

## Shoftim

### *L'Vilti Room Levavo Me'Echav: Reflections on Humility<sup>1</sup>*

#### I.

Deviating from his general position<sup>2</sup> regarding the value of balance and moderation, Rambam identified two moral vices against which one is obligated to stake out an extreme, unrelenting position: arrogance and anger.

Indeed, a more careful reading<sup>3</sup> of Rambam's position indicates that the former vice is indeed the controlling issue. As it stands to reason, an arrogant and pretentious person will be easily angered, deeming himself perpetually aggrieved, deserving of superior treatment.

In so doing, Rambam staked out something of a novel position, eschewing numerous Talmudic statements advocating a modicum of haughtiness<sup>4</sup>. It is highly significant that in renouncing any role for arrogance, Rambam cites the Talmudic ruling that it is not merely a deplorable attribute as it concerns interpersonal conduct, but is associated with outright heresy, *kol ha'magbiah libo kafar b'ikar*<sup>5</sup>. It is at least as much an affront to the Almighty as it is an odious feature of character.

Rambam reinforces the characterization of arrogance as an insult to the Almighty in a different context, that of the obligation of *Simchat Beit Ha'Shoevah*<sup>6</sup>. There, Rambam notes that ceremoniously refraining from humbly rejoicing before the Lord, as David so readily did, is as much an expression of foolishness as it is arrogance. If one, like the Biblical Michal,

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this essay, humility and the related virtue of modesty will be treated as two distinct categories. Much of the foregoing analysis regarding humility, admittedly, can readily be applied to modesty as well, including its transcendence of the interpersonal realm to the human-Divine encounter: *ha'tzneia lechet im Elokekha*.

<sup>2</sup> See Hilkhot De'ot Chapter 1. It is fascinating and highly original that Rambam's associates this Aristotelian ideal with the potentially unrelated norm of *imitatio dei*.

<sup>3</sup> Rambam's integration of the two vices into the same halakha, as well as his utilization of the term *v'chen* suggest, though do not dispositively prove, a causal relationship.

<sup>4</sup> As noted by Hagahot Maimoniyot (De'ot 2:1).

<sup>5</sup> It seems noteworthy that Rambam dropped the moderating term "*k'ilu kafar b'ikar*" from his presentation of the original statement of R. Yochanan (Sotah 4b).

<sup>6</sup> See Rambam Hilkhot Shofar Sukkah U'Lulav 8:15.

cannot appreciate that the relative distinction in station between human beings is utterly dwarfed by the yawning chasm between any human and the Almighty, Rambam felt that one deserved consequences of extreme severity<sup>7</sup>.

## II.

The source of Rambam's ruling is none other than the Torah's testimony regarding the character of Moshe Rabbeinu<sup>8</sup>, whose own extreme humility served as the paragon for all subsequent Jewish leadership.

Developing his position further, Rambam explicitly<sup>9</sup> prohibits any Jewish leader from conducting himself arrogantly, once again noting Moshe's character as both paradigmatic, and concomitantly, normative.

While Rambam, of course, requires the nation to honor its judicial and rabbinic leaders, it is nothing short of striking that Rambam establishes that obligation only after noting the obligation for rabbinic leadership to honor and respect the people. This pattern is all the more remarkable given the fact that it is a deliberate inversion of the Talmudic statement<sup>10</sup> which serves as the explicit basis of Rambam's ruling, and which first obligates the community in reverence for the rabbinic judge.

## III.

Ramban, for his part, was in full agreement with Rambam that arrogance was intolerable. Moreover, like his illustrious predecessor, Ramban perceived arrogance as a deep affront to the Almighty, *ki ha'ga'avah midah megunah u'nimeset etzel ha'elokim*, and not merely an interpersonal failing. Finally, like Rambam did in the context of David's celebration of the relocation of the aron to Jerusalem, but perhaps to an even greater degree, Ramban

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<sup>7</sup> On the basis of Devarim 28:47.

<sup>8</sup> Rambam Hilkhoh De'ot 2:3.

<sup>9</sup> Rambam Hilkhoh Sanhedrin 25:1-2.

<sup>10</sup> See Sanhedrin 8a, in contrast with Hilkhoh Sanhedrin 25:1-3.

specifically emphasized the prohibition of arrogance for a king, localizing the prohibition to Parshat Shoftim and the content of appointing a king<sup>11</sup>.

And yet, in Ramban's presentation of the prohibition, rooted in the words *l'vilti room levavo me'echav*, something altogether novel emerges regarding the antidote to arrogance. Inescapably, for Ramban, the Torah's mandate for the king not only to produce a second Sefer Torah, but, more significantly, to carry it around in all places and at all times<sup>12</sup>, *v'hayta imo v'kara vo kol yemei chayav*<sup>13</sup>, is singularly responsible for preventing arrogance in an individual granted sweeping administrative powers, for whom haughtiness is a clear and present danger.

Apparently, for Ramban, it is precisely the constant exposure to the Divine wisdom of Torah, and by extension, and perhaps more consequentially, the Giver of Torah, that the king is meant to develop a sense of pervasive humility.

Mechanistically, one can imagine that this is true for at least two reasons.

First, the constant exposure to the bottomless depths and profundity of Torah will reinforce a sense of awe in the human king for the celestial and authentic Monarch. In a very specific sense, if arrogance can be described as a very particular pervasive vice, Ramban's paradigm yields a very particular manifestation of *barati yetzer ha'ra, barati Torah tavlin lo*<sup>14</sup>.

As a case in point regarding the potency of exposure to Torah in generating humility, it is hardly surprising that Moshe's personal virtue in this realm was unsurpassed<sup>15</sup>. Moshe did not achieve an unprecedented degree of humility despite his singular greatness, but, on the contrary, at least in part, on account of it. Moshe's ongoing, direct exposure to He to whom all

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<sup>11</sup> See Ramban to Devarim 17:20.

<sup>12</sup> See Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Sefer Torah 7:2. Ramban's enumeration of the mitzvah for the king to produce a second Sefer Torah, and never to separate from it, lo yipared mimenu, before his enumeration of the universal responsibility incumbent upon each man to produce his own personal Sefer Torah is striking. See Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Positive Commandments seventeen and eighteen, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> See Devarim 17:19

<sup>14</sup> Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 30b.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that the Torah comments on Moshe's humility (See BeMidbar Chapter 12) specifically in the narrative which establishes the qualitative superiority of his prophetic power reinforces this notion. The clarity with which Moshe beheld the Divine expressed itself in an unmatched comprehension of the appropriate posture for any human being, no matter how great.

glory is due, *peh el peh adaber bo*, and especially the process of having learned Torah directly from the Almighty, uniquely grounded him, and helped shape the character “that was more modest than any man on the face of the earth.”

Ramban’s novel contribution creates a tantalizing positive feedback loop regarding our understanding of the relationship between Torah and humility. While humility as a prerequisite for attainment of Torah is well established in rabbinic and halakhic sources<sup>16</sup>, Ramban’s breakthrough establishes that the relationship operates in the reciprocal direction as well: through study of Torah itself, the king, and, a fortiori, all people<sup>17</sup>, will adopt a far more humble posture.

#### IV.

Constant exposure to Torah, in Ramban’s paradigm, should generate a second, complementary method by which arrogance is suppressed. In the words of Israel’s most famous poet-king, *shiviti Hashem l’negdi tamid*, constant attachment to Torah must facilitate a sense of numinous reflection on the Giver of Torah, *mi’toch kach atah makir mi she’amar v’bayah ha’olam*<sup>18</sup>.

In particular, if He who reigns supreme still concerns Himself with all those in need of His succor and sustenance, *b’makom she’atah motzeh gevurato, sham ata motzeh anvitanuto*<sup>19</sup>, the earthly king should draw the implications, as far *imitatio dei* is concerned, for himself. It is noteworthy that Chazal<sup>20</sup> observed that the Divine presence eschewed more impressive mountains, from the standpoint of physical stature, for Sinai, the Almighty was creating a paradigm for concern with those who might otherwise slip through the cracks, and therefore, be disregarded.

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<sup>16</sup> See Talmud Bavli Eruvin 55a as well as Rambam Talmud Torah 3:8.

<sup>17</sup> See Ramban to Devarim 17:20, *v’kol she’ken ha’acheirim she’ainam re’uyim li’kach*.

<sup>18</sup> Sifrei Devarim 49:3. See Ramban who himself cites this view of Chazal in his critique of Rambam’s understanding of the mitzvah of Devekut Ba’Hashem, Hasagot L’Sefer HaMitzvot 7.

<sup>19</sup> Talmud Bavli Megillah 31a.

<sup>20</sup> Sotah 5a.

As such, for Ramban, the king's involvement in constant Torah study transcends technical instruction, *l'vilti sur min ha'mitzvah yamin u'semol*. It is the ultimate gesture of soul making, and it serves to eradicate that most pernicious of all human vices, arrogance. It roots him in the virtues necessary to his task, especially providing justice and fairness to those who would otherwise be most vulnerable, the *deca u'shefal ruach*<sup>21</sup>. It reminds him that what is not beneath the Almighty, and *those* that are not beneath the Almighty, are surely not beneath his earthly station.

It enables him to reflect on the manner in which the Almighty performs acts of justice, righteousness, and mercy in this world, and allows him- *malkhuta d'ar'ah k'ein malkhuta d'reki'ah*<sup>22</sup> - to do much the same<sup>23</sup>. In so doing, it renders him deserving of perpetuation of his dynasty, *l'ma'an ya'arich yamim al mamlachto hu u'vanav b'kerev Yisrael*<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See Berachot 58a.

<sup>23</sup> Ramban explicitly notes this characterization of the Divine by Yirmiyahu (9:23) in his comments to Devarim 17:20, "*baskel v'yadoa oti ki ani Hashem oseh chessed mishpat u'tzedakah ba'aretz ki bi'eleh chafatzti ne'um Hashem.*"

<sup>24</sup> Devarim 17:20.