

# HUMILITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*Beware that you do not forget God, your God . . . and you say to yourself, "It is my strength and the might of my hand that has accumulated this wealth for me." (Devarim 8:11-18)*

Kotzer Ruach, as explained previously, is crucial for redemption. It is a level of despair that cleans the slate of false beliefs and hopes and paves the way for clarity about just Who really saves. When all means of salvation have failed, it becomes clear that God was, is, and always we be the only real "Mover and Shaker."

However, this definition of kotzer ruach it certainly sounds like it is something to be avoided. It is, but that is only because it is the negative side of one of the most important and positive traits there are: humility.

It was Moshe Rabbeinu's humility that defined his greatness and made him trustworthy to God, as the Torah itself testifies:

*This man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth. God suddenly said to Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, "Go out, all three of you, to the Tent of Meeting!" And all three went out. God descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tent. He called to Aharon and Miriam, and they both went out. He said, "Please listen to My words. If there will be a prophet among you, I'll God will make Myself known to him in a vision. I will speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moshe. He is faithful throughout My house.(Bamidbar 12:3-7)*

Apparently the trait of humility is so important to God that it is associated with His own greatness:

Rebi Yochanan said: Wherever you find the greatness of The Holy One, Blessed is He, there you find His humility. (Megillah 31a)

This alone should tell us the importance of the trait. It's not as if God ever acts in a selfish way, or even has the potential to do so. Everything about God is, by definition, objective and righteous. He always works for the greater good, and He can't act otherwise because that would imply a flaw in His character which, as God, is impossible.

The opposite of this is self-interest which is what eventually results in all of the negative traits associated with man: pride, jealousy, hatred, etc. It is what allows a person to be blind to the truth of reality and take credit for that which duly belongs to God: everything.

The Torah warns against this:

*Beware that you do not forget God, your God, by not keeping His commandments, His ordinances, and His statutes, which I command you this day, lest you eat and be sated, and build good houses and dwell within them, and your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold increase, and all that you have increases, and your heart grows haughty, and you forget God, your God, Who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, Who led you through that great and awesome desert, [in which were] snakes, vipers and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; Who brought water for you out of solid rock, Who fed you with manna in the desert which your forefathers did not know, in order to afflict you and in order to test you, to benefit you in your end, and you say to yourself, "It is my strength and the might of my hand that has accumulated this wealth for me." You must remember God, your God, for it is He that gives you strength to make wealth, in order to establish His covenant which He swore to your forefathers, as it is this day. (Devarim 8:11-18)*

Thus humility is the foundation of any relationship with God. To the extent that a person lacks humility is the extent to which he ascribes greatness to himself, and to others whom he admires, that really belongs to God. He will take that which belongs to God and give it to men.

For some people they are so far gone down this road that there is little hope for them to change in time. No matter what God does to wake them up to their mistaken way of thinking they will not get the point. Therefore they are left to wallow in their confusion, becoming pawns in God's master plan for Creation.

But what about those people who can be taught otherwise through the events of their lives? What about people for whom a crisis is a reason for introspection, perhaps even to turn God?

God can work with people like that and does by intervening in their lives in a humbling way. He makes things happen for them, and to them, and around them, to push them in the direction of humility. He helps them make the transition to a more Godly way of thinking.

But who wants to go that route? On a lesser level it can result in unwanted humiliation. On a greater scale it can result in tragedy, death and destruction. How many times have the Jewish people been brought to the point of kotzer ruach through unwanted suffering?

Humility is never very enjoyable when it is imposed by others or through the events of our lives. It is much more rewarding when, on our own, we achieve humility through life itself.

An example of this might be someone who had a heart attack, and five years later, after recovering, is celebrating his 75th birthday. Feeling great and enjoying his guests he has forgotten how close he once came to death until, that is, his doctor showed up.

Until the heart attack the man had never known the doctor, but since his life-saving surgery they became good friends. The physician had overseen the man's recovery, and by the looks of the man, the doctor had done a good job.

"It's great to see you, Sam," the doctor says greeting his good friend and patient.

"David," the man replies with genuine enthusiasm, "thank you so much for coming. I know how busy you are saving people's lives, but it is really important to me that you are here."

"I know that," says the doctor warmly shaking the man's hand. "It was important to me as well that I come, and I have to say," he continues, "knowing how close you came to death that day . . . well, let's just say that it's great you survived and have recovered so nicely."

"And after God," the man said appreciatively, "I have you to thank for that."

But something about the way that doctor said what he had made the man feel a little uneasy, and made him ask, "But really, you never had any doubt, right? I mean, you deal with hundreds of heart attack patients each year and have a great record. I'm sure you knew I'd be fine."

The doctor paused for a moment as the smile left his face. "Not really," was all he said.

That comment caused the man's smile to leave his face as well, as he quietly asked, "What do you mean?"

The doctor paused again wondering if it was the right time to recount such a story, but after the man pressed him, he continued.

"Sam, you died that day on the table."

"What?" he said barely audible, as if the air had suddenly been drained out of him.

"At one point your heart just stopped . . . and we couldn't get it started it again," the doctor said with a tone that indicated he was reliving the scary moment.

"W-what happened?" the man stammered, overtaken by the revelation.

"Honestly, I don't really know," he said. "We tried the paddles . . . heart massage . . . everything I had in my bag of tricks . . . but none of it worked to get your heart again."

"B-but I'm here today . . . and I feel great . . ." he said rather feebly. "Something had to have worked in the end . . ."

"Your heart!" the doctor said humbly. "I mean, it just started on its own . . . someone in the room yelled out 'Oh my God' and your heart . . . just started working again . . . on its own. I had no idea what else to do."

The man looked at the doctor with a sense of dread in his eyes, shocked that he had never

heard the story before. "Why is this the first time you're telling this, David?" he asked contritely.

"I didn't want to tell you right after the surgery to avoid shocking you. Then the time just passed and you were getting better so it never occurred to me say anything after. Are you okay?"

"Yeah . . . fine . . ." the man said moving in the direction of the closest chair.

The man sat down, and the doctor sat next to him, saying, "I'm really sorry, Sam. I had no intention of telling you anything like this, especially today on such a happy occasion. I feel terrible."

The man, looking downward and in somewhat of a daze, thought for a few minutes. As he did, we went over the last five years of his life and saw them through the lens of near death. It all of a sudden occurred to him how different his family's lives would have been had his heart not started again "on its own," and what he would have missed.

Finally regaining his strength, he looked at the doctor squarely in the eyes and said, "No, David, you have done me a great favor."

The expression on the doctor's face showed that he did not know what the man meant, so he further explained himself.

"After my heart attack, and as I recovered, I gained a new appreciation of life. As you know, I changed my lifestyle and my attitude towards everything, but only as much as I thought I had to. A heart attack is a serious thing, I knew that. But I had thought that I had averted the worst of it, catching it in time, and would never have to confront it again."

He paused as he considered what to say next, and then continued, still looking the doctor in the eyes.

"And now you tell me that I am here today on my 75th birthday," he said scanning the people in the room, "having the time of my life with my wife, children, grandchildren, and good friends because I came back from the dead!"

In a moment tears welled up in the man's eyes as he began to cry. "I feel so grateful . . ." he voice tailed off as tried to maintain control. "So, so grateful . . ."

It is a humbling experience. The man had come very close to death and only by the grace of God had survived. Things he valued but which he had taken somewhat for granted became all important. Suddenly every moment he had lived since he came back to life again, even the ones he had taken for granted and had not used meaningfully, were treasured gifts. The knowledge had changed him for good, and for God.

It's a consoling thought to consider on Shabbos Nachamu.

## Text

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