

HUMILITY DOES NOT MEAN BELIEVING ONESELF TO BE A NOTHING

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 368, Don't Drink And Daven. Good Shabbos!

Humility Does Not Mean Believing Oneself To Be A Nothing

After the deaths of the two sons of Aaron, Moshe told Aaron: "Of this did HaShem speak saying 'I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me and I will be honored before the entire people.'" Aaron's reaction was silence. [Vayikra 10:3]

Rashi quotes the source [based on Zevachim 115b] for Moshe's assertion that G-d would be sanctified through those who were closest to him. The pasuk [verse] says, "I shall meet with the Children of Israel, and it shall be sanctified through My honor (v'nikdash b'kvodi)" [Shemos 29:43]. According to the homiletic interpretation of the pasuk, the word b'kvodi is not read as it is vowelized - "b'kvodi - through My honor". Rather, it is read as if it were vowelized b'kvoday (through those who honor Me).

The Gemara there elaborates. Moshe consoled Aaron by saying "I knew that this Mishkan [Tabernacle] was going to be sanctified through the death of someone close to G-d. I thought that it would be either you or me. I now see that they (Nadav and Avihu) were greater than either of us".

At first blush this seems very strange. Who said "I thought it would be either you or me, because we are the holiest ones here"? That is Moshe Rabbeinu talking -- the most humble of all men. How could the most humble person in the whole world say about himself, that he (or his brother) were the holiest persons in the entire congregation?

Rav Leib Chassman points out that if we think this statement is a contradiction to Moshe's humility, we are making a terrible mistake as to the definition of humility. If someone denies who he is, that is not modesty - that is foolishness!

A person who denies his own identity and talents is not humble. He is deceiving himself. An 'anav' [humble person] can know precisely who he is.

There is a famous story which illustrates this point. Rav Chatzkel Abramsky, zt"l, once needed to testify in a case in which the Beis Din of London was sued by a shochet [ritual slaughterer] who had been fired. As the head of the Beis Din, Rav Abramsky had no choice, but to testify in secular court. His attorney asked him to state his name and his position. The attorney then asked, "Is it true that you are the greatest living halachic authority on the European continent?" Rav Abramsky said, "Yes. That is true."

At that point the judge interjected and said, "Rabbi Abramsky, is that not rather haughty on your part? I thought that your laws and ethics teach you to be humble." Without any hesitation, Rav Abramsky responded, "I know we are taught to be humble. But I am under oath."

The point of this story is that Rav Chatzkel Abramsky was aware that he was the greatest living halachic authority on the European continent. Recognition of his true status was not haughtiness.

Rav Moshe Feinstein did not consider himself "an ignoramus". He knew that he was the posek [halachik authority] of his generation. Nevertheless, he was an extremely humble person.

What then is the key to humility? The key to humility is to remember that whatever a person has and is, is a gift from Heaven. "It is not my strength and the power of my hand that has wrought me this great wealth" It is not my brains. It is not my talents. It is not innate. It is all a blessing from G-d." A person remains humble by realizing and remembering that all of his achievements in this world are only through the good graces of G-d, and that he can lose them at any minute, G-d forbid.

There is a famous Mishneh at the end of Maseches Sotah that states that when Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the editor of the Mishneh) died, humility ceased. Rav Yosef in the Gemara questions this Mishneh and says that it could not possibly be accurate "For I am here". This comment of Rav Yosef begs for clarification.

I once heard a beautiful homiletic interpretation of this Talmudic passage. Rav Yosef was not saying, "I am humble. Therefore there are humble people around." He was saying something else. We learn elsewhere that Rav Yosef became blind. When he became blind, he forgot all his learning. This great Amora, Rav Yosef, whose opinion is found on so many folio of Shas, who learned so much, who taught so much -- this same Rav Yosef forgot it all after his illness.

Rav Yosef is saying is the following: Do not say that there cannot be humble people around anymore -- because I am around. As long as I am around, people can look at me and see what can happen to a person. Let them see that a person can be an Amora, know all of the Mishnayos, have hundreds of students and yet forget it all. If people bear that in mind, then there can still be humble people. For the key to humility is realizing that everything is a gift that can be lost at any time.

n The Way A Person Wishes To Go, That Is How G-d Will Lead Him

There is an interesting Medrash on the pasuk "Wine and strong beverage do not drink" [Vayikra 10:9]. The Medrash cites an incident involving an alcoholic. His addiction was so bad that he would sell everything he owned to support his habit. He ultimately even sold his own furniture and household utensils in order to buy wine. When his children saw what was happening, they decided that they had to do something dramatic to demonstrate to their father the destructiveness of his behavior.

When he was totally drunk, they tied him up and carried him out to the cemetery and left him there. They figured that he would sleep off his drunken stupor there, and upon waking in the morning, would see where he was, and become shocked by the fact that he found himself in a graveyard. Hopefully, he would thereby get the message that alcohol was killing him and would stop drinking.

The Medrash says that while he slept, a caravan containing barrels of wine passed by. Suddenly pirates approached to descend upon the caravan. The caravan had to speed away at a fast speed. In their haste, they allowed a barrel of wine to bounce off a wagon. It rolled into the cemetery and landed right near the head of the sleeping drunk father.

When their father awoke the next morning, he saw the barrel of wine next to his head and started drinking all over again until he was stone drunk once more. The children arrived at the cemetery the next morning and saw the situation. Frustrated, they said, "Even here, G-d does not allow you to break your habit. Since He gives it to you, we do not know what to do to counteract the Will of G-d." In other words "This is fate. G-d wants you to be a drunkard and there is nothing we can do about it."

What is the point of this Medrash? What is it trying to tell us with this story?

Rav Eliyahu Dessler writes that the lesson of the Medrash is that G-d helps a person do whatever he wants to do. In the way a person desires to go, that is how he is directed from above. If one wishes to become a righteous person, G-d will help him to become a righteous person. If one wishes to be an evil person, He will find ways to let you be an evil person. If one wishes to be a drunkard, G-d will provide him with a barrel of wine right next to his head.

But one might ask - don't we all want to be righteous people? Who does not want to be a Tzadik? Don't we all want to be Torah scholars? And yet we see that G-d does not make it so easy for us! So, Rav Dessler asks, what is the difference between the drunkard and us? G-d provided the barrel of wine to the drunkard, but we are not so easily provided with what we need to become righteous and scholarly. We sometimes find it so difficult to sit down and learn. We find it so difficult to daven (pray) with proper intent. We find that so many things that we want to do are so difficult for us to achieve!

The difference, Rav Dessler said, is that the drunkard was willing to sell his furniture, willing to sell every last thing he had for another drink. When the will is that strong, it indicates that the person REALLY wants something. When someone REALLY wants something, G-d makes it easy for him to

acquire it. Unfortunately, many times, our desire to do the right thing -- to learn, to pray, whatever it may be -- is not as strong as the will for the alcoholic to have their next drink.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Shemini are provided below:

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