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## Joining up with the Jewish people

A few years ago, Vitaly, a Russian Jew living in Minsk, faced the difficult decision of whether or not to **undergo a circumcision**. After expressing his fear to some American friends, they tried to reassure him by saying that after a couple of days **the pain** would subside.

Vitaly looked at them askance - because it wasn't the **physical pain** that had given him pause. Rather, he said, becoming circumcised was putting his **life at risk**. "You see," he explained, "it was a circumcision that **identified my grandfather** as being Jewish - and the Nazis **shot him on the spot**. Given the uncertain circumstances in Russia today, I may well be putting my life at risk if I undergo a circumcision."

Vitaly's friends were shaken by his reply, and asked him why did he not simply leave Russia? Vitaly replied, "Because of my **attachment to family and friends**."

Vitaly's willingness to risk physical danger in order to remain with family and friends has been **echoed countless times** in Jewish history. As well, this idea is illustrated in this week's Torah portion, Be'halot'cha.

A major figure in the Parsha is **Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses**. Prior to his association with Moses, Yitro had served as High Priest for the nation of Midian. Then Yitro heard about the many miracles God had performed for the Israelites in coming out of Egypt. So he journeyed with the Israelite encampment, became an advisor to Moses, and reached such a **position of prominence** that the Torah portion which recounts the giving of the Torah - Parshat Yitro - is named after him.

Yet despite all of these factors, there came a time when Yitro decided to **return home**. "I want to go to my land, to my birthplace," he told Moses (Numbers 10:30). This decision appears shocking, given that Yitro knew the truth of the Living God and had seen many miracles. How could Yitro abandon the Israelite camp and return home?!

Most commentaries explain that Yitro only wanted to take a physical - not a moral - leave of the Jewish People. Yitro had converted to Judaism and his intention was to return home and **convert his family** and fellow Midianites to Judaism before returning to the Israelite encampment. Buttressing this view is some later scriptural evidence that Yitro's offspring did in fact become Jewish and actually became **prominent leaders** among the Israelites.

Some commentaries, however, say that Yitro intended to **permanently leave** the Israelites. These sources offer three different reasons for Yitro's motives:

The first says that just as **love of family and friends** will convince people nowadays to stay in situations of danger, so too Yitro's love of family drew him back to the spiritual danger of life in Midian. (We saw this illustrated earlier with Vitaly, the Russian Jew.)

A second view says it was Yitro's **desire for wealth and honor** that motivated him to return home. In the Israelite camp, his importance would always be overshadowed by Moses, his son-in-law. The tangible riches that he possessed at home were more attractive than the ill-defined prospects he might receive with the Israelites.

A third view takes an entirely different perspective. This view says that given the Israelites **constant complaining** in the desert - and the revolts against Moses - Yitro questioned the value of staying with the Israelites. Just how much patience could the Almighty have with such a people? Yitro desired to distance himself from this swarming beehive.

Perhaps this final lesson is most applicable today, when Jews are too-often arguing with each other - both in Israel and elsewhere. By doing so, aren't we showing young Jews the **negative side** of Judaism and pushing them away? If this is Judaism, they say, then I don't want any part of it!

Let us learn a lesson from Yitro, and undertake to realize that **peace amongst Jews** is a vital condition for the health and preservation of our people.



## Are You Humble?

Life is a tightrope of competing interests and demands. To navigate it requires balance. Work-life balance. Balanced finances. A balanced diet.

The Rambam is well known for his Golden Mean - a formula for prescribing moderation in various character traits, and finding what he calls "the middle path". But there are two exceptions, two areas where we ignore balance. Where the extreme *is* the ideal. The first is we should always seek the extreme opposite of anger. And the second - the subject of our discussion this week - is humility. We should always strive for extreme humility.

"If a man is only [moderately] humble," the Rambam writes, "he is not following a good path. Rather, he must hold himself humble and his spirit very unassuming." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 2:3).

The Rambam derives this lesson - about the importance of extreme humility - from a verse in this week's parsha. The Torah describes the greatest leader of Jewish history, Moses, as follows: "Moses, the man, was very humble [more than] any person on earth." (Numbers 12:3). Moses teaches us that there is no room for the middle path between arrogance and humility; that a person should always be extremely humble.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, says humility is not only an imperative; it's one of the highest spiritual and moral levels that a person can achieve. In his great ethical work, *Mesillat Yesharim (Path of the Upright)*, and based on a verse in the Talmud, he sets out an ascending ladder of spiritual greatness - and right near the top of the ladder is humility.

The Ramchal defines humility as a mindset - of not thinking one is better than others, and of feeling oneself undeserving of praise and honour. In this vein, Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his commentary on our parsha, points out that Moses, the person who led the Jewish people out of Egypt, who spoke with G-d Himself, who reached the pinnacle of human perfection, could have (perhaps with some justification) looked down on others. A person with lesser gifts than Moses would have had a more natural inclination towards humility. And yet he mastered himself and held others in great esteem, never looking down on them, never succumbing to arrogance.

But how do we bring humility into our lives? The Ramchal outlines a four-step formula. The first step is to modify the way we speak, walk and sit: we should speak gently and kindly, we should not walk with a swagger, and we should not jostle for the most prominent seat in a room.

The second step is to get used to remaining silent in the face of insult: arrogant people who hold themselves in high regard take offence at the smallest slight, but humble people, while they recognise their self-worth and are comfortable with themselves, don't become indignant at offence from others.

The third step to humility is to run away from honour and recognition. This applies especially,

say our sages, in the context of leadership. The Torah outlook on leadership is summed up in a passage in the Gemara, where a sage who is appointing two young people for a leadership position, tells them: "Do you think I give you power and lordship [over others]? I give you service!" (Horiot 10a).

The fourth step is to practise giving *kavod* - honour - to other people. As it says in Pirkei Avot: "Who is honoured? One who honours people." (Avot 4:1) The *Mesillat Yesharim* says there are many ways to honour others - from simply greeting people in a warm manner, to being extremely careful not to disrespect another person.

One of the most striking tributes to the value of humility comes from the Ramban - Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman. The Ramban was the Chief Rabbi of Catalonia. In 1263, he was challenged to a theological debate by Pablo Christiani, a Jewish convert to Christianity, in the presence of King James I. The Ramban emerged victorious, though was banished from Europe as a result. Fleeing to Israel, he wrote a famous letter to his son who had remained in Catalonia, laying out a few core Torah values to guide him in life. And it's humility that features prominently in the letter.

"This sterling quality [of humility] is the finest of all admirable traits," he writes. He advises his son to "speak gently to all people at all times [as] this will protect you from anger - a most serious character flaw which causes one to sin. Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart."

He goes on to describe humility as the gateway to G-d consciousness. "Through humility the awe of G-d will intensify in your heart for you

will always be aware of where you come from and to where you are destined to go..."

He writes of the futility of arrogance: "And now my son, understand clearly that one who is arrogant in his heart towards other people rebels against the sovereignty of heaven, for he glorifies himself in G-d's own robes... For indeed of what should man be prideful? If he has wealth - it is G-d who makes one prosperous. And if honour - does honour not belong to G-d? If he takes pride in wisdom - let him understand that G-d may remove the speech of the most competent and take away the wisdom of the aged."

And then he closes the argument. "Thus all people stand as equals before their Creator... he casts down the lofty... he elevates the downtrodden. Therefore humble yourself for G-d will lift you". (This translation of the Ramban's letter is, in the main, based on the ArtScroll edition of the letter.)

And so from the Ramban we see the constellation of Torah values which are founded on humility: gentleness, kindness, slowness to anger, awe of G-d and recognising Him as the source of all blessings; and at the heart of it all, the deep-seated belief in the equality of all people.

Indeed, it was this appreciation for the value of every human being that lay at the heart of Moses' humility. Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel points out that when the verse says: "Moses was the humblest of all people", the literal translation of the Hebrew preposition used here is actually "from" not "of" - in other words: "Moses was the humblest from all people." He explains that Moses' humility was inspired by being able seeing the greatness - the image of G-d - in

those around him.

If we adopt this mindset, then there's simply no room for arrogance. Humility becomes a natural state of being, and with it, self-mastery. It's no coincidence that Moses, the greatest prophet ever, was also the most humble human being. Humility and greatness are two sides of the same coin.



## Image is Nothing – Taste is Everything

Above all else, a leader needs to understand his people. Throughout his years of leadership, Moses displays a profoundly deep understanding of and a high tolerance threshold for the Jewish nation. But one of the few sagas that places a real strain on his patience and causes him to request that God end his mission, is the case of their complaint about the manna, when he says: 'And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now' (*Num.* 11:15).

In comparison to the exotic Egyptian cuisine - the 'cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic' (*Num.* 11:5), that the Jews remember with nostalgia – in the desert, they have 'nothing to anticipate but the manna' (*Num.* 11:6) – a uniform substance lacking visual appeal. This complaint is strange. Whereas the food the Jewish people received in Egypt was

limited to that which was given to them by their Egyptian masters, the Midrash says that the miraculous manna from heaven tasted like whatever the Jews desired (*Ex. Rabba* 5:9), and was thus only limited by the constraints of their imaginations. So, what was the complaint about?

Perhaps the complaint is not actually regarding the taste of the substance, but rather its form. During their sojourn in Egypt, the Jewish people become accustomed to a more superficial existence, one where image matters more than essence. Now, however, having left the superficial society of Egypt in the physical sense, God is helping them detach from it in a spiritual sense too. He is trying to teach them that it is what is on the inside that counts, 'do not look at the jug, but rather at what is inside' (Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 4:20). Missing the point of this lesson, the people still crave the more sophisticated appearance of luscious-looking food.

In Proverbs, King Solomon writes, 'grace is deceptive, and beauty is vain: It is a God-fearing woman who should be praised' (*Proverbs* 31:30). Solomon, one of the wisest men to have ever lived (*I Kings* 5:10), astutely states that inner integrity and conviction transcend the more fleeting and transient outer beauty. When the generation of the desert worry about the way their food looks, it makes the tastiest of foods seem distasteful. At the end of the day presentation and taste are indeed both important. But before worrying about its physical arrangement on the plate, in order for the food to be delicious and nutritious it needs to be cooked well, with the appropriate ingredients and techniques. Similarly, with people, both internal character and external appearances are

indeed of value, but the priority must always be on building a stellar internal character. Often today too, people care more about other's perceptions of physical appearances than about what is going on inside.

In ancient times, there was a practice among the Egyptian elite to be buried in their pyramids and vaults together with their treasures and valuables, rather than passing them on to be utilised by the next generation. Such a custom highlights their focus, even in death, on the external image they portray to others.

This is the culture that the generation of the desert is born into, and that influenced their focus on superficiality and externals. Now, as they journey through the desert, God is helping this fledgling nation, a people who by no choice of their own have become slaves to superficiality, to rebuild themselves from the inside out. Through the divine gift of manna, which represents internal goodness alone and displays a complete absence of external beauty, God is teaching the Jewish people the rich value of inner taste and meaning, in contrast to the vacuous and relatively insignificant nature of the outer facade.



## Why Complain?

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people

complain about the manna, the bread that fell from heaven every day in the desert. It's quite extraordinary when you realize that the manna was miraculous food. It tasted however you'd want. If you desired a thick, juicy steak, that's the taste you got. Pizza with extra olives, coming right up. Chocolate chip ice cream, on its way.

And yet, the Jews in the desert complained that they preferred their slaves' rations in Egypt! It's unbelievable. If the manna tasted like anything they wanted, how could they complain about it?

We do the same type of thing all the time.

Complaining is almost always non-specific. We are looking for something to complain about. And we find it. If you want to complain, you will. We can stay at the best five-star hotel and complain that the concierge stopped smiling for a moment, or the tea was a touch too strong (or too weak), or the carpets were too soft. There is no such thing as perfection. So if we are looking, we will always find the flaw.

Even though the person complaining thinks precisely the opposite, complaining has nothing to do with circumstance and everything to do with attitude. If our attitude is bad enough, we will even complain about manna coming down from Heaven and tasting like anything we want.

But why do we complain? The problem is with expectations. The higher our expectations, the more upset we feel when life doesn't live up to them. The less we expect, the more likely we are to see the good in whatever comes our way. I would venture to say that expectations will never contribute to our happiness. They will only ever undermine it.

Expect perfection and life will always

disappoint you. Expect very little and life will always surprise you.

Life, and all that is within it, is a blessing that God has bestowed upon us – unmerited and undeserved. Seeing it that way will fill us with gratitude and grant us immunity from complaining.

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