

HUMILITY: ON THE SHOULDERS OF OUR FATHER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And now, O Israel, what does God, your God, demand of you? Only to fear God, your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him . . . (Devarim 10:12)

I am remaining with the topic of humility because it is also very relevant to these parshios, as well as the concept of kotzer ruach. As Moshe Rabbeinu will tell the Jewish people in this week's parshah, fear of God is the secret to staying loyal to God and maximizing one's portion in the World-to-Come. It works, not just because one becomes afraid to commit a sin, but because it results in humility. Humility is the secret to success on all levels.

The question is, what is humility? On one hand it is a very common idea, but on the other hand, it is also a commonly misunderstood idea, often confused with other more negative traits such as submissiveness.

Some of the most charismatic and boldest people in Jewish history have also been the humblest. Moshe Rabbeinu, one of the most charismatic people ever, was also the humblest man on the face of the earth. Pinchas, who boldly killed a prince of the Jewish people while zealous on behalf of God, was driven into action because of his intense humility.

Truth is humbling. The greater the truth, the more humbling it is. But not just any truth, but the Ultimate Truth, which is God Himself. It is awe that results in humility, and nothing is more awesome than God.

This is why at Mt. Sinai the Jewish people, when receiving Torah, were able to become completely unified as a people:

They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai Desert, and they camped in the desert; they (written: he) camped opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)

He camped opposite the mountain: k'ish echad, b'leiv echad—like a single person with a single heart. (Rashi)

The revelation of God was so awesome that it caused everyone to forget about their own personal lives and focus completely on the awesomeness of the moment. Personal biases and selfish tendencies became petty even to people who were normally petty.

Life itself is also very humbling. Take health, for example. As some have said, it's not a question of why we get sick, but of why we don't get sick more often. There are so many things that can go

wrong with our bodies:

Blessed are You, God our God, King of the universe, Who formed man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if even one of them ruptures, or if even one of them becomes blocked, it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You (even for a short period). Blessed are You, Hashem, Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously. (Blessing After Bathroom)

Especially as one ages. It is amazing that we can go about life as freely as we do, some well into their 80s and 90s.

Even if a fully developed human body never actually came to life it would still be a remarkable and awesome creation. Besides the organs, the muscles, and the tendons that comprise the more visible parts of a person, there is the incredible blood network and nervous system that gives it life and keeps it working quite harmoniously.

Furthermore, the fact that we can think at all, let alone logically, should take our breath away. And not only can we think, but receive stimuli and respond to them appropriately within crucial and often life-saving seconds. This is without all the massive amounts of wiring and circuitry associated with supercomputers that only perform a fraction of the brain's daily functions.

Yet, what transforms all of that from an incredible and phenomenally detailed piece of Divine craftsmanship into something that is authentically Godly is the mysterious "breath of life":

God formed man from dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a living soul, and the man became a living spirit. (Bereishis 2:7)

It is this Divine spark, that we receive at some point in the development process, that kickstarts our entire system and puts each one of us on a path towards an independent life.

Furthermore, it takes a significant amount of electrical energy from moment- to-moment to keep our bodies going all the years of our lives. Yet, we do not come with a plug and have no need to connect to any external source of power. Somehow our bodies have the ability to generate their own electric current, keeping the heart pumping and the brain thinking for many decades.

The smallest glitch can bring all of it to a either a partial or complete halt. Something goes down the wrong pipe and we choke. We eat bad food and our digestive system is negatively impacted. Something goes wrong with our blood system or nervous system and the damage can be drastic and long term. And such small glitches can occur so easily.

Though "billions" of things can go wrong with personal health, they don't because of another element that is far more important than the physical parts of our bodies working as designed. It is called Hashgochah Pratis, or Divine Providence, which at a moment's notice can turn a person's life upside down or right side up, depending upon the spiritual needs of the person. It is all very

humbling.

In short, humility is the result of a level of consciousness that a person can attain just by paying attention to the reality of life itself. This is what the Rambam teaches here:

What is the process for coming to love and fear God? When one contemplates His actions and His wondrous and great creations and sees in them His wisdom, that it has no limit and no end, immediately he will love and praise Him, and desire tremendously to know His great Name. (Yad Chazakah, Yesodei HaTorah, 2:2)

This is why people who are suffering often turn to religion. What might appear to more "successful" people as a copout, as a desire to explain away their troubles by associating them with the inexplicable, is actually the result of just the opposite. Suffering sensitizes a person to the gift of life which humbles the person to the point of being able to acknowledge and accept the greater truth that everything comes from God.

For example, a person who, God forbid, becomes immobile, even unable to feed himself, never brags about how he gets around or takes care of his basic needs. His dependency on others to help him get by is perfectly clear to him and everyone else.

However, the person who wakes himself up in the morning, gets dressed on his own and feeds himself before tackling his daily tasks, is easily fooled into believing that he is responsible for his own successes. The "intermediary" between his success and his failure, between his health and his illness, is invisible to him, making delusions about personal independence inevitable.

Rashi alludes to this at exactly the point in the Torah where the topic of Amalek, and therefore doubt in Divine Providence, is discussed:

He called the place Massah and Merivah, because the Jewish people argued there, and because they tested God by asking, "Is God amongst us or not?" Amalek came and attacked the Jewish people in Refidim. (Shemos 17:7-8)

The Torah places this section [of the attack of Amalek] immediately after this verse [of, "Is God amongst us or not?"] to teach [that God said], "I am always amongst you and ready at hand for everything you need, and yet you say, 'Is God amongst us or not?' By your lives, that 'dog' shall come and bite you, and you will cry for Me and then you will know where I am!" It is like a man who carried his son on his shoulders and went on a journey. The son saw an article and said, "Father, pick up that thing and give it to me." He gave it to him, and so a second time and also a third time. Yet, when they met a certain man along the journey, the son asked him, "Have you seen my father anywhere?" Therefore, the father said to him, "You do not know where I am?" At which point he put him down and a dog came and bit him. (Rashi, Shemos 17:8)

It might be difficult for a person to forget that he is physically sitting on the shoulders of his

physical father even for a moment. The heightened view alone is enough for a person to remain in touch with the reality that it is father who is carrying him through life.

On the other hand, it is extremely easy to forget that one is "sitting" on the "shoulders" of his spiritual Father, that God is the source of all of his success. This is because unless a person makes a special effort to see life with such a "heightened" view, it will look as if all that he can and can't do is a function of his own personal ability or lack of them. Hence the Talmud states:

All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of God. (Brochos 33b).

The meaning of this short but fundamental principle of life is much clearer in Hebrew, because the word for "fear" and "see" are related. Fear, or in this case, awe, is a function of what one sees in life, of how one perceives reality with his mind's eye. It is the result of "seeing" Heaven's involvement on every level of everyday life.

It is this level of "vision" that dictates a person's response from moment- to-moment to any given situation, be it aggressive or passive. Two people can look at the exact same reality, and yet only one may "see" the opportunity of the moment and "seize" it. The other person, oblivious to what is truly happening, rarely knows that he missed anything.

This is why one need not actually pursue the trait of humility to attain it. He must, however, pursue truth, Ultimate Truth, and grasp it to the best of its availability and his ability to understand it. Given that Torah can be learned on four levels—Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod—it is very available:

It is not in Heaven, so that you could say, "Who can go up to heaven and bring it for us, so that we can hear it and keep it?" Nor is it across the sea, so that you could say, "Who will cross the sea and take it for us, so that we can hear it and keep it?" Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it. (Devarim 25:12-14)

Thus, the deeper one's appreciation of reality, whether learned or intuitive, the humbler the person will become and the truer his actions will be. It is to this ultimate level of consciousness that the rabbis alluded when they taught:

[Rabban Gamliel ben Rebi Yehudah HaNasi] used to say, "Make His will your will, so that He will make your will His will. Annul your will before His will, so that He will annul the will of others before your will." (Pirkei Avos 4:2)

If even a significant portion of the population could reach this level of humility on its own, it would be kotzer ruach enough to bring the Final Redemption without any more suffering.

Text

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