READING FOR HUMILITY ©

*Anavah / Humility*

By Alan Morinis

Your interior world is the realm of soul, and the soul-trait that is turned up too high or too low in you defines your spiritual curriculum. If you have already grasped this understanding, then you are confronted with a difficult problem: where to start? What is the first soul-trait to which you should devote your attention? Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda wrote the classic Mussar text *The Duties of the Heart* (in Hebrew *Hovot ha-levavot*) in Spain in 1080. He helps direct our attention by posing a question: on what do the virtues depend?

His answer is clear: “All virtues and duties are dependent on humility.” This is a principle all later Mussar teachers have endorsed—the first leg of the spiritual life involves the cultivation of humility—called *anavah* or *shiflut* in Hebrew.

Unfortunately, “humility” sounds so much like “humiliation” that it’s easy to get a very wrong impression of this soul-trait. In the traditional Jewish understanding, humility has nothing to do with being the lowest, most debased, shrinking creature on earth. Rav Kook says it well:

> Humility is associated with spiritual perfection. When humility effects depression it is defective; when it is genuine it inspires joy, courage and inner dignity.

Mussar teaches that real humility is always associated with healthy self-esteem. Lack of self-esteem leads to unholy and false feelings of worthlessness.

Being humble doesn’t mean being nobody; it just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be. After all, Moses, who is considered the greatest of the prophets, is described in the Torah as “very anav [humble], more than any other men who were upon the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3).

If a leader as great as Moses was so humble, then there is surely more to humility than the shrinking meekness we ordinarily associate with the term.

Too little humility—what we’d call arrogance or conceit—is easily seen as a spiritual impediment, but the opposite is also true. Too much humility also throws a veil across the inner light of the soul. The rabbis in the Talmud make this point very forcefully through the following story. The passage in the Talmud begins: “The anivut [humility] of Rabbi Zechariah son of Avkulas caused the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem” (*Gittin* 55b-56a). This was a cataclysmic event in Jewish history that is still mourned today. How could a virtue like humility cause so terrible a catastrophe?
To understand, we have to enter the story a little earlier, when a man named Bar Kamtza sought revenge on the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem by going to the Romans to claim that the Jews were rebelling. To prove his point, he told the Roman leadership to send a sacrifice to the Temple. Normally such a sacrifice would be offered up, but Bar Kamtza caused a minor blemish on the animal that was unnoticeable to the Romans but that he knew the rabbis would see, and as a result of which they would be bound to refuse to accept the offering. This refusal would be “proof” that the Jews were in rebellion against Rome.

When the sacrifice came before the rabbis in the Temple, they noticed the hidden blemish, and they understood immediately what was going on. One suggested that they offer the sacrifice anyway. Zechariah ben Avkulas, however, argued that if they did that, people would draw the incorrect conclusion that it was permitted to offer blemished sacrifices.

The rabbis then suggested that Bar Kamtza be killed to prevent him from telling the Romans and endangering the Jewish people. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas responded again, saying, “If we do so, people will incorrectly think that those who inflict blemishes on sacrifices are put to death.”

As a result of the priest’s unwillingness to accept either course of action, Bar Kamtza succeeded in his plan. The sacrifice was denied, and as Bar Kamtza had planned, the Romans assumed the Jews to be in rebellion. The Romans attacked and ultimately destroyed the Temple. The Talmud concludes that “the anivut of Zechariah ben Avkulas caused the loss of our home, the burning of our sanctuary, and our exile from the land.”

There is no understanding this statement if anivut (a synonym for anavah) meant humility as we usually understand the term. What can we learn of the Jewish concept of humility from the story of Zechariah ben Avkulas?

Zechariah ben Avkulas showed humility because he did not act with presumption—either by offering a blemished animal that contravened the rules, or by condoning murder—but he actually manifested too much humility, because he shrank from the task he had been handed. He held the fate of the Temple and his people in his hands, yet he seems to say, “Who am I to make such unprecedented decisions that will potentially mislead the people as to the law?” This was his excessive humility. His sense of himself was flawed because he saw himself as less capable of solving a real-life dilemma of great consequence than he actually was.

To clarify the picture even more, let’s add for consideration another enigmatic reflection on humility from the Talmud where it says: “Anyone who sets a particular place for himself to pray in the synagogue, the God of Abraham stands in his aid, and when he dies, people say of him, ‘this was a humble person’” (Brachot 6b).

Where is the humility in sitting in the same place in the synagogue whenever you come to pray? The answer is that by fixing yourself to one spot, you thereby free up all the other space for others to use.
This example helps us frame a Jewish definition of humility as “limiting oneself to an appropriate amount of space while leaving room for others.” Sitting in a predictable place, you make room for others to occupy their own spaces, too. Zechariah ben Avkulas gave up too much of his “space,” considering that the space a person can occupy can be physical, emotional, verbal, or even metaphorical.

This definition also fits Maimonides’ concept that humility is not the opposite of conceit, which would be self-effacement, but rather stands between conceit and self-effacement. Humility is not an extreme quality, but a balanced, moderate, accurate understanding of yourself that you act on in your life. That’s why humility and self-esteem go hand-in-hand.

When you understand humility in terms of the space you occupy, it’s important to clarify that we are not all meant to occupy the same amount of space. Some people appropriately occupy a lot of space, as would be the case with a leader—think of Moses again. But if a leader laid claim to even more space than was appropriate, they would be a Pharaoh. And we have already learned from the case of Zechariah ben Avkulas that for a leader to shrink from his responsibilities—to take up less space than appropriate—can have disastrous consequences.

At the other end, it may be entirely appropriate for a more solitary person to occupy less than an average volume of space. Were a person of this nature to force themselves to speak up more, be more outgoing, etc.—in other words, to fill more space—the consequences could be negative at the level of soul. Nor would they be serving the soul to withdraw themselves even further from what is already suitable to them.

All Mussar teachers stress that anavah is the first soul-trait to work on because humility entails an unvarnished and honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. Without this accurate self-awareness, nothing else in your inner life will come into focus in its true measure—and it is not accidental that the Hebrew word for soul-traits, which is middah (pl. middot), literally does mean “measure.” Without humility, either you will be so puffed up with arrogance that you won’t even see what is really needing some work, or you will be so deflated and lacking in self-esteem that you will despair of being able to make the changes that are lit up so glaringly in your self-critical mind.

Is humility a soul-trait you need to work at? The questions to ask yourself are these: do you leave enough space in your life for others, or are you jamming up your world with your self? Or is there space you rightfully ought to occupy that you need to stretch into? Your answers are the measure of your humility.
MEETING FOR HUMILITY

As this will be your first meeting as a group, your facilitator will lead you in an invocation, after which there will be introductions.

1. Invocation

   The facilitator reads and all consider:

   It is stated in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1: “Ben Zoma taught: Who is wise? One who learns from all persons, as it is written (Psalm 119:99), ‘From all my teachers have I gained understanding.’”

   Ben Zoma was not a rabbi, not ordained, not even thought of well enough by his colleagues to be called by his own first name (Shimon), but rather was called by his father’s name, son of Zoma. Yet, the haggadah teaches us that the president of the Sanhedrin, Rabbi Elazar, learns from this lowly ranked scholar. Not only does Rabbi Elazar learn from ben Zoma, but he gives him the credit for the information taught.

   Rabbi Ovadiah from Bartenura expands on this same thought by commenting on this mishnah, saying: “Who learns from every person – and even though he is lesser than him, since he isn’t standing on his honor and learns things from those who are clearly of lower station. For his wisdom is only for the sake of heaven, and not something with which to get glory and splendor.”

2. Introductions

   1. Everyone present introduce himself or herself to the group, with a few comments on why you are participating in this program. What is your kavvanah (intention)?

   2. As this will be an introduction to Mussar for many if not all of the group, you have had as a reading assignment the chapter by Immanuel Etkes describing Rabbi Yisrael Salanter and the Mussar Movement he founded, and summarizing some of the key points about Mussar. Your facilitator will guide you in a 15-20 minute discussion in which everyone can reflect on what you learned from that reading, and what questions it raised for you.

   3. Confidentiality: All participants in The Season of Mussar program must treat every statement made by a program participant, whether in a meeting or outside, as privileged and confidential. This commitment is essential in order that all participants feel safe to share their personal lives with the others in the group, knowing that nothing that is said in the context of this program will be repeated to others, for any purpose.

3. The Text Discussion

1. How would you articulate in your own words the principle of why humility is generally designated as the first place to focus on in doing the soul-work of Mussar?

2. “Mussar teaches that real humility is always associated with healthy self-esteem.” Does this seem contradictory to you, or does it make good sense?

3. When Moses is described in Torah as “very anav [humble], more than any other men who were upon the face of the earth,” does that confound or illuminate your understanding of humility as seen in Jewish thought?

4. In light of this reading, can you think of other examples that parallel that of Zechariah ben Avkulas, where a person in authority declined to fill their space and, instead, did what was conventional but less than the situation required?

5. We have here a Jewish definition of humility as “limiting oneself to an appropriate amount of space while leaving room for others.” Do you have experience that confirms or refutes that definition?

6. Reflect personally on the questions: do you leave enough space in your life for others, or are you jamming up your world with your self? Or is there space you rightfully ought to occupy that you need to stretch into?
4. Practice

a. A Mussar Contemplation on Humility

This week’s reading began with the teaching of Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda that humility is the root of all the other virtues. Most of us need help to become appropriately humble and Bahya provides a tool to help us work on that crucial soul-trait. He offers a group of contemplations that are designed to help develop humility. There are formal ways to do these sorts of contemplations but it is enough for your group just to spend a few moments thinking on each one of them long and hard enough to make some impression.

You’ll get a sign that you contemplated them deeply enough when thoughts along these lines pop into your head at unexpected moments during your day.

Take a few moments to focus our thoughts and imagination on the following subjects:

1. the transience of life, and the uncertainty of the moment of death, along with its finality, and how none of a person’s possessions or even body will accompany him or her

   Really think on that for a moment. Do you accept everything he says? How real is death to you? Do you live as if one day you will really die? Think on this.

   Then spend some time just letting your mind run over these two additional contemplations:

2. the grandeur and power of the Creator of the sun, moon, stars and the celestial sphere, the earth and all that is on it, inanimate objects, plants and animals

3. the upheavals in this world, how swiftly kingdoms and governments disappear, how people are moved from one predicament to another, one nation is destroyed for the benefit of another, and the end of all is death

“When a person’s thoughts are never free of one of these points,” ibn Pakuda concludes, “he will be humble and uninflated at all times, until humility becomes second nature to him and inseparable from him.”

b. Accounting of the Soul (cheshbon ha’nefesh)

This week we begin the Accounting of the Soul practice that we will continue to do throughout the course (and beyond, I hope). The instructions are given in a separate document, called Accounting of the Soul practice, which you can access from the link at the head of the email you received to introduce all your Week 1 materials.

Accounting of the Soul involves two practices: recitation of a phrase in the morning and evening journaling. For your morning recitation, the phrase you will use for this week and next week (i.e., as long as humility is our focus) is:

No more than my place, no less than my space.
5. *Chevruta* (learning partner) matching

You will be given a questionnaire to fill out that will help your facilitator match you to a compatible learning partner. You will be informed of your match soon after your first meeting. You will meet with your *chevruta* every second week, in the week that your *va’ad* is not meeting.

6. Closing

A traditional visualization meant to cultivate *anavah*.

The Mussar teachers had great respect for the transformative power of visualization. In many places in the writings of Rabbis Eliyahu Lopian (1872-1970) and Eliyahu Dessler (1891-1954), for example, we find great respect for the power of “deep reflection and vivid imagery” (to quote Rabbi Dessler) to leave its imprint on the soul. The Mussar teachers developed the concept of *kibbutz roshmim*, which means the accumulation of mental impressions to name the effect visualization has on the soul.

This visualization we will do is suggested to us by Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, in his Mussar classic, *The Duties of the Heart*, which dates from 1080. Concerning the cultivation of *anavah*, he writes there:

“The methods of acquiring humility, and the way this is made easier for a person, consist in the following: that one’s thought and imagination are kept focused on several points,” which he then enumerates [The Gate of Humility, Chapter 5]. This visualization covers only the first of the seven.

What is your origin? Where do you come from? Rabbi ibn Paquda answers the question: “a drop of semen and blood.”

Envision that humble origin, when one cell met another, and merged. [pause]

Where in that picture can you find the identity with which you so closely identify at this time?

One cell becomes two becomes four until a full-fledged body is formed in the womb.

Imagine with intensity the physical origin of life and allow that truth to penetrate. Know that you had no control over initiating or guiding the whole process. Appreciate that you are not your own creation.

See yourself at the moment of birth, “weak and frail in body and in limbs.” [pause]

There is surely greatness, wisdom and majesty in the origins of life, but none of that connects to the ego, none of it justifies or underwrites arrogance. Remembering our origins helps us perceive that, at root, we are not who we ordinarily think ourselves to be.
To close with the words of ibn Paquda:

“Reflection on this and other aspects of the human condition surely leads to humility, as David, peace be upon him, said, ‘Oh God, what is man, that You should care about him?’” (Psalms / Tehillim 144:3).

Confirm time and place for the next meeting