

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Becoming and Being a Mensch: True Leadership

Parshat Shemot, Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Today's Torah Table Talk is dedicated to Barak Obama, our 44th president.

May he constantly strive to be a Mensch!

The Torah records the early life of Moses in a series of vignettes which capture his basic character. We see Moses as an infant in the river Nile, we learn about the women who risked their lives to save his life just as he would later risk his life to redeem Israel, and we see Moses as a man who is willing to defend the weak and helpless, almost impulsively and by instinct. Moses cannot tolerate suffering. When he finds his people struggling beneath the oppression of the task masters, he is horrified. Witnessing an Egyptian beating an Israelite slave, Moses strikes back and kills the Egyptian. But before he does so, the Torah tells us that Moses “turned this way and that.” What was he looking for? Was this act of violence premeditated? Was he afraid of being found out? Or did he have something else in mind? In Avot we are told to strive to be a man/mensch, especially when no one else seems to be doing so. This is the definition of leadership. When Moses sees that there was no one else to address the challenges of his generation, he rises to the occasion and does what is necessary, realizing that it would have far reaching implications for his life. No word is more evocative of what we must strive for in Judaism than the word mensch...it is our prayer that as Senator Barak Obama becomes our newest president that he will remember to constantly strive to be a mensch.

Pirke Avot 2:5 (Hillel) used to say: Where there are no worthy people, strive to be a *mensch*.

Sources

Exodus 2:11-12

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witness their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that; **seeing there was no man**, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

Exodus Rabbah 1:28-29

"And when he saw that there was no man" (Exodus 2:12)--saw that there was no one who would be zealous for God and slay the Egyptian--"he smote the Egyptian" (Exodus 2:12).

Maimonides, Commentary on Avot

The word *hishtadel*, strive, means, “wrestle with oneself,” and “force yourself to acquire good qualities.” Since there is no one around to teach you, you must teach yourself. In *Targum*, the Aramaic translation of the Torah, the verse, “A man wrestled with him,” (Genesis 32:25) is translated with the word *ishtadel* (the same Hebrew root word as the passage from Avot).

Rabbi Shimon Ben Tzemach Duran, Commentary on Avot

In a place where there is no one standing in the breach to deal with communal matters, strive to be such a person even though it means that one may have to defer one’s study of Torah. We learn this in the final chapter of Berachot 63a: In Psalms it says: “In a time to act for the Lord, one may violate Your teachings.” (Psalms 119:126) That is, one may violate God’s commandments (and not study Torah) in order to represent God’s greater interests. Sometimes the annulment of Torah is the best way to fulfill it, as in the case of Moses (and the Ten Commandments). The Torah says: “Carve two tablets...*asher shibarta*, like the ones you broke.” (Exodus 34:1) Said the Holy One to Moses: “*Yashar Koach* that you smashed (the tablets)!”

Wikipedia definition of Mensch

Mensch means “*a person of integrity and honor.*”.... According to Leo Rosten, the Yiddish maven and author of *The Joys of Yiddish*, mensch is “*someone to admire and emulate; someone of noble character. The key to being “a real mensch” is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous.*” In Yiddish (from which the word has migrated into American English), mensch roughly means “a

good person." A "mensch" is a particularly good person, like "a stand-up guy," a person with the qualities one would hope for in a dear friend or trusted colleague. *Menschlichkeit* are the properties which make one a mensch.

Commentary

A literal translation of *Pirke Avot* would be: "In a place where there are no men strive to be a man," but clearly the word *eesh and anashim* mean more than a matter of gender or simply a human being, in this context. The word *mensch* can also be translated literally as "man" but it has a much deeper meaning as we see from the definition provided by Wikipedia. When Moses looks from side to side to see if there was anyone around, he was not acting out of self-interest. Moses was looking for an *eesh*, someone to take action; a *mensch* in the larger sense of the word. When he realized that it was up to him to act, he did so. In this sense, Moses' act was not impulsive but premeditated. There are times we must take action even though it is not necessarily in our own self-interest. His defense of the Israelite slave would put him on a trajectory that would lead to leadership and eventually to Mount Sinai.

Maimonides and Rabbi Shimon Duran offer other perspectives on *menschlichkeit*. To be a mensch is not an easy thing to accomplish; it is a struggle. The natural human response is to act out of self interest and self gratification. We struggle with ourselves to serve the greater good while taking care of ourselves. Sometimes we must teach ourselves how to be a *mensch* if there is no one else around to teach us how to accomplish this goal in our lives. Rabbi Duran offers an even more surprising perspective in *menschlichkeit*. For the sages, the highest of all callings is the study of Torah – there are dozens of aphorisms in *Avot* that express this sentiment. And yet sometimes *menschlichkeit* necessitates our parting ways with *Talmud Torah* so that we can strive for the greater good of society. Rabbi Duran uses the example of Moses smashing the Ten Commandments and suggests, based on an interesting reading of a verse in Psalms, that there are times when we must abrogate the law in the greater interests of pursuing the higher callings of society.

We are living in trying times. President Barak Obama is certain inheriting his share of serious challenges and problems in American and in the world: an economy in shambles, growing poverty, a continuing war in Iraq and Afghanistan, a nation deeply divided, not to mention, a war in Gaza. Can he solve all these problems? I doubt it. My hope is that our thirty-fourth president will be a Mensch; that he will be honest with the public and act for the greater good of our nation and our world. As Barak Obama takes office we offer him our prayers and good wishes.

Questions to Ponder

1. How would you define the word, *Mensch*? How is a *Mensch* different from a *Tzaddik* and a saint?
2. Why does Moses look from side to side before he strikes the Egyptian? Do you think he had reservations about attacking this man; was it his intention to kill him? Do you think he had regrets afterwards?
3. Why is becoming a *Mensch* such a struggle, according to Maimonides? What challenges and dilemmas do we struggle with in our desire to be a *Mensch*?
4. One of the greatest challenges to being a *Mensch* is power. How did Moses struggle with power throughout his life? Why does God congratulate Moses for having smashed the Ten Commandments? Do you think he deserved congratulations?
5. Are there times when the end is more important than the means: that is, it's ok to break the law in order to defend the greater good? How might this idea be relevant to someone assuming the presidency of the United States? How is it relevant in our personal lives?
6. If you could have a brief conversation with President-elect Obama what would you say to him? What three pieces of advice would you give him?

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