

# TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

## Cultivating Humility

*Parshat Beha'alotecha*, Leviticus 8:1 – 12:

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Not long after the Israelites began their ill-fated journey, havoc broke out in the camp. The people complained about the lack of food even though God provided them with manna. Moses suffered from a bad case of burn-out and felt he was no longer capable of leading the people, and his two siblings became critical of his 'Cushite' wife. Despite this, Moses remains silent. We are told that, "Moses was a humble man, more so than any other man on earth." (Numbers 12:3) God calls Moses, Miriam, and Aaron into the Tent of Meeting and chides the older brother and sister for their criticism. He says, "Hear my words: when a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make myself known to him in a vision, I speak to him in a dream. Not so my servant Moses: he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth..." (Num. 12:6-8) With those words Miriam is stricken with Leprosy and is only cured when Moses intercedes on her behalf.

Humility is a human quality that is highly valued in the Jewish tradition. But what is humility and how can we discern real humility from false humility? Is there a difference between humility versus meekness? In the statements below from *Pirke Avot* and *Avot D'Rebbe Natan* we learn about the importance of seeking humility. Yet how does one seek humility without appearing overly arrogant?

**Pirke Avot 4:4** Rabbi Levitas of Javneh said: Be exceedingly lowly of spirit, for a mortal's hope is but the worm!

**Avot D'Rebbe Natan 33** Ben Zoma said: Who is it that is humble? One who is as humble as Moses, our teacher, as it is said: "Now the man Moses was very humble." (Numbers 12:3)

### Sources

#### **Jacob Milgrom, Numbers: The JPS Torah Commentary**

Humble: Hebrew, *'anav* (cf. Zephaniah 2:3) This is the only instance of the singular in the Bible. Its meaning is clarified by its synonymous parallel "Who seeks the Lord" (Ps. 22:27), hence, "devout, trusting." It also applies to the weak and exploited (Amos 2:7; Isaiah 11:4) However it never means "meek."

#### **Midrash HaGadol, Genesis page 642**

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor My ways your ways" (Isaiah 55:8). When a mortal has a vessel, he rejoices in it as long as it is entire; when it is broken, he has no use for it. Now, what is the Holy One's precious vessel? Man's heart. When the Holy One sees a man proud in heart, He has no use for him, as is said, "Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 16:5). But when the heart is broken, He says, "This one is Mine," as is said, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Ps. 34:19).

#### **Babylonian Talmud Sotah 5a**

R. Joseph said: A man should always learn from the reasoning of his Maker. Behold, the Holy One disregarded all mountains and hills, and caused His Presence to abide on Mount Sinai, even as He disregarded all goodly trees and caused His Presence to abide on a thorn bush.

#### **Babylonian Talmud Eruvim 13b**

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel*, the one asserting, "The law is according to our views," and the other asserting, "The law is according to our views." Then a divine voice came forth and said, "The utterances of the one and of the other are both the words of the living God, but the law is according to *Beit Hillel*." But since both are the words of the living God, by what merit did *Beit Hillel* have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and humble, and taught both their own rulings and those of the school of Shammai. Indeed, they taught the rulings of *Beit Shammai* before their own. This should prove to you that the man who humbles himself, the Holy One exalts; and the man who exalts himself, the Holy One humbles. From everyone who tries to thrust himself upon eminence, eminence flees. But upon everyone who flees from eminence, eminence thrusts it self. Everyone who tries to force time, time forces back.

### **Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, Path of the Upright,**

Another imagines that he is so great and so deserving of honor that no one can deprive him of the usual signs of respect. And to prove this, he behaves as though he were humble and goes to great extremes in displaying boundless modesty and infinite humility. But in his heart he is proud, saying to himself: 'I am so exalted, and so deserving of honor, that I need not have anyone do me honor. I can well afford to forgo marks of respect.'

### **Moses Nachmanides, Igeret HaRamban**

I shall explain how you should become accustomed to the practice of humility in your daily life. Let your voice be gentle and your head bowed. Let your eyes be turned earthwards and your heart heavenwards. When you speak to someone do not look him in the face. Let every man seem superior to you in your own eyes. If he is wise or rich you have reason to respect him. If he is poor and you are richer or wiser than he, think to yourself that you are therefore all the more unworthy and he all the less, for if you sin you do so intentionally whereas he only sins unintentionally.

## **Commentary**

The paradox of humility is that if one is overtly aware of humility, one does not possess this quality. But one does not have to be self-deprecating or self-demeaning in order to cultivate humble. We see this in the case of Moses. How was it possible for Moses, the man who defied Pharaoh, who led Israel out of Egypt, who split the Red Sea and ascended Mount Sinai, to be humble? He certainly had every reason to be proud of his life accomplishments or at the very least to be deeply aware of his great power and position. Yet Moses is described as the humblest of all human beings.

To be humble is to honestly recognize one's place in the world, one's strengths and weaknesses, and still appreciate that one's own humanity. Moses was hardly meek. He knew how to stand up for himself and for others when necessary; and yet he also had the ability to live for others and to take his God-given talents for granted without being overly impressed with them. Similarly, the students of *Beit Hillel* respected and honored the views of *Beit Shammai*, despite the rightness of their point of view, and were not afraid to present *Beit Shammai's* opinions as a valid alternative. It was their humility in the face of their opponents and not the correctness of their opinion which made them worthy of honor. The students of *Beit Shammai* were no less correct but apparently they were less humble about their position.

So is it possible to pursue humility without losing it? Rabbi Levitas of Javneh suggests that cultivating humility begins with a healthy sense of one's mortality. No matter what one accomplishes in life, our end will be the same as our neighbors - it is the worm. Rabbi Levitas suggests that the only way to cultivate humility is to avoid arrogance. We can do this first and foremost with a respectful awareness that in the end we are going to die.

## **Questions to Ponder**

1. There is much confusion concerning the story of Miriam and Aaron's criticism of Moses? Moses is married to a Midianite woman; why is his wife referred to as a Cushite here? Why is Miriam singled out for punishment in this story and not Aaron?
2. Why do you think the Torah makes a point of emphasizing Moses' humility? Do you think it is important for a leader to show 'humility'?
3. How would you define humility? Is it possible to be humble and self-aware of one's attributes and good qualities at the same time?
4. *Midrash HaGadol* suggests that God prefers 'a broken vessel.' What do you think this means and why do you think this is the case? How is Moses 'a broken vessel?' In what ways are you 'a broken vessel?'
5. How can we cultivate humility in our generation? How is pride in oneself different than being arrogant?

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