

The Middah of *Anavah* (Humility)

Confusion about Humility, or What's in Your Overcoat?

When most of us hear the word humility, we will likely jump straight to the concept of being self-effacing. A very common example of this is when someone gives us a compliment. If we have heard that it is “good to be humble”, we will likely try to deflect the compliment by saying something like, “well, I just got lucky,” or “actually, I got this on sale . . .” Rarely do we feel entitled to take in and own the kind thing that is being offered. Even more rarely do we look the person in the eyes and say, “thank you, how kind of you to say so.” Yet if we do not, we may actually cause distress to the other person by not fully accepting what they wish to give us, and allowing their good impulse to run its complete course. For in truth, it does not feel good to offer a gift and then have it not be fully accepted and appreciated. Therefore, this sort of self-effacement cannot be true humility, for it diminishes both the giver and the receiver - whereas a true spiritual quality always increases the light.

Judaism is such an old tradition – there has been time for our teachers and sages to consider just about everything under the sun more than once – so naturally, the rabbis have much to say about the true nature of humility. One teacher in particular, the great Hasid R' Simcha Bunem gives a particularly poignant and powerful teaching on the matter of one of the great struggles we humans grapple with – the struggle both within ourselves and without between radical humility and glory, especially as it applies to “the challenge of good and evil acts”.

Simcha Bunem's teaching is as follows:

“Each person needs to pretend he or she is always wearing an overcoat with two pockets. In one pocket there should be the verse from Genesis 18:27, “I am dust and ashes.” And in the other, the passage in the Talmud that reads, “For my sake the world was created.” Then, according to need, the person should draw out the message from either pocket.”

Two of our modern rabbis comment on this:

“When the impulse to do evil wants to show a person how great he or she is, or of the greatness of his or her acts or achievements . . . the person should draw out the scrap that reads, “I am dust and ashes.” And when the impulse toward evil wants to snare a person in the net of sadness and depression, and show his or her failures, the person should draw out strength from the scrap that reads, “For my sake the world was created. . . [in other words], When a person feels in control of the world, a veritable master of the universe, he should remind himself [with the one scrap] and when he is seduced . . . into feeling worthless and depressed, he should remind himself that the world was created with him in mind.”

In Jewish belief and practice, therefore, true humility includes loving ourselves and knowing our worth – AND not needing to “crow” about it. It is all a matter of balance, and of knowing when we might need to reign ourselves in a bit, or conversely,

let our light shine out more, be seen and appreciated. Therefore, proper practice of humility is an ongoing process of discernment and wisdom, so that we take up “exactly the right amount of space” and fulfill our rightful place in the world.

Those of you who own a copy of *Everyday Holiness* by Alan Morinis will enjoy reading more about this in his excellent chapter on *Anavah*. And be sure to join us on Saturday, January 20 as we wrap up our discussion of the holy quality and launch into the next!

Blessings to you all, my dear friends!

Rabbi Shula