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Humility of Moses

A wonderful passage in the Talmud describes the greatness of Sages of previous generations. In poetic prose, the Talmud states: "The death of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa saw the end of men of action. The death of Rebbe Yossi Katanta saw the end to righteousness. When Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai passed away, the glory of wisdom was no more. When Rebbe [Judah the Prince] died, humility and the fear of sin ceased."

The Talmud continues with a surprising comment by Rabbi Yosef. He challenged the statement that humility had disappeared, saying: **"But I am still here!"**

This comment is difficult to understand. How can Rabbi Yosef claim to be humble - while at the same time proclaim his own humility?!

At first glance, while Rabbi Yosef's statement might appear as the opposite of humility, this is not the case. Because "humility" is not defined as a poor self-image. Judaism says that humility is a **clear, objective understanding of exactly who you are**. The truly humble person recognizes his strengths and weaknesses relative to himself, to others, and to G-d. He entertains no false notions about his place in the scheme of things.

Seeing oneself in an unfairly low light is a problem of **"false humility."** One popular story tells of a yeshiva dean who reprimanded a student for walking around with an air of humility. "You're not so big that you can act so small," the rabbi told him.

Beyond this, false humility can even be dangerous. If one views himself unfavorably, he **might fail to take necessary action** when it is called for. Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, a great Chassidic rebbe, used to say that the mistake of the righteous is that they see themselves in too small a light - and thus fail to do all they otherwise could to bring about the redemption.

What is the Torah's primary description of Moses, the greatest prophet of all time? He was **"the most humble of all people."** (see Numbers 12:3)

It is precisely due to this quality that Moses was chosen as the transmitter of G-d's Torah. As someone **dedicated to truth and untouched by the self-delusions** that blind others, Moses knew his place - and as such rightfully deserved to deliver G-d's truth to the world.

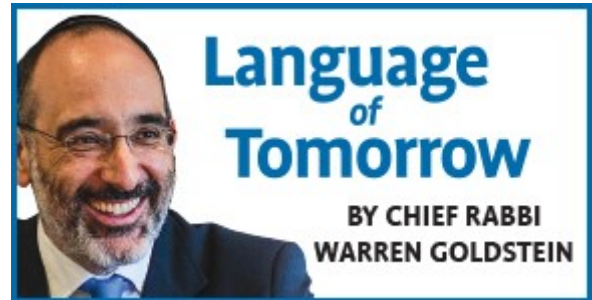
At the same time, Moses was keenly aware that despite one's position, a person must be cautious in dealing with others. Over and over again -

despite an awareness of his own relative greatness - Moses shows himself to be of **lowly spirit when interacting with others**.

A beautiful example is found in this week's Torah portion, which begins by describing G-d's call to Moses from within the Tabernacle Sanctuary. As Rashi explains, the word used to describe G-d's calling out to Moses - "**vayikra**" - attests to a very intimate contact. For while G-d openly "speaks" to very few, those He "calls out" to is even rarer.

Curiously, the word "vayikra" is written in Torah scrolls with a small letter Aleph. If we would disregard the small Aleph, the word would read "**vayikar**" - a word associated with a "**chance encounter**" - i.e. a much lower level of intimacy. The Midrash says this small Aleph was due to a scribal modification by Moses. Uncomfortable with the word "vayikra" - a statement which proclaimed his preciousness in G-d's eyes, Moses sought to downplay this in a way that did not compromise the meaning of the original text, yet made clear to others that he was still a man of lowly spirit.

Moses epitomized the heights of humility - because while fully aware of his own greatness, he was **careful not to flaunt it** in the face of others.



The Best Way to Serve God

Our parsha this week, Vayikra, starts the third of the Five Books of the Chumash and deals with the service in the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Temple. The parsha begins with the topic of the offerings in the Temple. The verse says *Adam ki yakriv korban laHashem*, "If a person comes to bring an offering to God." The verse uses the word *adam* for "person" though normally the Chumash uses the word *ish*. Furthermore, this word *adam* is emphasised: if you look at the *trop*, the cantillation marks in the Chumash, above the word *adam* you will find a dot called a *revi'i*, which draws attention to this word, *adam*.

The Midrash says that the word *adam* refers not just to any ordinary person but to Adam, *Adam HaRishon*, the very first human being who ever lived. The key to understanding what the service of

God entails – in the offerings in the Temple and in general – is to first understand Adam and Eve.

The universal brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity

Adam and Eve teach us a number of things about the service of God. Firstly, they teach us about the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. The Mishnah asks why human beings all come from one father and one

mother – Adam and Eve – unlike the animals and the species of the plant kingdom which were created en masse. One of the answers the Talmud gives is to eliminate racism; had there been numerous original ancestors, everyone would say his ancestor is greater than the other's. And so, God created us all from the same ancestors to teach us that human beings are all brothers and sisters. Despite this, people still sink to racism; just imagine how much worse it would be had we come from multiple ancestors.

Adam, alluding to the first human being, is all about the universality of humans. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch links this with the fact that offerings in the Temple were brought not only by Jews, but by gentiles as well. Anyone who wanted to bring an offering in the Jews' Temple in the Holy City of Jerusalem was welcome to do so. As the prophet Isaiah says, Hashem says *Ki beiti beit tefilla yikareh lechol ha'amim* "My house will be a house of prayer for all the nations." Thus, this word *adam* teaches us about the universality of every human being serving God.

Self-motivation in serving God

The second thing we learn from Adam is how to serve God. The Kli Yakar discusses how Adam's children – the most infamous siblings in history, Kayin and Hevel, Cain and Abel – tried to serve God. They both brought offerings, but each had his own flaws. Kayin didn't bring the best of his crops to Hashem. When we come to serve Hashem, we have to give Him our best. Hashem favoured Hevel's offering and Kayin was jealous. Hevel's flaw was that he brought an offering only after he saw his brother doing so; he wasn't self-motivated. Often we keep up with

others, not only in material things but in spiritual things as well; we do something solely because someone else is doing it and not because we are self-motivated. The Kli Yakar explains that we learn from the use of the word *adam* that just as Adam, the first human being in the world, had no one to be jealous of and no one with whom to compete, whose point of reference was only Hashem and himself and he didn't worry about what anyone else was doing (because there was no one else), so too when we come to serve God we must serve Him like Adam HaRishon, focusing only on God and not on what the rest of the world is doing.

Service of God and ethical behaviour toward our fellow human beings

The third thing we learn from Adam is that our service of God must be ethical. Rashi quotes the Midrash which says *adam* is referring to *Adam HaRishon*. When he brought his offerings to God there was no theft involved because he was the only person around, there was no one from whom to steal. So too, when one brought an offering to God in the Temple, it was not allowed to be from stolen property.

But in truth, who would do such a thing? The Kli Yakar explains Rashi's words and says that we are not talking about someone who brings stolen goods to the Temple because that would be so obviously wrong. Rather, we are talking about a person who lives an unethical life, whose business practices are dishonest and result in a lot of ill-gotten gain. Some of their wealth may have been earned honestly, but there are lots of things that were earned unethically. When such a person brings an offering, it is an abomination to God. The prophet Isaiah speaks out about this in the first chapter of Isaiah, where God says to the people don't bring me

offerings when your hands are dripping with the blood of injustice. We certainly can't serve God if our behaviour toward others is unjust and unethical because we have an obligation to keep the **whole** Torah – the mitzvos *bein adam laMakom*, between man and God, as well as the mitzvos *bein adam lachaveiro*, between man and his fellow man.

This concept is quite subtle and yet profound. Sometimes religious passion can cause a person to overlook basic sensitivity to another human being. One of the great masters of sensitivity to all human beings was Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the *Mussar* movement which was a great philosophical school of thought started in the 19th century. By personal example, Rav Yisrael Salanter taught the importance of ethical conduct. For example, he was once hosted by one of his students on a Friday night and he said to the student that he is prepared to come only if he ensures the meal doesn't take too long. The student didn't understand this request, but he obliged. After the meal, Rav Yisrael explained to him that the cook who was serving all the food was a widow, and surely she wants to get home to her family as quickly as possible. The longer you keep her, the later her own Shabbos meal will begin. Rav Yisrael said it's all very well to have such a holy Shabbos experience, but not at the expense of another.

There is another well-known example: Rav Yisrael was once visiting a different city and many people came to daven where he was davening, so that they could see the great sage. It was *Mincha* time. The people were very surprised to see that he davened quite a quick *Mincha*. Afterwards, they asked him why he prayed so quickly. He explained that he noticed lots of workers – day labourers and traders –

who had taken off from work and come to daven *Mincha* to see him, and he didn't want them to lose time off of their work which would result in harm to their *parnassa*.

When we come to serve God, we must ensure that our actions toward God and toward our fellow human beings are consistent with each other. Keeping God's Torah means keeping **all** of it, not just the mitzvos between us and Him but between us and our fellow human beings. We must ensure that everything we do is done with sensitivity, kindness, care and consideration for others and that everything we do is permeated with the ethics of the Torah.

The Torah is the guide for how to serve God

This brings us to the final point on Adam. The opening passage of the parsha deals with a free-will offering. As we know, some of the offerings in the Temple were obligatory but this passage is referring to a voluntary one, brought out of one's own volition, with passion and fervour. When Adam came to serve God he had one major disadvantage: he didn't have a Torah. He just came to serve God out of desire to be close to God, but he didn't have a Torah to guide him. When we come to serve God, we have to come with the same fervour as Adam but we must also follow the Torah's guidelines. The parsha is saying that when we approach the service of God, we must do so in the context of the Torah's guidelines. We begin like Adam, but then there are volumes of Hashem's wisdom written in the Torah for what we must do.

One of the most unique and important teachings of Judaism is that we can't just intuit how to be a spiritual or a moral person. The Torah is a blueprint for life which guides us as to how to be spiritual and ethical. We can't just work

things out by ourselves; we must follow the guidelines of the Torah.

The Kuzari, one of the classic works of Jewish philosophy written by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in the Middle Ages, explains this further. The book is structured as a debate between the King of Khazar and a great Torah sage. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi writes that all people have good intentions and try and be spiritually connected, but that without the guidance on how to do it, it is impossible. A person who just wants to serve God by intuition, says Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, is comparable to a fool who comes to a medicine cabinet of a doctor who is famous for his ability to heal the sick. The doctor is not in, and many people have gathered in his office to receive medicine, so the fool proceeds to dispense the medication to the patients without knowing which medicines are intended for which sickness and in what dosage. As a result he kills the patients with the very same medicines that could have been used to heal them. If by chance one person is healed by a particular medicine, everyone else will clamour for that same medication, thinking that it will cure all of their ills. This will continue until, by chance, they find another medicine that heals them. They do not realise that the real remedy is the prescription of the wise doctor who mixes the compounds and knows exactly what and how much to dispense to each patient.

The Torah is what dispenses medicine – a way of life – from the Ultimate Doctor, the One Who created us all and knows what’s good for us. If a person decides on his own what is spiritual and how to be ethical and moral, that is not called serving God. We need guidance, and that is the great privilege in having the Torah; it guides us every step of the way on what to do and how to

do it.

The book of Vayikra, which we are about to begin, is about service in the Temple but more broadly it is about the service of God in general. And so it begins with *Adam ki yakriv*; if a person comes to bring an offering to God, he or she should do so as though they are like Adam, the first Adam, in serving God: we must recognize the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings; we must be self-motivated; we must come completely clean from an ethical point of view; and we must be willing to be guided by the Torah as to how to serve God.



The Power of Purpose

When assessing the value of goods, most people measure the physical quality of the product or the quantity of time, energy and resources invested in its creation. How though, does God measure the value of good deeds? Does He analyse how much money we spend, how many resources we invest, or how much energy we exert? Or does the Divine system work differently?

This week we reopen the Book of Leviticus and discuss the many individual sacrifices that were required in Temple times. They range from the more expensive cattle offerings (*Lev. 1:3-9*)

through to the cheaper meal offerings (*Lev. 2:1-16*). The refrain: ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance to God’ occurs eight times in the Book of Leviticus, always in relation to the sacrifices (*Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9; 3:5; 23:13, 18*). What is the function of this phrase, and why is it repeatedly emphasised?

The scope of the different sacrifices required in the Temple allows for people of differing financial abilities to give according to their means. The mishna states:

It is stated with regard to an offering from an animal, ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance’, and with regard to an offering from fowl, ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance’ and with regard to the meal offering, ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance’ to teach that: [It is not important] whether one does a lot or a little, as long as one directs one’s intention towards Heaven (*Mishna, Tractate Menachot 13:11*).

Rashi highlights the fact that the word ‘soul’ is used only with regard to the meal offering, the cheapest of the range of sacrifices, in order to emphasise the fact that for a poor person, it may be a tremendous financial struggle to bring this sacrifice, and God thus sees it as if he has offered his soul (Rashi on *Lev. 2:1*). God’s yardstick seems clear: Each person is simply required to give as much as he can, so long as his intentions are pure and directed towards Heaven.

This principle can be extrapolated beyond the financial arena, and beyond the sacrificial realm, to all areas of life. Some people lack the requisite knowledge to keep every commandment or do every good deed, but that

does not preclude them from trying and directing their thoughts and intentions towards God. Other people may have the ability to pray with devout intention when they feel inspired, yet at other times they feel emotionally void or spiritually uninspired. They too are not precluded from continually making an honest effort, regardless of their current level of inspiration. The common denominator is that regardless of one’s ability, or one’s means, one is constantly required to try and direct one’s intentions towards Heaven.

As it says in one of the most famous liturgical poems during the lead-up to the High Holy Days, ‘Master of forgiveness, examiner of hearts’, (‘Adon HaSelichot’ in Siddur of Rav Amram Gaon) which reflects God’s ability to see into every hidden thought while at the same time granting merciful forgiveness. In contrast to physical goods, God measures good deeds not by one’s abilities but rather by one’s intentions, the desires of one’s heart and the extent of one’s efforts. Regardless of what we have, the Jewish system declares: ‘Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven’ (*Mishna, Tractate Avot 2:12*).

The word *korban*, or ‘sacrifice’, is derived from the same root as *karov*, meaning ‘come close’. The word *lehakriv*, or ‘to bring a sacrifice’, can therefore also be read as ‘to bring closeness’. In order to build a close relationship with God, we are required to give of ourselves and to entirely dedicate our thoughts to Him, for according to God’s gauge, the beauty and value of one’s deeds ultimately lies in the intentions, not in the end product.



Waking Up

One of the offerings on display in this week's portion is a "transgression offering," or *chatat* in Hebrew. A *chatat* is brought when a person inadvertently commits a transgression worthy of the death penalty. For example, a man accidentally sleeps with his sister.

The obvious question one must ask, as with all cases of *chatat*, is how could one possibly do this by accident? Well, he could forget that something like this is not allowed. Or he could think that he is actually sleeping with someone else. But whatever way you cut it, the bottom line is that there is an incredible level of negligence over here. A person has to be seriously asleep in order to do something like this by accident. He must be living in his own little amoral dream world.

So the Torah gives something to bang him over the head. He takes a cow to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. He watches as it is killed, chopped up, and burnt to ashes on the altar. He sees very bluntly and vividly just how fragile life is. And hopefully the experience will shake him out of his moral apathy. Hopefully he will take to heart that the day is short, there is so much to accomplish in this world, and he can't afford to dream his way through life.

As with any Jewish ritual, it only works as well as the person experiencing it allows it. If he

sleeps through his *chatat*, as he is doing through the rest of his life, it will have no effect on him whatsoever. Torah is not a magic formula - i.e. do the ritual and it has the spiritual effect. Torah merely puts a person in an environment in which he can wake up to the value of life should he choose to do so. But the choice always remains his.

As a final point, I've heard it said that the concept of offerings is a tad barbaric, maybe. But by the same token, slaughtering an animal and stuffing its meat down one's throat sounds no more civilized to me. Why is it okay to kill an animal in order to walk on its hide, but not okay to kill an animal in order to wake oneself up to the meaning of life? I know which one sounds more civilized to me.

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