

CHAPTER 2, LAW 3(B) - ARROGANCE VS. SELF-AWARENESS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"There are certain character traits which a person is forbidden to accustom himself in, even in moderation. Rather, he must distance himself to the opposite extreme. One such trait is haughtiness. For the ideal path is not that one be humble ('anav') alone; he must be lowly of spirit ('shefal ru'ach'), and exceedingly unassuming ('rucho nemucha'). Likewise it is said of Moses that he was "very humble" (Numbers 12:3) -- not merely humble. So too did the Sages command us: "Be exceedingly lowly of spirit" (Pirkei Avos 4:4 (<http://www.torah.org/learning/pirkei-avos/chapter4-4.html>)). The Sages likewise stated that one conceited in his heart has denied G-d, as the verse states: "Lest your heart grows haughty and you forget the L-rd your G-d" (Deut. 8:14; Talmud Sotah 4b). The Sages stated further, "Damned if one has arrogance... even partially" (Talmud ibid. 5a)

Last week we began discussing the evils of arrogance. The Sages condemn it in the strongest terms. One who values himself above all else lives in the center of his own universe. The more he serves himself and pumps himself up, the less he serves G-d. Thus, unlike virtually all other areas, for which moderation is the best policy, there is no room for haughtiness in the world of religion. We either live in a G-d-centric universe or a man-centric one. You either serve G-d or you serve yourself; there is no middle ground.

There is, however, a glaring contradiction in the Rambam's writings. In the previous chapter, the Rambam listed many traits, including arrogance, and stated that the middle path is the ideal one for "all the qualities known to man" (Law 4). Even more explicitly, in Law 5 the Rambam distinguished between the wise man ("chacham") and the pious one ("chasic"). Whereas the wise man pursues the middle path in all his ways, the pious one inclines closer to the extreme of piety or asceticism. The Rambam proceeded to illustrate this with the quality of arrogance, stating that whereas the wise man distances himself from arrogance moderately, the pious one does so to an extreme. And this, stated the Rambam, is considered piety beyond the letter of the law.

Further -- as if we need any more proof -- in the previous law of this chapter the Rambam described the cure for one who is too conceited. He must treat himself like a doormat, allowing himself to be disgraced -- and then he should return to the middle path, which is the proper one.

So the contradiction just cannot be missed. Up until now the Rambam has made it clear that arrogance is a trait like all others -- which much be practiced in moderation, not shunned to an extreme. Today, however, the Rambam insists that we not exhibit one iota of this wicked trait. To state it inelegantly, what in the world is going on?!

The answer is actually quite simple. We must distinguish between our own personal attitude about ourselves and our behavior within society. As we explained above, our personal self-image must be entirely self-effacing. There is no room for imagining we're god, for swallowing up the gifts G-d has granted us and pumping ourselves up on their account. We are not better than our fellow because we were born with more brains or talent. They were gifts from G-d, handed to us at birth through no effort or worthiness of our own. For in the eyes of Judaism, there can be no truer statement than that all men are created equal.

Yet even so, this basic recognition must not impact on our behavior within society. As self-effacing as I am within, I must carry myself about knowing my place in society and the world. Likewise, the Rambam earlier, when describing the cure for the conceited, advised the sufferer to degrade himself by doing things such as sitting in the least honorable seat and wearing worn-out clothes. And afterwards, such a person should return to the center. And this is because Judaism believes in a strongly hierarchical society. We must be keenly conscious of our place in the world and our role within our surroundings. Children are instructed to honor their parents, students must revere their teachers, and Jews must comport themselves among the Gentiles knowing they represent G-d's wisdom and morality to the world.

The Talmud (Sotah 5a) while discussing the evils of arrogance, quotes what seems a dissenting opinion. It states that the Torah scholar must possess "an eighth of an eighth" of pride. Clearly, this opinion does not dispute the Talmud's overall condemnation of arrogance. It does, however, introduce a critical counterbalance. If you want to be taken seriously -- both you and the Torah you teach -- you must carry yourself about as a Torah scholar. You know your scholastic abilities were a gift from G-d -- ones you hardly developed to the potential with which you were blessed. Yet to your students you are master. You must demand their attention, you must oversee their development, and you must see to it that they respect the bearers of the Torah -- for by doing so they respect the Torah itself -- as well as its Giver.

The Talmud likewise states: "Whoever holds back his student from serving him, it is as if he denies from him kindness" (Kesuvos 96a). It was likewise said of the Chofetz Chaim (R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, considered one of the greatest rabbis of 19th-20th century Jewry) that when he would visit other towns, the community would parade him about and make a great fuss over him. (An old Jewish practice was to unhitch the horses of the visiting rabbi's coach so that the townspeople could themselves reverently usher the rabbi in. There was one alleged incident in which two rabbis were visiting, arriving in the same wagon. Each slipped out himself to pull the other rabbi, the result being that the townsfolk found themselves dragging along an empty carriage. (I'm sure the horses had a good laugh.) :-) Anyway, the Chofetz Chaim permitted them to honor him so -- knowing that they were serving G-d showing honor to the Torah -- but would sometimes burst into tears during the course of it all, knowing (so he believed) how personally undeserving of such honor he actually was.

Thus, the resolution of our contradiction is actually fairly straightforward. Whatever you think of

yourself within, you do a disservice to your children, your students, and the world at large by disgracing yourself to an extreme. As a matter of fact, you do the same disservice to yourself. If you treat yourself like a shmatta ("rag" in English -- it doesn't really translate), sooner or later you're going to think of yourself as one as well. There is no room for arrogance within, yet neither is there for openly carrying yourself about like a born loser. We must know who we are and what we represent, and to a very small extent (as the Talmud put it, to 1/64th), we must see to it that the world takes note.

(Needless to say, the task of demanding respect where it is due is daunting to an extreme. As I heard R. Berel Wein once put it, if you have to actually remind others that you deserve their respect, the battle is basically lost already. No one who asks for respect ever receives it (except in the most illusory fashion). You must somehow earn others' respect without actually demanding it. The Talmud (Eiruvim 13b) was not kidding when it said that one who pursues greatness will have it flee from him, while if he flees it it will pursue him. The Talmud likewise, after quoting the "eighth of an eighth" opinion, quotes another sage as saying (in these words almost exactly) "damned if you do and damned if you don't." This, as many matters in Judaism (and life), is no small feat.)

At the same time, as the Rambam earlier stated, there is room for extra piety in this area. If I feel my mission in life is best fulfilled through self-effacement, through privately and unassumingly lowering myself beneath my deserved place in society, so be it. This is not the way of the wise, but there is room for such devoutness. For the most part, however, as aware of our shortcomings we must be, we must carry ourselves about proudly (if not arrogantly) knowing our role in society and the entire world.

I'd like to make one more brief point before we conclude. There is another type of "humility" which the Rambam does not discuss but which should be mentioned before we move on. There is a form of false humility which although often referred to in English with the same term is actually quite a different animal: low self-esteem. A person suffering from this does not recognize his talents at all. He sees himself not as a unique creation of G-d, endowed with the talents to fulfill his unique mission in this world. But rather, he sees himself as too poorly-endowed to be of very much good. He wastes himself, likely wallowing in self-pity wishing he had someone else's talents or mission in life.

Such a shortcoming did not even enter the Rambam's discussion. This is not "humility" -- recognizing one's talents but realizing they come from G-d. It is pitiable self-delusion. And there is no more room for this in Judaism any more than there is for arrogance. Perhaps even worse than imagining your talents are yours and not G-d's is failing to recognize you have talents in the first place. I am a nobody; I cannot fulfill any mission in life -- and so I won't even bother trying. Such an attitude is not only wrong; it is tragic. It is a tragic waste of G-d's most valuable and precious possession in this world -- a human being. And as humble as we must be regarding ourselves, we must never lose sight of the fact that each and every one of us is G-d's priceless creation.

Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and **Torah.org**