

HUMILITY

ISSUE #19

JANUARY 2013

TEVET 5773

A young student walked into a beit midrash (study hall) and to his surprise, saw an older man sitting and reciting to himself "I am lowly. I am nothing. I am worthless." The young student, seeing this as pious, sat down and started doing the same "I am lowly. I am nothing. I am worthless." The older man interrupted him and said "How can you be so arrogant to think that you are so humble?"

Humility is an important character trait. It is a trait that we tend to notice in others and it is easier to get along with people who are humble not haughty. As we strive for humility, we may face the following questions:

QUESTION ONE

Does humility negate the self-confidence and self-esteem necessary to improve ourselves?

QUESTION TWO

If we are applying for an employment position or a spot on a team, is there a way to be humble while still "showing off" our qualifications?

QUESTION THREE

Should we be humble about our service of God and in teaching others about Jewish values?

Let's Examine the Sources

There are a number of people in the Torah and Tanach who were known for their humility. First and foremost, the Torah states that Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble person ever:

This man Moshe was extremely humble, more than any other person on the face of the earth.

Bamidbar 12:3

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנִיּוּ מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל
פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.
בַּמִּדְבָּר יב:ג

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Can you think of events in Moshe Rabbeinu's life that showed his great humility?
- 2) Can you think of events where Moshe Rabbeinu does not appear to be humble?

Humility and Personal Growth

The Talmud teaches us about another person who was humble. Commenting on the Mishna, *Sotah* 49a, that states that when Rebbi died, (genuine) humility ceased to exist, R. Yosef comments:

R. Yosef said to the recorder of the Mishna, remove the word humility because [humility doesn't cease to exist], I am still humble.

Sotah, 49b

אמר ליה רב יוסף לתנא לא תיתני
ענוה דאיכא אנא.
סוטה מט:

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think the Mishna states that genuine humility no longer exists?
- 2) How can R. Yosef state that he is the only person in the world who is truly humble? Isn't such a statement antithetical to humility?

There are two comments on the statement of R. Yosef which help shed light on what humility really is:

The trait of humility is not to be lowly in one's own eyes and be satisfied with one's lowly status. In fact, that is a terrible trait. Rather, the opposite is true. One should know and recognize that all of the positive qualities that one does have are not good enough and one should have a great desire for further improvement.

R. Shmuel Borenstein, Shem MiShmuel, Shavuot 5673

The meaning of humility is that one is not concerned about one's honor or disgrace, not because one sees oneself as lowly and thinks that they deserve this disgrace or lack of honor. Rather the meaning of humility is that [while one realizes one's own value,] one should act without any concern about one's honor. This is what R. Yosef meant when he said in Tractate Sotah "remove the word humility because I am still humble". In fact, it states in Tractate Horayot (14a) that in all the years that Rabbah served as the leader (R. Yosef was appointed as the rosh yeshiva of the Pumbedita Academy in the third century but deferred to Rabbah), R. Yosef did not even use his prominence to have a physician come to his home [as a favor, rather he went to the physician's workplace] ... even though R. Yosef knew that he was on the same level as Rabbah. He was never concerned about his own honor, and that is humility.

R. Naftali, T.Y. Berlin, Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar 12:3

והנה מדת השפלות איננה להיות שפל בעיניו ויסתפק בשפלותו שאין בזה שבח ואדרבה זה גרוע ביותר אלא להיפוך שידע ויכיר שכל מה שיש לו אינו כלום בעיניו ומוצא עצמו חסר ומשתוקק מאד להשלמה הרב שמואל בורנשטיין, שם משמואל שבועות תרע"ג

ומשמעות עניו הוא שאינו חושש לכבודו וצערו ולא משום שהוא שפל בעצמו ואינו מכיר בעצמו שאינו ראוי לזה הצער והעדר הכבוד אלא משמעות עניו שהוא מתנהג בלי חשש על כבודו והיינו דאמר רב יוסף שלהי מס' סוטה לא תיתני ענוה דאיכא אנא והוא כדאיתא שלהי מס' הוריות דכל שני מלך רבה רב יוסף אפילו אומנה לביתה לא קרא ... אף על גב שידע רב יוסף שהוא בערך רבה, מכל מקום לא חשש לכבודו והיינו ענוה. הרב נפתלי צ.י. ברלין, העמק דבר, במדבר יב:ג

Questions for the Table:

1. Do you think R. Borenstein and R. Berlin are giving two different definitions of humility or do the two definitions complement each other? Why?
2. Some people display haughtiness because of their own insecurity. How can the insights of R. Borenstein and R. Berlin help guide such a person?
3. Based on the comments of R. Borenstein and R. Berlin, what role does humility play when dealing with other people?

Humility in Relation to Other People

When we do something that we are proud of, we may want to tell others about our great achievements, but we don't want to seem boastful about it. How does one determine whether promoting our achievements is positive or negative?

Haughtiness is a despicable and vile trait and one should greatly distance oneself from it ... It is a trait that involves people criticizing other people, not for altruistic purposes, but rather out of haughtiness, jealousy, competition, and out of denial of any good in the other people. For this reason, it is said that one who is haughty is comparable to an idolater because one's jealousy and bad outlook will bring one to deny the truth on all matters in order to lower one's friend.

R. Menachem Meiri, Beit HaBechira, Sotah 4b

הגאווה מדה שנואה ומשקצת וצריך להרחיק ממנה הרבה ... והיא מדה שבעליה מתגאים על שאר בני אדם שלא לשם שמים אלא דרך גאווה וקנאה ונצוח וכפירת כל מעלה שבזולתם ועל זו נאמר כאן שהוא כאלו עובד ע"ז שהרי קנאתו ורוע טבעו מביאו לחלוק על האמת בכל דבר כדי להשפיל שכנגדו.
הרב מנחם מאירי, בית הבהירה, סוטה ד:

R. Berlin has a comment about modesty that also relates to self-promotion:

Modesty all depends on normal ways of the world. In day-to-day life, there are things that are normal to do in public to show off one's abilities and means. For example, a wealthy person who enjoys wearing expensive clothing may wear them in public and it is not a lack of modesty. However, vocally boasting is not acceptable and is contemptible ... The same applies to [observance of] mitzvot. There are some mitzvot that are acceptable and pleasant to do in public and boasting about them is contemptible. There are other mitzvot that even telling the public about them is contemptible, such as charity and kindness when the recipient is going to be embarrassed.

R. Naftali, Z.Y. Berlin, Ha'Amek She'eilah 3:4

ענין צניעות הכל לפי מדת דרך ארץ, שהרי גם בהויות העולם יש דברים שעושים אותם בפני רבים להראות כחזו ועוצם ידו כמו עשיר שלובש בגדים יקרים להתנאות בפני רבים ואין זה יוצא ממדת צניעות, אבל התפארות בקול גדול אין זה מתקבל וגם הוא מגונה ... וכמו כן במצות יש דברים שמתקבל ונאה לעשותן ברבים, ורק ההתפארות מגונה, ויש דברים דאפילו ההודעה לרבים הוא מגונה, כמו צדקה וגמילות חסדים שחברו מתבייש בהן.
הרב נפתלי צ.י. ברלין, העמק שאלה ג:ד:

Questions for the Table:

1. How can we use R. Meiri's comments to determine when it is appropriate to criticize someone for something they are doing wrong and when it is not appropriate? How does one honestly assess if one is relating to others out of humility or jealousy?
2. How can R. Berlin's comments be applied to someone who is applying for a position?
3. What further insights can we gain from these two sources as to why R. Yosef specifically stated that he was humble?

Humility towards the Almighty

So far, we have learned that humility doesn't require one to feel lowly. However, we do find a number of sources that seem to describe a requirement to feel lowly. For example, the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* states:

R. Levitas of Yavneh states: You should be exceedingly meek because the end of human life is worms (i.e. burial in the ground).

Avot 4:4

רבי לויטס איש יבנה אומר, מאד מאד הוי שפל רוח, שתקנות אנוש רמה.
אבות ד:ד

Question for the Table:

How can we reconcile the definition of humility that we presented earlier with the statement of R. Levitas?

A comment of R. Moshe of Coucy can help us understand what R. Levitas was referring to:

[The verse (8:11) states] "Be careful lest you forget the Lord your God." This is a warning to the Jewish people against becoming haughty when the Holy One Blessed Be He provides good for them and they say that it is their own profit that came about from their abilities and hard work and don't appreciate the good of the Holy One Blessed Be He because of their haughtiness ... This is a warning against someone becoming haughty about the gifts of God, whether they are materials goods, beauty or wisdom. Rather, one should be humble and lowly before God and other people and thank the Creator for these gifts.

R. Moshe of Coucy, Semag, Negative Commandment no. 64

השמר לך פן תשכח את ה' אלהיך, אזהרה שלא יתגאו בני ישראל כשהקדוש ברוך הוא משפיע להם טובה ויאמרו שבריוח שלהם ובעוצם ידם ועמלם עשו והרויחו כל זה ולא יחזיקו טובה להקדוש ברוך הוא מחמת גאונם ... ומכאן אזהרה שלא יתגאה האדם במה שחננו הבורא הן בממון הן ביופי הן בחכמה אלא יש לו להיות עניו מאד ושפל ברך לפני ה' אלהים ואנשים ולהודות לבוראו שחננו זה המעלה.
הרב משה מקוצי, סמ"ג לאוין ס' סד

Question for the Table:

In what way is the humility that we must practice before the Almighty similar to the humility that relates to ourselves and others? In what way is it different?

Conclusion

Humility can have different applications depending on whether we are dealing with our own personal self-worth, relating to others or our service of the Almighty. Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda has a comment that threads together these three aspects:

[There is a type of haughtiness that is] praiseworthy, when wise people are proud of their wisdom and righteous people [are proud of] their actions [out of] thanksgiving to the Creator for the great good that [He provides] by giving someone these abilities and the joy that comes with these abilities. This will cause a person to put in a greater effort to refine these abilities and to be humble towards one's relatives and be proud of the achievements of one's friends, be concerned about their honor, ignore their misdeeds, praise them, love them and advocate on their behalf.

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda, Chovot HaLevavot,

Sha'ar HaKeniah ch. 9

והמשובח, כשמתגאה החכם בחכמתו והצדיק במעשהו הודאה לגודל טובת הבורא עליו בהם ושמחה בעבורם, ויגרם לו להוסיף ולהשתדל בהם ולהכנע לקרוביו ולשמח בחבריו ולחוס על כבודם ולכסות סכלותם ולדבר בשבחם ולאהב אותם ולהליץ בעדם.
רבינו בחיי, חובות הלבבות,
שער הכניעה פרק ט

While it may seem counterintuitive, humility requires great self-awareness, and tremendous self-confidence. As Rabbeinu Bachya teaches, when we recognize that all of our talents and abilities are divinely ordained, it not only humbles us before God, but it also gives us proper perspective to our own achievements and our relationship with others. If we recognize the source of our talents and abilities and use them for good things, then we should be proud of that and know that we are in a position to encourage others to do similar good things. We will be proud, not jealous of other people's achievements and when we observe other people's shortcomings, we won't think less of them. Having the proper perspective enables us to grow with confidence and relate positively to others.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Shmuel Borenstein (1855-1926) was the second Socatchover Rebbe (from Sochaczew, Poland). He is most well-known for his *Shem MiShmuel* which is a nine-volume work of Chasidic thought on the weekly Torah portion and the holidays.

R. Naftali T.Y. Berlin (also known as the Netziv 1816-1893) was born in Mir, Russia. He was a rosh yeshiva of the Volozhin Yeshiva. He was a prolific author, writing works such as *Ha'Amek She'eila*, a commentary on *She'iltot D'Rav Achai*, *Ha'Amek Davar*, a commentary on the Torah and *Meishiv Davar*, a collection of responsa.

R. Menachem Meiri (1249-1306) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well-known for his *Beit HaBechirah*, a commentary on the Talmud. He was heavily influenced by the teachings of Rambam.

R. Moshe of Coucy (13th century) was a French scholar. His *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* provides a detailed explanation of each of the 613 commandments.

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda (11th century) was a Spanish scholar. His *Chovot HaLevavot* is an ethical work that emphasizes refining oneself by focusing on one's thoughts and feelings.