

Humility

ANAVAH

*Occupy a rightful space, neither too much nor too little.
Focus neither on your own virtues nor the faults of others.*

Generally, man finds his delight in examining his own virtues, in discovering even the smallest of his positive attributes and the most minute faults of his friends, for he can then find reason to be proud even when in the company of great ones whose little fingers are thicker than his loins.

—Rabbi M. M. Leffin, *Cheshbon ha’Nefesh*

SOON AFTER I HAD FINISHED giving a talk, an elderly woman approached me. I greeted her, and she started to say something. “You have a wonderful, wonderful . . .,” she began, speaking slowly and stretching out the words, giving me lots of time to guess what it was she was leading up to. “Voice,” I finished her sentence in my mind, since I had just addressed the group. No, I then thought, maybe she was about to say “way with words,” since people do say I am articulate. And right after that, because I felt I had just made a really good presentation, I upped the ante to “presence.” Before I could speculate any further, however, her sentence arrived at the station to which her words had slowly been winding. “. . . wife,” she pronounced, her eyes smiling warmly. Oh, I thought. Then, “Thank you,” I recovered. “How do you know her?”

I’ve never had a more graphic illustration of my own instinctive craving for praise and honor. Having blindly stepped in it up to my ankle, there was no way I could deny where I stood. Here was my spiritual curriculum.

Where Your Curriculum Begins

I've emphasized that your interior world is the realm of soul, and the soul-traits that are turned up too high or too low define your spiritual curriculum. But where to start the course? In *Duties of the Heart*, Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda 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."¹ This is a principle later Mussar teachers have endorsed—the first leg of the spiritual journey involves the cultivation of humility. The importance they place on humility is underlined in the Talmud,² where we read: "One who sacrifices a whole offering shall be rewarded for a whole offering. One who offers a burnt-offering shall have the reward of a burnt-offering. But one who offers humility to God and man shall be rewarded with a reward as if he had offered all the sacrifices in the world. As it is written, 'A contrite and humbled spirit is a sacrifice to God. God does not ignore a broken heart.'"³

The Mussar teachers stress that humility is a primary soul-trait to work on because it entails an unvarnished and honest assessment of who you are. Without this accurate self-awareness, nothing else in your inner life will come into focus in its true measure—and it is no accident that the word that means "soul-trait" in Hebrew is *middah* (pl. *middot*), which literally does mean "measure." Without humility, either you will be so puffed up with arrogance that you won't even see what really needs 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.

Humility and Self-Esteem

Unfortunately for us, 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 Abraham Isaac Kook, who was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, 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."⁴

Mussar teaches that real humility is always associated with healthy self-

esteem. Lack of self-esteem leads to unholy and false feelings of worthlessness. One student in a Mussar course developed this insight from her own experience. She had the habit of sitting in the front at public gatherings and of wearing colorful clothes. When she was learning about humility, she decided to try toning herself down for the next event she attended. "This time, I packed my suitcase with beige, black, white, and brown clothes and made the choice to sit in the back of the room." Despite this retraction of self, she reported, "I had a great time, so much so that some people noticed and asked me what I was up to." But what really struck home was the realization she had that the sitting in the front and the colorful clothing were reflections "that I lacked a solid foundation in self-esteem."

She responded by focusing her Mussar practice on "rebuilding my self-esteem and having it based on a foundation of loving-kindness and humility." She could see the effect: "Recently, I have begun to feel a difference. As I develop my own internal love and respect for myself and become less other-directed, I do not need to be acknowledged by others for what I do. I have always sought the approval of others. Now my motivation is more internal and true to my own self."

Let's be very clear, though, that being humble doesn't mean being a 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 humble, more than any other men who were upon the face of the earth."⁵ If a leader as great as Moses was so humble, there is surely more to humility than the shrinking meekness we ordinarily associate with the term.

Not This, Not That

Every aspect of our lives is experienced by us through the lens of the ego, and when that glass is distorted or obscured, we will no longer perceive any of the details of our lives accurately, as they are. Too little humility—what we'd call arrogance or conceit—is easily seen as this sort of spiritual impediment. Even scripture is remarkably concrete on this point: "The arrogant cannot stand in Your presence; You hate all who do wrong."⁶

Rabbi Rafael of Barshad⁷ told a story that captures just how unfitting it is to think overly highly of oneself: "When I get to heaven, they'll ask me,

why didn't you learn more Torah? And I'll tell them that I wasn't bright enough. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you do more kind deeds for others? And I'll tell them that I was physically weak. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you give more to charity? And I'll tell them that I didn't have enough money for that. And then they'll ask me: If you were so stupid, weak and poor, why were you so arrogant? And for that I won't have an answer."

Because they abhorred arrogance, the followers of the Novarodok branch of Mussar were legendary for the exercises they undertook to reduce and deter excesses of ego. Their teachers would send them into a hardware store to ask for bread, and then into a bakery to ask for nails. They'd often get chased out of the store for those antics, but they learned that their self-worth did not depend on other people's appraisal and that they could get by in life with a whole lot less pride than they might otherwise have thought necessary.

But the opposite is equally true. Humility taken to the extreme also throws a veil across the inner light of the soul. The rabbis in the Talmud make this point very forcefully through a story that begins: "The humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas caused the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem."⁸ 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 who had offended him. He went to the Roman governors to inform them that the Jews were rebelling. To prove his point, he told the Romans 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 Temple priests would see. Because a sacrifice must be blemishless, Bar Kamtza knew that the priests would be bound to refuse to accept the offering. This refusal would be the "proof" that the Jews were in rebellion against Rome.

When the sacrifice came before the priests in the Temple, they immediately spotted the hidden blemish, as Bar Kamtza knew they would. But what he may not have anticipated was that they immediately understood what was going on. Someone suggested that they go ahead and offer the sacrifice anyway. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas, however, argued that if they did that, people would draw the incorrect conclusion that it was permitted to offer blemished sacrifices.

It was then suggested that Bar Kamtza be killed to prevent him from telling the Romans and endangering the Jewish people. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas responded, 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 took this to mean that the Jews were in rebellion. The Romans attacked and ultimately destroyed 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."

There is no understanding this statement in any way that we usually define the term *humility*. This story offers us a new insight into the traditional Jewish concept of humility.

Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas showed humility because he did not act with presumption—neither by offering a blemished animal in seeming contravention of the rules, nor 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 seemed 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 than he actually was of solving a real-life dilemma of great consequence.

To clarify the picture even more, let's add for consideration another enigmatic reflection on humility from the Talmud that 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.'"⁹

Now that's curious, don't you think? Where is the humility in sitting in the same place every time you pray in the synagogue? The answer is that by fixing yourself to one spot, you free up all the other space for others to use.

Adding this story to the one on the destruction of the Temple helps us to frame a Mussar definition of humility as "limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others." Sitting in a predictable place, you make room for others to occupy their own spaces, too. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas gave up too much of his "space," considering that the space a person occupies can be physical, emotional, verbal, or even metaphorical.

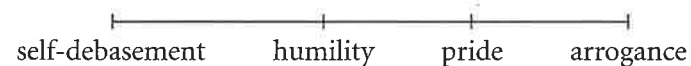
We hear an echo of the same notion in the description of the seating arrangement in the ancient Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. The Talmud¹⁰ reports:

There were three rows of disciples of the sages who sat before [the judges], and each knew his proper place. If they needed to appoint [another as a judge], they appointed him from the first row, and one from the second row came into the first row, and one from the third row came into the second row, and they chose another from the congregation and set him in the third row. He did not sit in the place of the former, but he sat in the place that was proper for him.

Humility Is Not an Extreme

Our definition of humility fits the Rambam's concept that humility is not the opposite of conceit, which would be self-effacement, but rather stands between conceit and self-effacement.¹¹ Humility is not an extreme quality, but rather 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.

We can graph this teaching as follows:



Arrogance has an insatiable appetite for space. It claims. It occupies. It sprawls. It suffocates others. Every statement in its voice begins with “I.” The opposite extreme is self-debasement. Shrinking from occupying any space whatsoever, it retracts meekly inside itself. Its statements would never dare to begin with “I,” although, in fact, if we listen carefully, they all do, because, whether we see ourselves as nothing or as everything, we are still preoccupied with the self, and both of these traits are, therefore, forms of narcissism. In Jewish terms, they are two variations on the theme of idolatry. Both extremes—whether we see ourselves as a god or a worm—are severe distortions of truth. Neither expresses humility. Neither is true so neither reflects accurate self-knowledge. The truth is toward the middle range, where there is room for self and other.

Role Models of Humility

Our primary role model for the space-making nature of humility is none other than God. In an interesting turn of phrase, just as God is about to create Adam, the text reads, “And God said, ‘Let us make Man in Our image, as Our likeness.’”¹² For centuries, sages have wondered about the use of the plural pronoun *Us*. Why is the description of the creation of man phrased in the plural? Who is this “us” that God is referring to?

The medieval commentator Rashi says that we learn from this passage that God is humble. How does he draw that lesson? He explains: “Since man is in the likeness of the angels and they would be jealous of him, for this reason, God consulted them.” He goes on to say that this verse teaches “proper conduct and the trait of humility, that the greater one should consult and take permission from the lesser one.”¹³

The lesson is that if God Himself is so humble as to take second opinions on the Creator's own actions, shouldn't we be at least that humble ourselves? We act with humility by making space in our lives to listen to others, even if they happen to hold a lesser station or rank or intellectual attainment than we do.

All the Mussar masters have been masters of humility and offer us earthly role models of this trait. A man once gave Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler what seemed to him to be excessive honor by referring to him directly in the third person, calling him “ha’Rav”—the Teacher—as in “Would ha’Rav like to do this or that?” Rabbi Dessler responded by asking that he not be called by that title. “You can injure a person speaking like that,” he said.

Witness, too, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's statement about himself. He said, “I know that I have the mental capacity of a thousand men.” This was surely not arrogance on his part, just uncommon honesty and accurate self-knowledge. He followed it up by noting, “Because of that, my obligation to serve God is also that of a thousand men.” He knew his space and his capacity to occupy it.

Occupying Your Rightful Space

Do you express humility by limiting yourself to taking up just the appropriate space while leaving room for others? Next time you sit on a bench,

watch how much of it you occupy. There is no need to cringe on the edge, because you're entitled to sit. Yet there is also no justification for sprawling into a space that ought to accommodate someone else. Or when someone shares a piece of news with you, do you come right back with your own concerns, filling the space they've opened, or do you make room to follow up what the other person has introduced?

One Mussar student reports on how her insights in this area have changed her behavior. Now, she says, "when friends, family, and associates tell me their troubles, I no longer rush in with my brilliant advice or suggestions as to how to solve their problems. My capacity for self-restraint has developed, and I no longer feel as much need to look smart, wise, good, etc." Understanding that her behavior was meant to gratify her own needs at the expense of caring for others, she said, "I'm now willing to take up less space in this domain."

Another student also sees a role for humility in interaction with others. "Before I learned Mussar," he said, "when in a group setting, I always chose to add something to the discussion." He says he works hard to remember to take only the space he requires. "I ask myself, 'Is this comment *absolutely* vital to the discussion at hand?' and often wait longer before giving my view."

Big Spaces and Small Spaces

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 for a leader—think of Moses again. But if a leader laid claim to even more space than was appropriate, they would be Pharaoh. And we have already learned from the case of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas that a leader who shrinks from his responsibilities—that is, takes up less space than appropriate—can also create disastrous consequences.

At the other end of the spectrum, it may be entirely appropriate for a more solitary person to occupy a less than average volume of space. Were people of this nature to force themselves to speak up more, be more outgoing—in other words, to fill more space—the consequences could be

negative at the level of soul. Nor would such people be serving the soul to withdraw themselves even further than is suitable for them.

The right amount of space is also situational. When police officers direct traffic, we accept that they are occupying a large public space. But when those same police officers go to their child's school for parent-teacher night, were they to try to occupy as "large" a space as they do on the street, they would appear arrogant and presumptuous.

The Well-Situated Ego

We read the following enigmatic saying in the Talmud: "Rava [a disciple of the sages] said: 'Who possesses [haughtiness of spirit] deserves excommunication, and if he does not possess it he deserves excommunication.'"¹⁴ The lesson we are meant to take away is that there is great spiritual danger in having an ego that is overinflated—and just as much spiritual danger in being devoid of self-esteem.¹⁵

Proper humility means having the right relationship to self, giving self neither too big nor too small a role in your life. Rabbi Chatzkel Abramsky, a well-known leader of the Jewish community in England, was once called to testify in court. His lawyer asked him, "Rabbi Abramsky, is it true that you are the greatest living Jewish legal authority in Europe?" The rabbi replied, "Yes. That is true." At that point the judge interjected and said, "Rabbi Abramsky, is that not rather haughty on your part? I thought that your laws and ethics teach you to be humble." To which Rabbi Abramsky responded, "I know we are taught to be humble. But what can I do? I am under oath."

The more you accept extreme inner attitudes that either build up the ego or tear it down, the more you deviate from truth. The inner voice that says, "You're hot!" and the one that says, "You're not!" both originate from the same source, and both mislead. The core issue is that these different voices draw our focus toward self, and that distracts from soul, which is really where we should keep our focus.

If you're unsure whether humility is a soul-trait you need to work on, ask yourself this: 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 ought

rightfully to occupy that you need to stretch into? Your answers are the measure of your humility and define how humility figures into your spiritual curriculum.

The goal would be to have it said of you (as it was of one of the Mussar masters of the nineteenth century), “He was so humble he didn’t even know he was humble.”¹⁶

A small deed done in humility is a thousand times more acceptable to God than a great deed done in pride.

—*Orchot Tzaddikim* (The Ways of the Righteous)

8

Patience

SAVLANUT

Whatever may obstruct me from reaching my goals, it is possible to bear the burden of the situation.

Woe to the pampered one who has never been trained to be patient. Either today or in the future he is destined to sip from the cup of affliction.

—Rabbi M. M. Leffin, *Cheshbon ha’Nefesh*

NOT A DAY GOES BY when we don’t face some sort of frustrating delay or obstacle, and too often our response is to strain against how things are. That tends to happen to me when I’m rushing somewhere in my car, but those feelings may suddenly sneak up on you while the water fills the tub ever so slowly, or as your child struggles with clumsy fingers to master the complexity of a shoelace, or on those days when nothing—not your Internet server, not your spouse, not the postman, *nobody!!*—does things when or how you want.

Impatience seldom makes things happen faster or better and usually only causes us grief. It’s like an inner blaze that burns us up without giving off any warmth. That would be bad enough, but it is also a short step from impatience to rage, and we all know what harm can come to ourselves and others because of uncontrollable anger.

I’d be remiss not to point out right at the outset that there are circumstances where we should not be patient and where patience is not a virtue. When confronted with injustice or the needs or suffering of another person or other situations where our actions could make a difference, we have no business patiently taking our time. Patience comes into play when