



Shabbat Table Discussions

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 Yeshiva University
CENTER FOR THE JEWISH FUTURE

HUMILITY

ISSUE #19
JANUARY 2013
TEVET 5773

A young student walked into a *beit midrash* (study hall) and to his surprise, saw an older man sitting and reciting to himself "I am lowly. I am nothing. I am worthless." The young student, seeing this as pious, sat down and started doing the same "I am lowly. I am nothing. I am worthless." The older man interrupted him and said "How can you be so arrogant to think that you are so humble?"

Humility is an important character trait. It is a trait that we tend to notice in others and it is easier to get along with people who are humble not haughty. As we strive for humility, we may face the following questions:

QUESTION ONE	Does humility negate the self-confidence and self-esteem necessary to improve ourselves?
QUESTION TWO	If we are applying for an employment position or a spot on a team, is there a way to be humble while still "showing off" our qualifications?
QUESTION THREE	Should we be humble about our service of God and in teaching others about Jewish values?

Let's Examine the Sources

There are a number of people in the Torah and Tanach who were known for their humility. First and foremost, the Torah states that Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble person ever:

This man Moshe was extremely humble, more than any other person on the face of the earth.

Bamidbar 12:3

הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עַنְנוּ מֵאֶת מִכֶּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָם בְּמָדָב יְבָג.

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Can you think of events in Moshe Rabbeinu's life that showed his great humility?
- 2) Can you think of events where Moshe Rabbeinu does not appear to be humble?

Humility and Personal Growth

The Talmud teaches us about another person who was humble. Commenting on the Mishna, *Sotah* 49a, that states that when Rabbi died, (genuine) humility ceased to exist, R. Yosef comments:

R. Yosef said to the recorder of the Mishna, remove the word humility because [humility doesn't cease to exist], I am still humble.

Sotah, 49b

אמר ר' יוסף לתרנא לא תיתני ענוה דאייכא אנא. סותה מט:

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think the Mishna states that genuine humility no longer exists?
- 2) How can R. Yosef state that he is the only person in the world who is truly humble? Isn't such a statement antithetical to humility?

There are two comments on the statement of R. Yosef which help shed light on what humility really is:

The trait of humility is not to be lowly in one's own eyes and be satisfied with one's lowly status. In fact, that is a terrible trait. Rather, the opposite is true. One should know and recognize that all of the positive qualities that one does have are not good enough and one should have a great desire for further improvement.

R. Shmuel Borenstein, Shem MiShmuel, Shavuot 5673

The meaning of humility is that one is not concerned about one's honor or disgrace, not because one sees oneself as lowly and thinks that they deserve this disgrace or lack of honor. Rather the meaning of humility is that [while one realizes one's own value,] one should act without any concern about one's honor. This is what R. Yosef meant when he said in Tractate Sotah "remove the word humility because I am still humble". In fact, it states in Tractate Horayot (14a) that in all the years that Rabbah served as the leader (R. Yosef was appointed as the rosh yeshiva of the Pumbedita Academy in the third century but deferred to Rabbah), R. Yosef did not even use his prominence to have a physician come to his home [as a favor, rather he went to the physician's workplace] ... even though R. Yosef knew that he was on the same level as Rabbah. He was never concerned about his own honor, and that is humility.

R. Naftali, T.Y. Berlin, Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar 12:3

והנה מגדה השפלות איננה להיות שפל בעניינו
ויסתפק בשפלותו שאין בה שבח ואדרבה
זה גורע ביותר אלא להיפוך שידע וכייר
שכל מה שיש לו אינו כלום בעניינו ומווצה
עצמו חסר ומשתווק מאי להשלמה
הרבי שמואל בורנשטיין,
שם משמויאל שביעות תרע"ג

ומশמעות עניינו הוא שאינו חוש
לכבודו וצערו ולא מושם שהוא
שפלו בעצמו ואיינו מכיר בעצמו
שאינו ראוי לזה הצער והעדן
הכבד אלא ממשמעות עניינו שהוא
מתנהגبيل חשש על כבודו והיינו
דאמר רב יוסף שלחי מס' סוטה לא
תיתני עזוה דאייכא أنا והוא
כדייתא שלחי מס' הוריות דכל שני
מלך רבה רב יוסף אפיילו אומנה
לבוייה לא קרא ... אף על גב שידע
רב יוסף שהוא בערך הרבה, מכל
מקום לא חשש לכבודו והיינו עזוה.
הרבי נפתלי צ.י. ברלין, העמק
דבר, במדבר יב:ג

Questions for the Table:

1. Do you think R. Borenstein and R. Berlin are giving two different definitions of humility or do the two definitions complement each other? Why?
2. Some people display haughtiness because of their own insecurity. How can the insights of R. Borenstein and R. Berlin help guide such a person?
3. Based on the comments of R. Borenstein and R. Berlin, what role does humility play when dealing with other people?

Humility in Relation to Other People

When we do something that we are proud of, we may want to tell others about our great achievements, but we don't want to seem boastful about it. How does one determine whether promoting our achievements is positive or negative?

Haughtiness is a despicable and vile trait and one should greatly distance oneself from it ... It is a trait that involves people criticizing other people, not for altruistic purposes, but rather out of haughtiness, jealousy, competition, and out of denial of any good in the other people. For this reason, it is said that one who is haughty is comparable to an idolater because one's jealousy and bad outlook will bring one to deny the truth on all matters in order to lower one's friend.

R. Menachem Meiri, Beit HaBechira, Sotah 4b

הגואה מדיה שנואה וمشקצת וצריך להרחיק ממנה הרבה ... והיא מדיה שבעליה מתגאים על שאר בני אדם שלא לשם שמים אלא דרך גואה וקנאה ונזוצה וכפירתם כל מעלה שבזולתם ועל זו נאמר כאן שהוא כאלו עובד ע"ז שהרי קנאתו ורוע טבעו מביאו לחולוק על האמת בכל דבר כדי להשפיל שכונגו. הרב מנחם מאירי, בית הבחירה, סותה ד:

R. Berlin has a comment about modesty that also relates to self-promotion:

Modesty all depends on normal ways of the world. In day-to-day life, there are things that are normal to do in public to show off one's abilities and means. For example, a wealthy person who enjoys wearing expensive clothing may wear them in public and it is not a lack of modesty. However, vocally boasting is not acceptable and is contemptible ... The same applies to [observance of] mitzvot. There are some mitzvot that are acceptable and pleasant to do in public and boasting about them is contemptible. There are other mitzvot that even telling the public about them is contemptible, such as charity and kindness when the recipient is going to be embarrassed.

R. Naftali, Z.Y. Berlin, Ha'Amek She'eilah 3:4

ענין צניעות הכל לפי ממדת דרך הארץ, שהרי גם בהיות העולם יש דברים שעושין אותם בפני עצמם להראות כחו ועוצם ידו כמו עשיר שלובש בגדים יקרים להתנות בפני רבים ואין זה יוצא ממדת צניעות, אבל התפארות בקהל גדול אין זה מתkowski וגם הוא מגונה ... וכמו כן במצבות יש דברים שמתkowski ונאה לעשותם ברבים, ורק ההודעה לרבים הוא מגונה, כמו צדקה וגמלות חסדים שהברERO מתבייש בהן. הרב נפתלי צ.י. ברלין, העמק שאללה ג:ד

Questions for the Table:

- How can we use R. Meiri's comments to determine when it is appropriate to criticize someone for something they are doing wrong and when it is not appropriate? How does one honestly assess if one is relating to others out of humility or jealousy?
- How can R. Berlin's comments be applied to someone who is applying for a position?
- What further insights can we gain from these two sources as to why R. Yosef specifically stated that he was humble?

Humility towards the Almighty

So far, we have learned that humility doesn't require one to feel lowly. However, we do find a number of sources that seem to describe a requirement to feel lowly. For example, the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* states:

R. Levitas of Yavneh states: You should be exceedingly meek because the end of human life is worms (i.e. burial in the ground).

Avot 4:4

רבי לוייטס איש יבנה אומר, מאד מאד חמי שפל רוח, שתקנות אנווש רמה. אבות ד:ד

Question for the Table:

How can we reconcile the definition of humility that we presented earlier with the statement of R. Levitas?

A comment of R. Moshe of Coucy can help us understand what R. Levitas was referring to:

[The verse (8:11) states] “Be careful lest you forget the Lord your God.” This is a warning to the Jewish people against becoming haughty when the Holy One Blessed Be He provides good for them and they say that it is their own profit that came about from their abilities and hard work and don’t appreciate the good of the Holy One Blessed Be He because of their haughtiness ... This is a warning against someone becoming haughty about the gifts of God, whether they are materials goods, beauty or wisdom. Rather, one should be humble and lowly before God and other people and thank the Creator for these gifts.

R. Moshe of Coucy, Semag, Negative Commandment no. 64

השמר לך פן תשכח את ה' אליהיך, אזהרה
שלא יתגאו בני ישראל כשהקדוש ברוך
הוא משפיע להם טובות ויאמרו שבריות
שליהם ובעוצם ידם ועמלם עשו והריווח
כל זה ולא יחויקו טוביה להקדוש ברוך
הוא מהמת גאנם ... ומכאן אזהרה שלא
יתגאה האדם بما שהננו הבורא הן במנון
הן ביפוי הן בחכמה אלא יש לו להיות עניין
מאד ושפל ברך לפני ה' אליהם ואנשיים
ולהודות לבוראו שהננו זה המעללה.
רב משה מקוצץ, סמ"ג לאוין ס' סד

Question for the Table:

In what way is the humility that we must practice before the Almighty similar to the humility that relates to ourselves and others? In what way is it different?

Conclusion

Humility can have different applications depending on whether we are dealing with our own personal self-worth, relating to others or our service of the Almighty. Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda has a comment that threads together these three aspects:

[There is a type of haughtiness that is] praiseworthy, when wise people are proud of their wisdom and righteous people [are proud of] their actions [out of] thanksgiving to the Creator for the great good that [He provides] by giving someone these abilities and the joy that comes with these abilities. This will cause a person to put in a greater effort to refine these abilities and to be humble towards one’s relatives and be proud of the achievements of one’s friends, be concerned about their honor, ignore their misdeeds, praise them, love them and advocate on their behalf.

**Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda, Chovot HaLevavot,
Sha’ar HaKeniah ch. 9**

והמשובח, כשמתגאה החכם
בחכמו והצדיק במעשהיו הוודאות
לగודל טובות הבורא עליו בהם
ושמחה בעבורם, ויגרם לו
להויסף ולהשתדל בהם ולהכנע
לקרוביו ולשם בחבוריו ולהוחס
על כבודם ולכוסות סכלותם
ולדבר בשבחם ולאהاب אותם
ולהילין בעדרם.
רביינו בחיי, חובות הלבבות,
שער הכונייה פרק ט

While it may seem counterintuitive, humility requires great self-awareness, and tremendous self-confidence. As Rabbeinu Bachya teaches, when we recognize that all of our talents and abilities are divinely ordained, it not only humbles us before God, but it also gives us proper perspective to our own achievements and our relationship with others. If we recognize the source of our talents and abilities and use them for good things, then we should be proud of that and know that we are in a position to encourage others to do similar good things. We will be proud, not jealous of other people’s achievements and when we observe other people’s shortcomings, we won’t think less of them. Having the proper perspective enables us to grow with confidence and relate positively to others.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Shmuel Borenstein (1855-1926) was the second Socatchover Rebbe (from Sochaczew, Poland). He is most well-known for his *Shem MiShmuel* which is a nine-volume work of Chasidic thought on the weekly Torah portion and the holidays.

R. Naftali T.Y. Berlin (also known as the Netziv 1816-1893) was born in Mir, Russia. He was a rosh yeshiva of the Volozhin Yeshiva. He was a prolific author, writing works such as *Ha'Amek She'eila*, a commentary on *She'iltot D'Rav Achai*, *Ha'Amek Davar*, a commentary on the Torah and *Meishiv Davar*, a collection of responsa.

R. Menachem Meiri (1249-1306) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well-known for his *Beit HaBechirah*, a commentary on the Talmud. He was heavily influenced by the teachings of Rambam.

R. Moshe of Coucy (13th century) was a French scholar. His *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* provides a detailed explanation of each of the 613 commandments.

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda (11th century) was a Spanish scholar. His *Chovot HaLevavot* is an ethical work that emphasizes refining oneself by focusing on one's thoughts and feelings.

PATIENCE

ISSUE #21
 JUNE 2013
 TAMUZ 5773

A father was very excited to take his two pre-teen children on a fishing trip. After a twenty minute drive to the lake, the father told his kids to turn off their electronic devices and leave them in the car. He showed them how to attach bait to the hook and he cast the line into the water. Within a few seconds, one of the children said "Dad, why didn't we catch any fish yet?"

We live in an age where “instant” is becoming more and more desirable. We have instant access to information; food items are being produced so that the food is ready to eat as quickly as possible; even items used for observance of mitzvot are marketed so that no preparations are required to observe the mitzvah (e.g. oil lamps for Chanukah, pre-packaged charoset). Instant access to everything can make us more productive and finish projects at a quicker pace. However, a recent Pew study of technology experts showed that one of the concerns of instant access to everything is that it leads to a lack of patience.¹ Let’s consider the following questions:

QUESTION ONE	While we may value patience, when we are patient, we may not perform tasks as quickly and won’t accomplish as much. How do we balance the two values?
QUESTION TWO	If we are helping a friend or relative learn how to do something and they are not able to figure it out, at what point can we give up and stop? How do we know if we are lacking patience or the matter is beyond the comprehension of the person we are trying to teach?
QUESTION THREE	How do we decide whether to prepare for a mitzvah ourselves, purchase a pre-packaged item or have someone else do it for us?

Let's Examine the Sources

The very first lesson of *Pirkei Avot* is about patience:

[The Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be patient in judgment, teach many students and create safeguards for the Torah.

Pirkei Avot 1:1

הם אמרו שלשה דברים: **הוא מותנים בדין**
והעמידו תלמידים הרבה ועשו סייג לתורה
אבות א:א

Question for the Table:

While the simple interpretation of this statement is directed towards rabbinical judges, what universal lessons about patience can we learn from the Mishnah?

who gets angry will inevitably forget things (i.e. make mistakes).

Beit HaBechirah, Avot 1:1

הכוועס סוף שהוא משכח את דבריו.

בית הבחירה, אבות א:א

R. Meiri's comments focus on the *bein adam lachaveiro* (interpersonal) aspect of patience. A lack of patience can sometimes lead to taking our frustrations out on others. R. Yisrael Tausig quotes his father-in-law, R. Yosef Pressburger, who explains the Mishnah's connection between this type of patience and teaching many students:

The three ideas [in the Mishnah] are all connected: If you are patient and interact with people with a positive disposition, not with impatience, you will merit teaching many students and through them you can create safeguards for the Torah ...

Beit Yisrael, Shemot 3:5

שלשה דברים אלו תלויים זה בזה: אם תהי מתוונים ותקבלו כל אדם בסבר פנים יפות, ולא תהוו קפודנים, תזכו להעמיד תלמידים הרבה וועל ידיהם תוכלו לעשות סיג לתורה ...

בית ישראל, שמות ג:ה

Questions for the Table:

- 1) How can "teach many students" be applied to those who are not teachers by profession?
- 2) Based on R. Meiri and R. Tausig, why is it important for everyone (not just judges and teachers) to have patience for others?

Patience and Experiencing the Process

Have you ever made something yourself rather than buy it ready-made? Did the fact that you made the item yourself impact your experience of using it? The Talmud relates how R. Chiya prepared educational materials to teach his students:

R. Chiya said: I make sure that the Torah is never forgotten from the Jewish people. I bring flaxseed and plant it and then weave nets from the plant to trap deer. I feed its meat to orphans and with its skins I prepare scrolls and head to a place where there are no school teachers and write the Five Books of Moses for five different students and I teach the Six Orders of Mishnah to six students and tell them "teach what you have learned to your fellow students."

Ketuvot 103b

א"ל ר' חייא أنا עבדו שלא משתמשת תורה מישראל דאיתננא כייתה ושדיינה ומגדלנה נישבי וצידנא טביה ומאכילה בישרא ליתמי ואדריכנא מגילה מאמשכי דעתיה וסליקנא למטא דלית בה מקרי דרזקי וכתיבנה חמשה חומשי לחמשא ינוקי ומהניננא שיתא סיידי לשיתא ינוקי, לכל חד וזה אמרי ליה אתה סיירך לחברך.

כתובות קג:

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why did R. Chiya go through all of the preparatory steps to attain the scrolls? Wouldn't it have been a better use of his time to purchase the scrolls from a professional?
- 2) Why do you think R. Chiya excluded the children from the initial preparations?

R. Azriel Hildesheimer explains why R. Chiya went to such an extreme to prepare everything personally:

The commentators all wondered: Why was it necessary for all of these peculiar preparations from planting the flax, [making the] nets, trapping, preparing the parchment and writing the scrolls with an effort that had no limits? Why didn't he just purchase

כל המפרשים תמהו למה לי כל ההכנות התמוהות הללו מזריעת הפשון, מכמורות, צידה תיקון הקלפים וכתיבת המגילות ביגעה בלי שיעור ולמה לא היה לוקה ה' חומשיים ושיתא סדרי משנה כתובים?

Patience in Our Actions

In the Shabbat Table Discussion on *zerizut* (acting with promptness), we noted the comments found in the anonymously written *Orchot Tzaddikim* about balancing *zerizut* with patience:

Although promptness is very positive, one should make sure not to rush in one's work too much. One who rides [a horse] too quickly is likely to get hurt and one who runs very quickly will fall. One cannot complete a task properly if it is rushed; doing something properly requires patience. This is why our rabbis stated "be patient in judgment." Promptness is to be awake, alert and ready to act, but never to rush what one is doing. These issues require great wisdom to determine when one should act quickly and when one should act with patience.

Orchot Tzaddikim, Sha'ar HaZerizut

A similar idea is presented by R. Aharon Levine:

Although patience is praiseworthy and there is no greater trait, this is only while one is contemplating whether a specific action is proper. However, once one decides that it is proper, patience is no longer a good idea ... If a person is quick in one's actions and swift in one's ways before thinking about the virtues of it, then this is not promptness but rather haste and sloppiness that one should avoid whenever possible. However, if a person is quick in one's actions after contemplating and recognizing that the action is good and proper, then this type of promptness is praiseworthy and the reward is great.

HaDerash VeHaIyun, Parashat Re'eh, no. 211

אף-על-פי שהזריזות טובה מאוד, יזהר שלא ימהר בעבודתו יותר מדי כי הרוכב ב מהירות הוא קרוב מאוד להיכשל. וכן מי שהוא רץ ב מהירות הוא נופל. ולא יתרכן לתיקן מעשה מתוקן בבהלה, אבל במתוון יתוקנו העניינים. וכן אמרו רובינו: "הו מתונים בדיין" (אבות א, א). והזריזות - שהיא ניעור לבו ויקייז מחשבותיו ויקלו איבריו למלאותו, אך לא ימהר בשום עניין. וכל אלו העוניים צרכיהם חוכמה גדולה, מתי ימהר ומהר אחר.

אורחות צדיקים שער הזריזות.

האומנם משובחת היא המתינות ואין לך מדה טובה ממנה, אכן זה רק כל עוד שלא התבונן האדם ולא בא לידי הכרה, כי טוב הדבר אשר בדעתו לעשותו ונכוון לעשותו. אבל לאחר שבא לידי הכרה הזאת, אז לא טובה עוד המתינות ... אם האדם זרין במעשהיו ונחפזו בתהallocותיו, בטרם התישב בדעתו ועמד על חקר הדבר, אז אין זאת זריזות רק מהירות ופחוות, שיש למנווע מהן בכל היכולה. אבל אם האדם זרין במעשהיו אחריו התבוננו ואחריו הכרינו כי טוב הדבר ונכוון לעשותו, אז הזרירות הזאת משובחת ושכירה הרבה מאד.

הדרש והעיוון, פרשת ראה, ס' ריא

Questions for the Table:

- 1) *Orchot Tzaddikim* interprets "be patient in judgment" as referring to patience in our actions. How does patience in our own actions relate to the patience required of judges?
- 2) *Orchot Tzaddikim* states that one should act quickly to begin an activity but patient when one carries out the activity. R. Levine states that one should be patient while deciding whether to engage in an activity and then quick once the decision is made. Are the two ideas contradictory or complementary?

Patience With Others

R. Menachem Meiri, based on the comments of *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, extrapolates a different lesson from the first Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot*:

In Avot D'Rabbi Natan they added that being patient is not only applicable in judgment but that a person should be patient in everything and shouldn't be quick to get impatient because one

באבות של ר"נ פ"א' הוסיפו בדבר שלא בדיין לדבר ש לא היה אמן כי לא שהיה אדם נותן מתוון בכל דבריו ולא יהיה נמהר להקפיד על דבריו שככל

written versions of the Five Books and Moses and the Six Orders of Mishnah? This is very puzzling! ... [One can answer] in a simple and logical way that if a student sees how much effort the teacher exerted on behalf of the student, the student will be more interested in listening.

Novellae of R. Azriel Hildesheimer, Ketuvot 103b

אתמהה... בדרך נגלה והשכל הפשט מצד עצמו אמרת ונכון דאם התלמיד רואה כמה יגיעות יגע המורה בהכנות בעדו יטה לו יותר לב ואוזן.

חדושי רבי עזראיל הלדסהיימר, כתובות

קג:

R. Chiya's students had a greater appreciation for the process involved in production of the scrolls that they learned from and it greatly enhanced their experience. At the same time, R. Chiya specifically did not involve the children in the beginning stages of the process; they only participated in its final stages. Perhaps he felt that they didn't have enough patience to go through the entire process and instead of appreciating it, they would have resented it. R. Chiya's method allowed his students to reap the benefits of connecting to the process by ensuring that they had an appropriate and balanced level of involvement.

Questions for the Table:

- 1) R. Hildesheimer's comments focus on the impact that R. Chiya's actions had on his students. What impact do you think these actions had on R. Chiya?
- 2) What are some factors to determine whether it is reasonable to perform a specific preparation personally?

Patience, like all traits, is an especially valuable characteristic when we learn to balance it with other traits and values. We can benefit greatly from patiently weighing decisions and carrying out our actions with precision as long as our patience doesn't become an excuse for indecision or procrastination. When we help others, we should be patient and understand that not everyone has the same talents and abilities. If one is truly patient, it will be easy to determine when we can no longer help someone else with what he/she needs to be taught. Whether teaching others or doing something ourselves, we should realize that the more patience we have for the experience, the more we will appreciate it.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, CJF

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

Orchot Tzaddikim was written in the 14th or 15th century. The author is unknown. The book discusses many different character traits and is often quoted in discussions on ethics and values.

R. Aharon Levine (1879-1941) was known as "The Reisha Rav," after the community he led in Reisha, Poland. His *HaDerash VeHaIyun* is a collection of his sermons. He was a member of the Polish parliament before the outbreak of World War II and was murdered by the Nazis in 1941.

R. Menachem Meiri (1249-1306) was a French scholar. He is most well-known for his *Beit HaBechirah*, a commentary on the Talmud. He was heavily influenced by the teachings of Rambam.

R. Yisrael Tausig (1889-1967) was born in Hungary and moved to Jerusalem in the 1930's. He was the rabbi of the Batei Ungarin community in Jerusalem, a community built for Hungarians who moved to Israel. His *Beit Yisrael* is a collection of comments on the Torah portion.

R. Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899) was a German rabbi who served a number of communities and founded a yeshiva. He is most well-known for modernizing Orthodox Judaism in Germany.

¹ "Millennials will benefit and suffer due to their hyperconnected lives," Pew Research Center study, February 2012, available at: <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Hyperconnected-lives/Overview/Overview-of-responses.aspx>.