

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –
Parshat BeHa’Alotecha**

**Cultivating Humility: What is humility? Why is it
important? What is its power?**

Based on a teaching from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his article, “*Humility,*”
Covenant and Conversation, 5768/2008.

I find it one of the most revealing moments in Moses’ life. To understand it we must remember the context. He has just been challenged by the Israelites to provide them with meat. “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” It is not their desire for meat that distresses Moses, so much as their false nostalgia, their ingratitude, their continued failure to grow up. He prays to die:

He asked the Lord, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? . . . I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now – if I have found favor in your eyes – and do not let me face my own ruin.”

The crisis passes. But then a new challenge arises:

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” And the LORD heard this.

The nature of their complaint will not concern us. What gives this episode its intensity is not what is said but who said it. This is not “the people,” still less “the mixed multitude.” This is Moses’ own brother and sister, the sister who watched over him as a baby as he floated down the Nile in a reed basket, the brother who was his faithful companion in some of his most risk laden encounters. To be criticized by the crowd, or by opponents, is one thing. To be turned on by those closest to you is altogether different and unnerving.

What is Moses' response? Nothing. The text is explicit at this point for a reason. There is an absence of response which comes from simply not knowing. There is another which comes from not caring. The Torah wishes us to know that neither is the case here. Instead, Moses' equanimity comes from deep within his character: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more than anyone else on the face of the earth."

It is not Moses who reacts, but G-d who does so on his behalf.

The sentence is strange, both in the sentiment it expresses, and in its place in the narrative. Moses humble? The man who spoke words of fire, who was undaunted in the presence of Pharaoh, who led an entire people out of slavery, who was unafraid to argue with G-d himself, the man who smashed the tablets after seeing the golden calf. Was this a humble man?

And what is the place of this sentence in the story of Miriam and Aaron? It seems to interrupt the flow. Verse 2 tells us that God heard their remarks. Verse 4 tells us that He replied. Moses, at this stage, is not party to the conversation at all. Verse 3 breaks the sequence. For that reason, a number of English translations put it in parentheses.

Besides this, why is Moses so calm in the face of this seeming betrayal by those closest to him, when in the previous chapter he had been so agitated by the people's request for meat – a challenge of a type he had faced and overcome before?

The questions answer one another. The people's challenge was directed against G-d – or fate or circumstance – not against him. That is why he cared. Miriam and Aaron's challenge was directed against him. It was personal. That is why he was serene. Moses did not care about himself. If he had, he would not have been able to survive a single day as leader of this fractious, unstable people. He cared about the cause, about G-d and freedom and responsibility. That was what made him humble.

Humility is not what it is sometimes taken to be – a low estimate of oneself. That is false or counterfeit humility. True humility is mindlessness of self. An *anav* (the biblical word used in this chapter) is one who never thinks about himself because he has more important things to think about. I once heard someone say about a religious leader: "He took G-d so seriously that he didn't need to take himself seriously at all." That is biblical humility.

Moses cared about others. Only once – when he heard he would not enter the land he had spent forty years leading his people toward – did he pray on his own behalf. Even then, he was not thinking about himself but the land. In truth, he was not even thinking about the land but rather about witnessing G-d's promise fulfilled.

Humility is not self-abasement. **It is not self- anything. It is the ability to stand in silent awe in the presence of otherness** – the Thou of G-d, the otherness of other people, the majesty of creation, the beauty of the world, the power of great ideas, the call of great ideals. **Humility is the silence of the self in the presence of that which is greater than the self.**

How values change! Humility is the orphaned virtue of our age. Its demise, though, came a century later with the threatening anonymity of mass culture alongside the loss of neighborhoods and congregations.

A community is a place of friends. Urban society is a landscape of strangers. **Yet there is an irrepressible human urge for recognition.** So, a culture emerged out of the various ways of 'making a statement' to people we do not know, but who, we hope, will somehow notice. Beliefs ceased to be things confessed in prayer and became slogans emblazoned on tee-shirts. A comprehensive repertoire developed of signaling individuality, from personalized number-plates, to 'in your face' dressing, to designer labels worn on the outside, not within. You can trace an entire cultural transformation in the shift from renown to fame, to celebrity, to being famous for being famous. The creed of our age is, "If you've got it, flaunt it." Humility, being humble, does not stand a chance.

This is a shame. **Humility – true humility – is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all virtues.** It does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing other people. It signals an openness to life's grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it.

I learned the meaning of humility from my late father. He was an enthusiast. **He had** – this was what I so cherished in him – **the capacity to admire. That is the greater part of humility: the capacity to be open to something greater than oneself.** False humility is the pretense that one is small. **True humility is the consciousness of standing in the presence of greatness,** which is why it is the virtue of prophets, those who feel most vividly the nearness of.

As a young man, full of questions about faith, I travelled to the United States where, I had heard, there were outstanding rabbis, including the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Wherever I travelled, I heard tales of his extraordinary leadership, many verging on the miraculous. He was, I was told, one of the outstanding charismatic leaders of our time. I resolved to meet him if I could.

In fact, I did have the privilege of meeting him, and was utterly surprised. He was certainly not charismatic in any conventional sense. Quiet, self-effacing, understated, one might hardly have noticed him had it not been for the reverence in which he was held by his disciples. That meeting, though, changed my life. He was a world-famous figure. I was an anonymous student from three thousand miles away. **Yet in his presence I seemed to be the most important person in the world.**

He asked me about myself. He listened carefully. He challenged me to become a leader, something I had never contemplated before. Quickly it became clear to me that he believed in me more than I believed in myself. **As I left the room, it occurred to me that it had been full of my presence and his absence. That is what listening is, considered as a religious act. I then knew that greatness is measured by what we efface ourselves towards.** There was no grandeur in his manner; neither was there any false modesty. He was serene, dignified, majestic; a man of transcending humility who gathered you into his embrace and taught you to look up.

Leadership, as anyone who has ever exercised it knows, is difficult. Mistakes that might be forgiven in someone else, in a leader are not. Even a leader who is in the right – especially one who is in the right – will be criticized. **If he or she is responsible, they will be thinking about the future, which means disturbing the present, and anyone who disturbs the present arouses anger, even a feeling of betrayal. A leader challenges people, and we do not like being challenged. He or she poses uncomfortable questions, the ones we would rather avoid.**

A leader – indeed anyone who follows in the footsteps of the prophets – is caught in the impossible tension between the demands of and the wishes of the people. How do leaders survive? Some by cunning and adroitness; some by ruthless suppression of opponents; others by indomitable belief in themselves. None of these apply to true spiritual giants, nor are they worthy of emulation by us. **True leaders survive by believing in the cause, not in themselves.** They do not take personal attacks personally. They respect the fact that their message will be difficult, that they are asking others to change, and that change is never less than painful.

The most eloquent people in history were the ones most convinced of their inability to speak. It is not that Moses lacked self-confidence, or self-worth, or a sense of personal destiny. Such considerations are utterly irrelevant. **It is that he, more than others, knew the difficulty of the task ahead.** He knew how painful it is to get people to acknowledge reality as it is, rather than as they would wish it to be. He knew how hard it is to get people to change. **Precisely because he was thinking about the task, not about himself, he declared himself unequal to it – and it is just this that made him the most qualified to do it.** Hence “Moses was a very humble man, more than anyone else on the face of the earth.”

Humility, then, is more than just a virtue: **it is a form of perception**, a language in which the ‘I’ is silent so that I can hear the ‘Thou’, the unspoken call beneath human speech, **the Divine whisper within all that moves, the voice of otherness that calls me to redeem its loneliness with the touch of love. Humility is what opens us to the world.**

Nor is it as rare as we think. Time and again when someone died and I conducted the funeral or visited the mourners, I discovered that the deceased had led a life of generosity and kindness unknown to even close relatives. I came to the conclusion – one I did not fully understand before I was given this window into private worlds – that the vast majority of saintly or generous acts are done quietly with no desire for public recognition. **That is humility, and what a glorious revelation it is of the human spirit.**

True virtue never needs to advertise itself. That is why today’s aggressive marketing of personality is so sad. It speaks of loneliness, the profound, endemic loneliness of a world without relationships of fidelity and trust. It testifies ultimately to a loss of faith – a loss of that knowledge, so precious to previous generations, that beyond the visible surfaces of this world is a Presence who knows us, loves us, and takes notice of our deeds. What else, secure in that knowledge, could we need?

And does it matter that humility no longer fits the confines of our age? The truth is that moral beauty, like music, always moves those who can hear beneath the noise. Virtues may be out of fashion, but they are never out of date. The things that call attention to themselves are never interesting for long, which is why our attention span grows shorter by the year. Humility – the polar opposite of ‘advertisements for myself’ – never fails to leave its afterglow. **We know when we have been in the presence of someone in whom the Divine presence breathes.** We feel affirmed, enlarged, and with good reason. For we have met someone who, not taking himself or herself seriously at all, has shown us what it is to take with utmost seriousness that which is not I.

I would like to suggest that the following Talmudic insight provides us with the foundation for Rabbi Sack's illuminating discussion on humility – ענווה. In tractate Megillah 31a our sages taught, "Where you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you will find His humility."

במקום שאתה מוצא גדולתו של הקדושה ברוך הוא, שם אתה מוצא ענוותנותו.
מגילה לא.

The Baal HaTanya, Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, asks how it is possible to approach God's greatness, to find it and be united with it? He answers that only through God's humility, by God compressing His infinite will and wisdom into the finite words and letters of the Torah, enabling the finite individual to indeed grasp and unite with the Infinite.

Cultivating humility – ענווה – is to be Godly, and being that the human being has been created in the image of God – בצלם אלהים – cultivating humility manifests our own inner being as exactly that – Infinite Godliness.

In conclusion I invite you to consider how you can begin mindfully, with intent and meaning, cultivating humility in your own unique and authentic way. Perhaps in a way of thinking, developing the consciousness of humility - the consciousness of living in the presence of greatness. Perhaps in speech, beginning to attentively listen to the other and then speak to the other in a way, so the other feels that you have allowed his/her presence to fill your space. Perhaps in a new behavior, where at times you mindfully restrain from doing, cultivating the silence of the self in the presence of that which is greater than self. After all, we are human beings and not human doings.

What can each of you do to gently and softly quiet the 'I' so that you can hear the 'Thou', the unspoken call beneath human thought, speech and deed - **the Divine whisper within all that moves, the voice of otherness that beckons each of us to redeem its loneliness with the touch of love. Humility is what opens us to the world.**