



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS

Pirkei Avos - Perek 4 Mishna 4

TRUE HUMILITY

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

Sometimes the most obvious things are the hardest to see, or accept. As a young student in Yeshiva, I heard many a Mussar Shmooze about the evils of arrogance. Everyone knew it do be a bad trait, and no one would admit to such a sin. Yet, well there it was, all about us, and at every level.

Personally, my closest mentor (HaRav HaTzadik Rav Naftali of Bobov Ztl) taught one of the greatest lessons on this subject to me, and as so much else he did, without the structure of any classroom. It was a chol hamoed Pesach, and I was attending a tish by the Bobover Rebbe zt"l. There was a huge crowd and everyone sought to get a good place. The Rav sat at the long top table, surrounded by family and learned guests. I was standing behind Rav Naftali who was sitting close to his father the Rav. All of a sudden there was a sort of murmuring that seemed to come from the back of the hall. A guest had arrived, a well-known figure, the son of a respected scholar. The fellow sat himself in the back. As soon as the Rav heard of his presence, he called out that the honored fellow should come up front and take a seat at the head table. The stranger demurred, "Ach...such honor, please I'm not worthy of it." Those who knew the Bobover Rav will understand that the situation could not be left in such a way. "My friend, if not for your honor, sit next to me in honor of your forbearers."

It was then that my teacher took my hand and whispered, "Reuven, there will be times when you will be meant to sit at the top table, it is a greater show of humility that one takes his seat up front quietly. With all this fanfare the fellow only draws more attention to himself, and that is certainly not humility." Like everything else, these whispered remarks were meant to teach me something, something that would hopefully guide me in the future.

Humility is a complicated subject, one that must be visited at many levels. The human being is a complex creature that needs to feel

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secure and wanted. No one seeks to be shoved aside or made to suffer indignity. We need to foster within ourselves a positive self-image, for without it we become depressed or worse. So, where does healthy self-image end and arrogance start? The answer is that one has nothing to do with the other.

The Ruach Chaim points out that Moshe Rabbeinu was the humblest of men yet he never suffered from a lack of self-esteem. Quite the contrary, Moshe stood up to an entire nation during the incident of the golden calf and withstood an attempted coup by Korach and the elite of the nation. The Chovos Halevovos explains that humility is defined as lacking a feeling of greatness, this despite one's knowledge of his own talents and achievements.

The first step towards humility must be a true understanding of who you are. The Kotzker taught that "not only one who hates his fellow man is called a wicked person, one who hates himself is also called wicked." The Yid that seeks truth understands that he draws his esteem from Hashem. Again, the words of the Kotzker can help in understanding this, "It is proper for a man to believe that his deeds are important and beautiful in the eyes of Hashem, for through this belief he will prepare more and more good deeds.

But precisely the opposite is true if he believes he is far off from Hashem, that his deeds are unimportant to Him because they are not totally pure. Heaven forbid, such a notion can lead to a total self-distancing from Hashem, and this is exactly the advice of the evil inclination, the yetzer hara. About such a state of mind, King Solomon has said, "do not be overly wicked." We therefore face a dilemma, and so it should be. Finding one's way through the quagmire that is often one's emotions is one of the most vital tasks we have. If we realize that there are goals to be reached, and problems that need facing, then we are rectifying that which is false and finding Hashem within our daily lives.

There is a sensitive tension that surrounds a Torah living Yid, and this is how it was meant to be. Spiritual achievement carries with it the dangers of an inflated ego. The Kotzker remarked on the Torah passage, "And Hashem came down over Mt. Sinai" (Shemos 19:20), that Chazal tell us Hashem chose Mount Sinai as the place to give the Torah because it is the lowest of all mountains. "If this be so, that the mountain's virtue is simply its humility, then why didn't Hashem give the Torah in a valley? The reason is simple: to be on the level of a valley without any spiritual height, and not to be arrogant, this is no remarkable thing. But to be on the level of a mountain, with spiritual elevations others might boast about, and yet not to be arrogant - this is a remarkable accomplishment."

The Rebbe Reb Bunim of Peshischa spoke of the delicate psychological balance needed to be a true servant of Hashem. "Every Jew must have two spiritual outlooks at his disposal. One tells him, 'I am dust and ashes' (Bereishis 18:27). This means that when a man has risen to a spiritual height, and the evil inclination then coaxes a man towards arrogance, he should recall what he is, and where he will end. The second outlook we must have is that 'Each man is obligated to say, for me the world was created' (Sanhedrin 37a). This is necessary when the evil inclination wants to coax us into depression." These are the dual forces that we must each reckon with, juggling them about, and meaning it in one's heart.

This Mishna speaks sharply to this point. "Rabbi Levitas of Yavnah says: Be exceedingly humble in spirit, for the anticipated end of mortal man is worms." The Sfas Emes notes that in the original Hebrew the words for "exceedingly" are "meod, meod" which are placed in the beginning of the sentence rather than at the end, which would be the usual manner. This shows that one must exert every effort to remain humble throughout one's passage in life, no matter what circumstance one finds himself in. It can also be showing the dual forces that the Peshischa spoke of, and where one's mortal end will ultimately be. The double "exertion" needed is because there will always be that tension when one will be tempted by

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his ego.

We are Blessed with Holy teachers who are giants in every sense. Anyone who has had the merit of seeing a Torah leader up close will testify to his humility. This is one of the hallmarks of true kedusha. We must learn from them, working out within ourselves the many barriers that keep us from actualising our own true humility.

I will end where I began, in the precincts of the Bobover Rebbe Zt"l. Everyone knows that he was a giant in the realm of modesty and humility. I recall once, when I was a young Rabbi holding my first position, the phone ringing. "Hello?"

"Rav Rubin?" Came the reply,

"Yes, who am I speaking to?"

"This is Shlomo Halberstam."

I couldn't place the name, brain freeze ensued and my mind went blank.

"Excuse me, who?"

Again, the same reply, "Shlomo Halberstam" gently, with a tone of friendship.

After a bit of hedging the caller said, "This is Shlomo Halberstam from Bobov."

I was so taken aback; I stumbled, words falling all around me. Here was one of the greatest leaders of our generation calling me, the smallest "nuch shlepper," and without any sense of entitlement, simply telling me his name.

One last blink into that world of his humility. As a young bochur I was granted the merit of serving as a conduit for the Rov's wishes regarding the yeshiva students. Once there was a bit of a problem. Two bochurim wanted the honor of helping the Rov put on his coat. This became a cause celebre, with each fellow fighting his opponent for the mitzva. The Rov was embarrassed by it all and asked me to speak to the two litigants. Giving me instructions he said, "I can understand that because my father was a great tzaddik they may well want to honor his memory by assisting his son. But my father would have never wanted any anger to have a place in his community, so I ask them please, for his sake to stop."

So gentle, so real...you just knew it to be coming from a source of true humility.

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