Human dwarfism is an autosomal recessive disorder caused by the expression of a gene located on the long arm of chromosome 2. The disorder is medically referred to as microcephalic osteodysplastic primordial dwarfism and is phenotypically characterized by a visibly short stature, disproportionate body growth, a sloping forehead, prominent eyes, and small ears. Occasionally, mental retardation is also associated with the disorder. Various hair and skin abnormalities and a marked, steep base at the skull are other common features.

Due to the unfavorable consequences of this disorder, the Gemara felt the need to draw our attention to it. Bechorot 45b states that the opposite of a giant is the nannas, which means “dwarf.” According to the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Targum Yonatan in Leviticus 21:20, the Biblical term, “dak,” refers to a dwarf. The Gemara also stipulates certain laws and offers some advice with regard to dwarfs. Neither the giant nor the dwarf is permitted to serve as a priest. This is due to the fact that a defect in height was considered to be a blemish, and such a person was therefore unfit to serve in the Temple. Additionally, an abnormally tall man is advised not to marry an equally tall woman, “lest their offspring be like a mast.” Comparatively, a male dwarf should not marry a female dwarf, “lest their offspring be a thimble” [2].

There are several notable dwarfs in Tanach including Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4:14, the dwarf-like stature of Pharaoh is described. Arvit, the scribe, said in the name of R. Akiva: “The Pharaoh of Moses’ days was one amah tall. His beard was one amah long, and his male organ was an amah and a zeret.” Rabbi Yitzchak Alerstein attested that this description of Pharaoh’s stature does not reflect what Pharaoh actually looked like. Rather, when the Torah describes a person in a way that is beyond realistic biological constraints, it refers to the essence of the person. In other words, the person would, in fact, have the abnormal appearance described if not for the physical limitations of the common body image. This unrealistic and undesirable image describes the hidden Pharaoh, whose nonphysical traits may be invisible to an onlooker. Alternatively, although Pharaoh was not actually “one amah tall,” he was, nonetheless, very short and considered a biological dwarf according to Chazal [3].

There are several instances in Tanach where Nebuchadnezzar is also clearly identified as a dwarf. In Daniel 1:14, Haham states that Nebuchadnezzar was the smallest person ever to be appointed as a ruler over a kingdom. The Midrash in Yalkut reaffirms that Nebuchadnezzar was, in fact, a dwarf. Additionally, the Tanna D’Bei Eliyahu Rabbah (31) states that when Nebuchadnezzar went from province to province, the populace would mock him for his short stature saying, “Does this one rule from one end of the earth to the other?” People were shocked by the incongruity between Nebuchadnezzar’s great power and his short physical stature. Additionally, on three separate occasions, G-d complained of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, “See what this dwarf from Babylon has done to Me!” (Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 13:42).

Dwarfism can have an interesting psychological impact on the affected individual’s personality. Studies have shown that very short people sometimes develop a “Napoleon complex,” characterized by the drive to gain power and control others [4]. This “short-man syndrome” usually develops at an early age and is the result of constant ridicule and bullying by peers. Short people tend to be less materially successful than taller people and, therefore, feel the need to exert their control [5].

The psychological need of short people to appear as powerful individuals is especially seen in the egotistic complexes of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. Tanchuma Vayeira states that there were four people who deemed themselves as god-like: Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Hiram, and Joash. Shemos Rabbah explains that Pharaoh was willing to endure pain in order not to defecate during the day. Pharaoh believed he could trick the Egyptians into thinking that he was a powerful Egyptian god. In Megilla (11a), Nebuchadnezzar is described as a “haughty” and “short” tyrant. Interestingly, in Devarim Rabbah (1:5), the haughty Nebuchadnezzar is quoted as...
having said, “All the inhabitants of the earth are reckoned for nothing.”

It is apparent through analysis of Tana'ch that Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar presented with dwarfism, a physical pathology that may have contributed to their evil personas. Pharaoh, the nefarious ruler that enslaved the Jewish nation, was obsessed with having a god-like appearance, and only relieved himself at night as stated in many complementary sources of Shemos. Comparatively, Nebuchadnezzar, the evil tyrant that initiated the first exile upon his destruction of the First Temple, was known for his marked egotism, as he ruled from “one end of the earth to the other.” We may conclude that these powerful dwarfs exerted excessive control to compensate for the insecurities they felt about their physical make-up. As such, it is likely that the psychological phenomenon of the “Napoleon Complex” contributed to the great plight of the Jewish nation during countless marked periods in history.

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