

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 4: DUST AND ASHES

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh said: Be extremely lowly of spirit, for the end of man is worms.

This week's mishna advises us to be humble, "lowly of spirit." We should not be excessively proud of ourselves or our talents. We certainly must not identify too strongly with that little bit of flesh into which G-d breathed our souls, "for the end of man is worms."

Our mishna's language strikes us. Be extremely lowly ("me'od me'od" ("very very") in Hebrew). R. Levitas does not mince his words. Go to an extreme; treat yourself like dirt. Consider yourself and your body as the rotting carcass it will one day become.

And this should strike us. Judaism (in spite of a perhaps fundamentalist image) is not a religion of extremes. It does not preach poverty, celibacy or self-flagellation. It even instructs us (from a theological standpoint) to care for our health. Thus, we would expect the Torah to foster a more balanced attitude towards our physical halves and our self images. Shouldn't we see ourselves as important and potentially great individuals? Aren't our bodies worthy and divinely-constructed tools to be used in the service of G-d? Won't such crushing self-denigration demean us and sap us of our self-confidence? Should we really view ourselves as nothing more than eventual food for worms?

To explain, I would like to back up a bit. Let us first better define the arrogance our mishna decries. We will then be able to distinguish between true, healthy humility and a crushing, debilitating sense of worthlessness.

The Sages view arrogance as virtually the antithesis of everything Jewish. The Talmud writes that a person who is conceited is as one who commits idolatry, and that G-d says to such a person: "He and I cannot dwell together in the world" (Sotah 4b-5a). The implication is that one who is vain -- who is full of himself -- has left no room for G-d. He commits idolatry in that he worships himself and his own qualities -- failing, of course, to realize that it was G-d who blessed him with his talents to begin with.

Further, such a person is guilty of "stealing" from G-d, priding himself for qualities which are truly not his own. As my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) often points out, any skills or natural aptitudes which were basically granted to us at birth cannot truly be considered "ours". We did nothing to earn them; they are direct gifts from G-d -- and ultimately His possessions. Our own small part in them is only in realizing our potential, the degree to which we humbly make good the trust G-d has invested in us.

Maimonides (Mishne Torah Hil' De'os [1:4](#)), while discussing proper character traits, states that ordinarily the golden middle is our best approach to life. One should not be too lustful or too ascetic, too cheap or too extravagant, too sullen or too frivolous. Nevertheless, there are two exceptions to this golden rule -- one of them being humility (ibid., [2:3](#)). We must go to the extreme in self-effacement and the avoidance of ego.

And the reason for this is that arrogance is not just a matter of a single bad trait. The more a person is the center of his own world the less likely he will be capable of forging a relationship with G-d. To do so requires that we give up a little of ourselves. If we recognize the G-d who entrusted us with our abilities, we can begin to repay that G-d and make good His trust. The arrogant person, however, focuses on himself alone. He has robbed G-d, so to speak, of the talents he was blessed with. He thus lacks the most fundamental component for building a relationship with G-d. In fact, the good deeds he does perform may be doing no more than increasing his pride and haughtiness -- further distancing himself from G-d, rather than bringing him closer.

But there is something far more subtle here. Most sins and negative character traits are easy to spot. Anger, miserliness, rashness, apathy: we (or at least others) generally know full well when we suffer from such. Arrogance, however, is a far more cunning animal: it is protean. (Depression is also an elusive one, but for another discussion...) A great rabbi (I believe it was R. Moshe Sofer, of 18th-19th century central Europe) once remarked that signs of humility may themselves be a form of arrogance. I think this can best be illustrated with a classic Jewish joke.

The scene was the synagogue shortly before Kol Nidre services on Yom Kippur eve. The mood was tense, palpably so -- the strong feelings of remorse over past deeds, anxiousness to get going with the services. The full solemnity of the day weighed heavily upon the congregation. Suddenly, the rabbi, no longer able to contain himself, rushes up to the ark and cries out "Ich bin a gornisht! Ich bin a gornisht!" ("I'm a no one! I'm a no one!" -- that's Yiddish) and returns to his seat, just a little bit relieved. Shortly after, the shammash (sexton) takes the rabbi's lead and follows suit. Pretty soon the leading community members, then the average ones, all file up one at a time to cry out their own confession.

An itinerant beggar has meanwhile wandered into the synagogue and sat himself down on the back bench. Rather bewildered by all the commotion, he figures that this must be the synagogue custom or something, and so he too drags himself in front of the congregation and does the same. At that point the rabbi turns to the sexton and says, "Oich mir a gornisht!" (Poorly translated: "Who does he think he is calling himself a nobody?")

I was never a very good joke teller, and in that spirit I'll do the unforgivable: I'll **explain** the joke -- because I really want this message driven home. What was funny about the scene? Because when the rabbi or somebody "important" humbles himself before G-d he's **doing** something. In spite of his greatness he's admitting his smallness. And that admission, of course, makes him even greater. But

when someone who **really is** a no one humbles himself -- well, what good is that? What does he think he's trying to **show**?!

Another important counter example, not as funny but equally tragic, and one I've observed close up many a time. Say someone keeps to himself and refuses to receive honors (say during synagogue services - one I've certainly witnessed before). On the outside he might appear quite humble. But in truth, he's probably doing so as a way of feeling aloof from the crowd. Subconsciously he is saying: "Nobody knows the true respect I deserve. I don't want **them** to honor **me**. Better to be in my own world -- bitter at the lack of recognition I receive, rather than together in the world of others -- grateful for the good they do for me."

Such a person is in the center of his own self-centered world which leaves little room for others and certainly none for G-d. (And it requires a heck of a lot of willpower to wrest oneself from such a selfish little universe.) It matters little how many mitzvos (commandments) such a person is fulfilling and how much of the Talmud he has memorized. He is serving no one but himself.

Jeremiah expresses it simply but eloquently: "Thus says the L-rd: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, and let not the strong man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man glory in his riches. For in this shall he that glories glory -- understand and know Me... says the L-rd" (9:22-23). Good deeds in the context of building a relationship with G-d are invaluable. But used to raise myself up and look down upon others are acts of pettiness, selfishness, and ultimately of distancing myself from G-d.

Now let us return to our initial question. Arrogance may be all-consuming, but why must we go to the opposite extreme? Didn't we learn in the past that G-d willed it that no two people are alike, that every one of us is unique and can contribute to the world in a way no one else can? Our bodies might be dust and ashes, but aren't our souls formed of the breath of G-d Himself? Is such pathetic self-deprecation even healthy, let alone admirable?

I'll answer briefly this week -- this is a theme we will hopefully return to in the future. But in a word, the answer is that we must distinguish between humility and its far cousin -- low self esteem. Humility does not mean we must tell ourselves we are worthless or undeserving. Moses was called humblest of men (Numbers 12:3) though he most certainly knew he was the greatest prophet ever and lawgiver of the nation (and he certainly always found within him the nerve to take sinners head on when the need arose). Abraham referred to himself as "dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27) though there is no doubt he knew full well the pivotal role he was playing in world history.

Rather, humility means we see ourselves as full -- even proud -- members of humankind, possessing all the greatness and uniqueness this entails. Yet we are not aggrandized by such a notion. We humbly and solemnly accept our obligation. It was G-d who entrusted us with such talent and potential. We have much to live up to.

Low self esteem is too a lack of arrogance, but in a very different way. We are not full of ourselves, but it is because we lack a true recognition of our uniqueness and potential. One with low self

esteem may lack a healthy awareness of his uniqueness or might be subconsciously denying it -- in order to shirk the greatness he knows he can live up to. Neither alternative will help us realize our goal. Only if we recognize our greatness and the Creator from which it came, can we begin to turn "dust and ashes" into "the world was created for me" (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5).

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