made him disproportionate. Rav responds that he meant that Mosheh was 10 objective *amot* tall, just as the planks were, but that his limbs were proportionate.

This reading seems to make Rav Shimi's question absurd. Rav's proof was that Mosheh must have been as tall as the planks, so obviously he meant objective *amot*!?

The Talmud records at least three other such dialogues between Rav and his grandson Rav Shimi bar Chiyya bar Rav. In each of them, Rav Shimi objects to a factual claim made by his grandfather, who prefaces his response with "Are you Shimi?!" (The *את* is missing in our text, but present in the version in Yalkut Shimoni and one manuscript.) Rav then explains that either he or his proof-text has been misunderstood. The most directly parallel case is Menachot 29a, where Rav declares that the Menorah was only 9 *tefachim* high (maximum value = 3 feet). Rav Shimi objects that according to Mishnah Tamid 3:9, the priest who serviced the menorah stood on a rock that was three stairs high! Rav responds that he was referring only to the height of the Menorah above where its branches began.

It's unclear to me whether Rav's preface "are you . . ." is intended to praise or put down his grandson. (Rabbeinu Gershom records a tradition that Rav did not look at other people and so had to identify them by voice, in which case it would be neutral. But Rashi convincingly rejects this on the ground that Rav never refers to anyone but his grandson this way.) Perhaps Rav meant to praise Shimi generally but claim that this question was uncharacteristically weak.

On Nedarim 38a Rav Yochanan appears to assume the truth of Rav's statement, and the Talmud seems to find another ground for objection.

אמר ר' יוחנן:
אין הקדוש ברוך הוא משרה שכינתו אלא על גבור ועשיר וחכם ועניו,
וכולן ממשה.
גבור –
דכתיב: ויפרוש את האהל על המשכן,
ואמר מר:
משה רבינו פרסו,
וכתיב: עשר אמות ארך הקרש וגו'.
אימא: דאריך וקטין!
אלא מן הדין קרא, דכתיב:
ואתפוש בשני הלוחות ואשליכם מעל שתי ידי ואשברם,
ותניא:
הלוחות - ארכן ששה ורחבן ששה ועביין שלשה.

Said Rabbi Yochanan:
The Holy Blessed One rests His Presence only on the gibor, wealthy, wise,
and humble.

All of these are derived from Mosheh.

Gibor –

as Scripture says:

He spread the tent over the Mishkan.

and a Master said:

Who spread it? Mosheh our Teacher spread it,

and it is written:

ten cubits the length of a plank.

But maybe he was tall and narrow (and therefore not a gibor)!

Rather from this verse, as it is written:

“I took hold of the two tablets; I threw them from my two hands;

I shattered them”

and a beraita teaches:

“The tablets were six long and six wide and three thick.”

The anonymous Talmud here suggests that the lack of proportion was not between torso and arms, but rather between height and width. Mosheh was giant but puny. This also seems absurd, as it requires not only height but strength to lift and spread out a massive carpet. The Talmud however takes the suggestion seriously, and derives Mosheh's *gevurah* from a different verse.

On Shabbat 92a, the Talmud has a third discussion of Mosheh's height.

אמר רבי אלעזר:

המוציא משאוי למעלה מעשרה טפחים - חייב,

שכן משא בני קהת.

ומשא בני קהת מנלן?

דכתיב: על המשכן ועל המזבח סביב,

מקיש מזבח למשכן;

מה משכן עשר אמות - אף מזבח עשר אמות.

ומשכן גופיה מנלן? –

דכתיב עשר אמות ארך הקרש

וכתיב ויפרש את האהל על המשכן.

ואמר רב: משה רבינו פרשו.

מכאן אתה למד: גובהן של לויים עשר אמות.

...

דילמא משה שאני,

דאמר מר: אין השכינה שורה אלא על חכם גבור ועשיר ובעל קומה.

Said Rabbi El'azar:

One who carries something out (on Shabbat) above 10 tefachim is liable,
as that was how Bnei K'bat carried (the Mishkan and accessories).

From where do we know that Bnei K'bat carried above 10 tefachim?

As it is written: “[the cover of the gate was on the Mishkan and the altar around”

which compares the Mishkan and altar:

just as the altar was 10 amot, so too the altar was 10 amot.

From where do we know the Mishkan itself?

as it is written: ten cubits the length of a plank.

and Scripture says: He spread the tent over the Mishkan.

and said Rav: Mosheh our Teacher spread it.

From here you learn: The height of the Levites was 10 amot

...

But maybe Mosheh was uniquely tall,

as a Master said: The Divine Presence rest only on the gibor, wealthy, wise,
and tall.

Here height replaces humility as a condition for the Divine Presence, and is a necessary condition independent of *gevurah*. Rabbi El'azar claims that all Levites were as tall as Mosheh, but the Talmud seems to reject this on the ground that there would be no purpose in making them so tall, whereas Mosheh's height was necessary for the Divine Presence to rest on him.

Later commentaries resurrect Rav Shimi's question. If the purpose of excluding the blemished from the Temple Service is to prevent visual distraction, wouldn't superhuman height, however well-proportioned, be a blemish? This might be why we prefer to have all Levites be that tall. Some contemporary commentaries even try to argue that at 15 feet, the Levites in the Wilderness were only slightly taller than the average person of their time.

There are ideological countertraditions. The Divine Presence rested on Sinai because it was not high and mighty, neither tall nor *gibor*. Perhaps Rav Yochanan deliberately replaced “height” with “humility” on the list of qualifications for the Divine Presence, and reinterpreted *gevurah* from physical prowess to conquering one's own urges.

Rav's tradition puts Mosheh Rabbeinu's greatness obviously beyond our reach and grasp. Rabbi El'azar suggests that the same is true of all the Levites of that generation, and maybe of all people then. Perhaps Rav Shimi and the anonymous Talmud, and maybe Rav Yochanan, contend that such claims are definitionally false. Superhuman greatness is a disproportion or even distortion, and allegedly superhuman role models are distractions rather than inspirations.