Lesson 2-1  HUMILITY (part 1)

Contents:

1. Introduction
2. A Talmudic Insight into Humility
3. Defining Humility
4. Self assessing your own Humility
5. Practice
6. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Now we embark on our first middah—the soul-trait of humility. Most Mussar study and practice focuses on specific soul-traitss, one at a time, and it is traditional to make humility our first port of call because what we call “humility” [ענוה—anavah, in Hebrew] actually invokes the entire subject of ego, and the relationship of self to soul. This is such a fundamental topic because it affects all other elements of the work you might do on yourself.

All the study and practice we have guided you to do in Week One of this course has been groundwork that has prepared us for what comes now. Mussar provides us with the image of life as a spiritual ladder that we climb, rung by rung. The rungs of the ladder are the traits of the inner life—the middot. How you practice generosity, kindness, forgiveness, honor, truth and other traits are all rungs of the ladder. It may be that any one trait is so perfected in you that there is no climbing necessary. Thank God, we all have some traits like that. It’s marvelous that some people can be as patient as a rock while waiting behind someone fumbling so painfully slowly for a key or credit card. Yes, there are such people, though few of us are among them. No matter how good we might be in some areas, however, there are bound to be other areas of inner being where each of us is not so whole. In those specific traits you will find your personal spiritual curriculum.

As we noted, one rung of the ladder to which the Mussar masters have always paid special attention is the trait of humility, anavah. Very often they suggested that this was the place to start the Mussar journey, and we will follow that advice, too. Their reasoning is not hard to uncover. The topic of “humility” covers all aspects of your life where your own sense of ego figures. We tend to perceive and to relate to our lives through the lens of the self, and so if there is any distortion in that lens, then everything else in our lives will appear distorted as well, whether we realize it or not. This idea is conveyed in the more classic language of The Duties of the Heart,¹ where we read: “All virtues and duties are dependent on humility.”

¹ written by Bahya ibn Paquda and published in Spain 1070, originally in Arabic.
2. A Talmudic Insight into Humility

A story we find in the Talmud helps us begin to get a sense of the distinctively Jewish understanding of humility. The passage begins: “The humility of Rabbi Zechariah son of Avkulas caused the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem” (Gittin 55b-56a). Loss of the Temple was a cataclysmic event in Jewish history that is still mourned today. How could a virtue like humility cause such a terrible catastrophe?

To understand, we have to enter the story a bit earlier, when a man named Bar Kamtza had been slighted and 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 which he knew the rabbis would see. He knew that once they saw the blemish, the rabbis would 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 immediately noticed the hidden blemish, and they understood what was going on. One sage suggested that they offer the sacrifice anyway. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas, however, argued that if they did so, 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 again responded, this time by saying, “If we do so, then people will incorrectly think that those who inflict blemishes on sacrifices are put to death.”

As a result of this unwillingness to accept either course of action, Bar Kamtza succeeded in his plan. The sacrifice wasn’t offered up, and the Romans took this as proof of a Jewish rebellion. The Romans attacked and ultimately destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The Talmud concludes: “The humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas caused the loss of our home, the burning of our sanctuary, and our exile from the land.”

What can we learn of the Jewish concept of humility from the story of Zechariah ben Avkulas?

3. Defining Humility

The Jewish concept of humility is based on the idea that life is a mission. When you send a person on a mission you have to supply him with equipment and it’s God who assigns us our talents on the basis of His assessment of the sort of tools we require to accomplish our mission. For example, a person such as Moses, whose mission was to become the greatest prophet, had to have been supplied with a lot of very specialized spiritual equipment to enable him to succeed at his mission. But this equipment is always on loan. It doesn’t belong to the worker but to the company, and a person must be very careful not to confuse his or her self with the tasks accomplished with those borrowed tools.
Our task is to recognize our gifts and to be humble in recognizing that we are recipients of those gifts, not their creator. We must then put them to work in real-life contexts.

Humility means occupying the space in life that fits who we are—neither claiming more than is appropriate to us, nor shrinking from occupying our rightful space.

Rabbi Zechariah showed humility because he did not act with presumption—neither by offering a blemished animal that contravened the rules, nor by condoning murder. But he actually manifested too much humility in shrinking from the task at hand. The fate of the Temple and his people depended on him, 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 failure to occupy his rightful space. His sense of self was flawed because he saw himself as less capable of solving a real-life dilemma of great consequence than he actually was. For surely if God sent the challenge, Rabbi Zechariah had the capability to handle it.

Maimonides’ concept is that humility is not the opposite of arrogance (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 where you actually fit in 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, he or she would be the wicked Pharaoh, who defined himself as a deity. And we have already learned from the case of Rabbi 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 soul consequences could be negative. Nor would it serve the soul to withdraw even further from what is already suitable.

4. Self assessing your own humility

Humility entails an unvarnished and honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. Without humility, either you will be so puffed up with arrogance that you won’t even see what really needs work, or you will be so deflated and lacking in self-esteem that you will despair of being able to make the necessary changes. Recalling that the word middah that we use to describe the whole category of all the inner traits actually and literally means “measure,” we invite you to ask yourself, what is the measure of your humility? Your answer can and should be framed in terms of space. Do you occupy your rightful space?

The graph of the quality looks like this:

self-abnegation -- humility -- pride -- arrogance
Think about some everyday scenario that you encounter. Perhaps at your weekly staff meeting at work, there is one person who is always more assertive than his position would call for. Or there is someone else (perhaps you?) who has ideas but is reticent to speak up. The possible scenarios are endless, but thinking about some genuine ones will help you bridge the gap from the theoretical to the practical.

Not everyone needs to develop humility. Some people are already too humble, not bringing themselves forward when appropriate. In order to become more whole, one person needs to cultivate humility and another needs to enhance pride. We are strongly warned against arrogance, but Mussar does encourage self-confidence and self-esteem.

In Psalms 93, God is described as: “Hashem malach geyut lavesh”—“God will have donned grandeur,” providing us with a term to name the positive counterpart to arrogance—geyut or grandeur. And it is also true that one’s sense of self is contextual. A person who acts arrogantly with his immediate family may be meek and submissive in his place of work.

5. Practice

In cultivating the trait of humility, you need to become aware if and when you are acting with too much humility or too little humility. To that end, it’s helpful to have a reminder of the basic concept, a vision of the ideal way you would like to be. To do this, the traditional Mussar method is to choose a simple phrase that captures the ideal of that quality. The phrase we recommend for humility is No more than my place, no less than my space.

**DO:** Every morning, repeat to yourself the phrase that defines humility:

*No more than my place, no less than my space.*

Although we want you to use the assigned phrase in this program, in general it is possible to select other phrases, usually from Torah, Talmud and rabbinic writings. Phrases can be in Hebrew, English or any language that is meaningful to you. The point of the phrase is to capture your ideal image of the trait. Choose a focus phrase for each middah that you work on.

Every morning, soon after you have awakened, read over to yourself the focus phrase for humility. It might be helpful to write the phrase on a card that you set up right beside your bed, and in other places where you are sure to see them and be reminded, whether in a room where you do morning meditation or taped to your coffeemaker or on a post-it on your bedroom mirror.

Read over the phrase slowly and with full concentration. Read it aloud. Say it several times. Chant it. Go over this reminder in whatever ways cause it to be so clearly illuminated in your mind that it seems to have been written in neon.
If you meditate or are familiar with meditation, you can use the phrase in your meditation. Or you can practice it as a visualization, visualizing yourself in situations in which you are acting in accordance with the phrase.

Once you’ve really experienced the phrase in so penetrating a way, go on with your day. Of course, during the day try to live up to the ideal stated on your reminder card, but not with strain or by repressing tendencies. Just do your best.

What do you see in yourself that you can record in your journal? Do you notice yourself having an excess of humility, putting yourself down or not bringing forward the skills and abilities you have? Too much pride, focusing on how important your ideas are, or taking up others’ time for no real purpose?

**DO:** Continue daily journaling of your experiences of humility (or its absence).

**VIEW:** sample journal responses to see some examples of what previous students have entered in their journals in response to this assignment.

**DO:** Add a comment or question to the course Discussion Group.

6. Conclusion

Ego is the lens through which we see our lives and our interaction with it. For some people, everything is refracted through the lens of self and everything is measured on the scale of ego—as is encouraged in our culture, which trumpets empty celebrity, and finds a market for magazines named “Self” and “Us.” Other people are so selfless that they neglect themselves totally, being so dysfunctional that they become burdensome dependents to others and the community. As we have learned, the Mussar teachers caution us to pay close attention to wherever we have a personal tendency to gravitate to extremes, and, in the case of ego, neither worshiping at the altar of self nor complete neglect of self represent states of spiritual excellence.

Now, as you go forward in your Mussar studies and practice, we encourage you to aim to do so on a strong and balanced foundation, which true humility provides. Even as the focus moves to other topics, always keep an eye out for the ways of the ego, along with its potential to distort your perception of any of the elements of your life.