

# CHAPTER 6, MISHNA 6: WAYS 34-36(B): THE HUMAN CHALLENGE - PART II

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Torah is greater than priesthood and kingship, for kingship is acquired with 30 qualities, priesthood is acquired with 24, whereas the Torah is acquired with 48 ways. These are: ... (34) distancing oneself from honor, (35) not being arrogant in one's studies, (36) not enjoying instructing others...***

Last week we began to look at the qualities of our mishna, all of them relating to the Torah scholar's avoidance of honor. As we saw, not only does the scholar not actively pursue honor, but he does not even take pride in his learning -- for he feels he is doing no more than required of him. Finally, he does not even **like** his position or the responsibility of admonishing others and rendering decisions in Jewish law. We also noted some of the sharp criticisms the Talmud levels against the arrogant person, how he is compared to an idolater and how G-d Himself states, "He and I cannot dwell together in this world." Arrogance seems to be the antithesis of everything Judaism stands for, and must be completely blotted out from our way of behaving and thinking.

We then asked if arrogance is really so bad altogether. Don't people have a natural need for recognition, to be noticed, for a little positive reinforcement? Any good teacher or parent knows what a valuable tool positive reinforcement is -- especially in the presence of others. Is that just feeding on the child's negative tendencies? And what about the simple desire to feel good about ourselves -- at least for our religious accomplishments? The scholar of our mishna is not even proud \*to himself\* for his Torah study! Is self-pride really so negative and unjustified? Isn't it human nature? In fact, how could the scholar **not** feel just a little bit proud of his achievements?

We quoted further the incident with R. Elazar son of R. Shimon who **was** overly proud of his Torah study and had nothing but a nasty remark for the ugly (read: sinful) individual he chanced upon. How was it that the rabbi -- for the perfectly understandable "fault" of being proud of himself -- slipped all the way down to nastiness and condescension -- the absolute antithesis of the qualities true Torah study is supposed to engender?

We read in Jeremiah (9:22-3): "Thus says the L-rd, 'Let not the wise man praise himself for his wisdom, nor the strong man for his strength, nor the rich man for his wealth. But rather for this shall he praise himself: comprehend and know Me... for this is what I want,' says the L-rd." The simple understanding of these verses, based upon the context, is that one should not reassure himself that his wisdom, strength or wealth will save him from G-d's exacting justice.

There is a deeper idea, however (heard from [R. Berel Wein](#)). One should not "praise himself" -- brag or feel pride -- because of his religious accomplishments. Don't think you're G-d's great gift to mankind because in your wisdom you mastered the entire Talmud, because in your strength you conquered your passions, or because you have a wing of a Jewish institution named after you. Don't think you've done G-d any great favors by doing just what He created you to do (if even that). Don't use your achievements to pump yourself up, becoming high and mighty in your vanity. That is a form of self-worship -- what the Sages call idolatry -- using even the good that you do to serve yourself rather than G-d. And there is no room for such an attitude in Judaism.

For one thing alone can we feel pride: for "knowing" G-d. How do we know G-d? By getting closer to Him and building a relationship with Him. If we use our mitzvos (good deeds) to pump ourselves up - - to make ourselves feel good, then in a way we are serving ourselves at the expense of serving G-d. If **I** am proud for what **I** have accomplished then I am self-centered, and if that is my primary focus it drives me away from G-d's presence rather than drawing me closer.

If, however, I perform the mitzvos because it is G-d's will -- in order to get closer to Him -- then I may feel pride. My pride lies in the ecstatic knowledge that I have connected with my G-d, the ultimate and infinite source of existence, and that I have **annulled** myself before His infinity. I feel great, but it is not **my** greatness; it is G-d's greatness which I have become a part of. And standing in G-d's presence is both humbling and crushing. Although it is an exhilarating and invigorating experience -- the one our souls truly crave above all else -- we enter G-d's presence with the submissive sense of our own smallness and insignificance. And in our emptiness and humility, we can truly be proud.

The Hebrew word for "honor", as used in our mishna, is "kavod". This relates closely to the word "kavaid" or heavy. One who seeks honor is "heavy" or full of himself. Rather than connecting himself to G-d, he weighs himself down -- increasing the distance between himself and G-d -- attempting to fill an empty soul with a selfish sense of independent worth. This is not possible. The soul's true worth is in that it stems from G-d and can condition itself to reconnect with its source. If a human soul feels its emptiness and insignificance, it can become truly great -- and become proud of itself in the process.

This is one of the great human challenges. There is an enormous and inborn human drive for honor - - not so much to lord over others (though that's a pretty darn strong one too) but just to feel we **exist**. As human beings who want to express our existence we need to accomplish -- to feel we are **real** people who create and make a difference in the world beyond. Yet doing for our own sakes is selfish and pulls us away from G-d -- towards what the Sages call idolatry. G-d instead challenges us: do it for G-d's sake. Use your deeds to move closer to G-d, humbling and negating yourself before His grandeur, rather than pumping up your own ego. If you do so, you make the ultimate sacrifice -- exchanging empty pride with humility and closeness to G-d. And by submitting and humbling yourself -- by swallowing your pride -- you have made the greatest sacrifice achievable -- and you have achieved eternity. And this can be your greatest source of pride.

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