

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 23:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Now on to the things we'd need to reflect on to be (and stay) humble. Recall, though, that we're referring to being piously and deeply humble, not simply modest, unassuming, and politely non-egotistical. The sort we're talking about is obviously a whole other order of humility -- one that touches the core and is deeply connected to our view of ourselves and our place in the universe. And it would require us to arrive at some heart-felt and even upending realization.

The first would be based on these bluntly stunning and truly upending words of Akavyah ben Mahalalel. "Know where you have come from-- a putrid drop (of semen); and where you're going-- to a place of dust, vermin and worms; and before Whom you're destined to give an account and reckoning-- the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He" (Pirkei Avot 3:1).

What that statement demands of us is that we take ourselves aside, realize our stark, dire albeit common mortality, our humble and abject smallness, and our utter dependence on G-d Almighty's judgment. (To be sure, it also points out the fact that, despite our lowly origins and end, still and all G-d takes us seriously enough to reflect on the station of our souls and to give us responsibility for it; but that's not the point at hand.)

Indeed, Ramchal asserts that taking this to heart "stifles all arrogance and helps foster (true pious) humility", and it leaves one "abashed and mortified". Imagine, he goes on to say, if you were "a pig-herder who (somehow) became a king". It would be impossible for you "to become arrogant (in your new role) if you remembered your origins". And you'd also "be humbled upon reflecting upon ... (your) ultimate destiny" despite your new grandeur.

For, despite your good fortune right now, in the end you too will "return to dust and become food for worms". "After all", Ramchal points out, "what is your greatness in fact if you're destined to the shame and mortification (that we all are)?"

So we'd need to take Akavyah ben Mahalalel's words to heart if we're to come to truly pious humility.

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