

BESTING YOURSELF

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

In explaining Moshe's character - such that he would not react at all to his sister Miriam's subtle slight, and, therefore, G-d Himself needed to come to Moshe's defense - the Torah testifies, "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth." (Bamidbar/Numbers 12:3) But this character trait is not reserved exclusively for a person of Moshe's spiritual fortitude. Pirkei Avos/The Ethics of our Fathers (4:4) encourages everyone, in the name of Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh, "Be exceedingly humble in spirit, for the anticipated end of mortal man is worms." What is the relationship between mortality and humility? And why does the simple pursuit of humility not suffice; why must we be "exceedingly humble"?

The Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities) elaborates that it is understood that there is no physical pleasure that can possibly reward the fulfillment of a mitzvah (Divine commandment). The Talmud explains that one moment in the Afterlife is more pleasurable than all of the pleasures of this world. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1891-1954; of London and B'nai Brak; one of the outstanding personalities and thinkers of the Mussar movement) explains that "all the pleasures of this world" does not simply refer to the all the pleasure one individual will experience through his lifetime, or even all the pleasure EVERYONE in the world will experience during that individual's lifetime. Rather, concludes Rabbi Dessler, "all the pleasures of this world" means all of the pleasures experienced by EVERYONE throughout the world THROUGHOUT HISTORY, from the beginning of time through eternity; all of that pleasure is less than the enjoyment of one moment of the Afterlife.

But, continues Rabbi Kagan, there is no real basis for comparison because the "currency" of the World to Come is inherently different than the pleasures of this world. Just as mitzvos are an accomplishment in the spiritual realm, fulfilled with the goal of enhancing our loving relationship with G-d, so too our reward for these mitzvos can only be spiritual. The ultimate reward for mitzvah is another mitzvah (Pirkei Avos 4:2); that is, one step taken toward strengthening the relationship with the Divine is rewarded with another opportunity to build that bond. Considering the eternal joy inherent in a relationship with G-d, any physical pleasure, even all the riches in the world, pales in comparison.

But there is one pleasure that straddles both realms: honor. While it is just as temporal - and, therefore, as meaningless - as physical pleasures, it is indeed a spiritual reward, made of the same

currency as that of the Afterlife. So while many people exhaust their resources of this world to achieve honor and prestige, it can also be acquired in lieu of the eternal. For if someone chooses to be rewarded for their mitzvos with honor and accolades for their great wealth or intellectual contributions, that payment is exchanged for remuneration in the Divine realm.

Thus, concludes the Chofetz Chaim, the Mishna in Pirkei Avos does not simply encourage distancing ourselves from tribute, but warns us to maintain great distance, to be exceedingly humble. Flee from honor as one flees from an inferno. Heaven forefend that we should discover at the end of our days that we squandered our eternity of thousands of opportunities for G-d consciousness for a relatively few fleeting moments of accolade.

How do we accomplish this? We are, after all, people of accomplishment. Are we to deny that which we have achieved?

We can learn well from Moshe himself. The Torah itself confirms that there was never another prophet like Moshe (Devarim/Deuteronomy 34:10), yet there was never anyone as humble as Moshe. How did HE encompass both traits? Notes Rabbi Kagan, specifically because of Moshe's relationship with the Divine did he realize and understand how small he truly was in comparison. We, too, have our own points of reference. In our moments of intellectual honesty, we appreciate that for all of our successes, we have many areas of weakness and shortcoming where others stand out. No one excels beyond his peers in all areas of life. Like Moshe, we will flourish when we are not worried about surpassing others, but are concerned only with outshining ourselves.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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Kol HaKollel is a publication of the Milwaukee Kollel Center for Jewish Studies 5007 West Keefe Avenue; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; 414-447-7999