

Anavah—Humility: Understanding Our Place

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WHEN HÉLÈNE CAZÈS-BENATAR was growing up in Tangier, she showed the kind of leadership potential that educators dream of—she became the first Moroccan Jewish woman to receive a bachelor’s degree. After earning a law degree from the University of Bordeaux, she became the first female lawyer in Morocco. As if these remarkable achievements were not enough, she could have never known what she would be called to do as the horrors of World War II made their way across the European continent and toward North Africa.

When World War II began, Hélène Cazès-Benatar sprang into action. She volunteered with the French Red Cross and encouraged the Jewish community to support the war effort, resulting in two thousand Moroccan Jews joining the fight against Nazism. When she found herself stuck in Casablanca, she did not admit defeat but worked with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to assist the hundreds of Jewish refugees from Europe flooding the city. Embracing her full potential at an hour of need and connecting with the forces of the Jewish community, Hélène Cazès-Benatar dealt heroically with a reality previously unimaginable.¹ At every step, she forged ahead and

refused to surrender to the forces and expectations outside of her.

None of us can know what we will be called to do at a later hour. The world is inherently unpredictable and capricious. As the Yiddish expression goes, “People plan; God laughs.” Still, we, like Cazès-Benatar, are able to choose our paths. But when stumbling blocks are placed before us, will we forge on or will we retreat?

I want to suggest that core to navigating any uncertain time is *anavah* (עֲנָוָה, “humility”). Humility is not about lowering one’s self-worth but embarking on a deep understanding of the forces that surround us, shape us, and direct our actions. And an ideal engagement with humility is not surrender but a willingness to grapple with those absurd forces beyond our control and to proactively shape our reality into the world we seek to build. Key to *anavah* is knowing how to understand our own place in the world. *Anavah* should not diminish our sense of self but sharpen our understanding of the world to show us that failure is not permanent but a way of pushing us in a new direction.

In *Parshat Va-eira*, Moses’s struggles offer several lessons about how to behave when failure stares us down. The *parashah* can help us understand that our stumbles should lead us to reassess how we relate to ourselves, the Divine, and our own narrative. The world is unpredictable—but it is critical that we stay present.

We catch Moses on the cusp of defeat: *Vay’dabeir Moshe kein el b’nei Yisrael, v’lo shamuel Moshe, mikotzer ruach umei-avodah kashah*

מִשָּׁה כִּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִשָּׁה) (מִקְצֵר רוּחַ וּמַעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה וַיִּדְבֹּר), “But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage” (Exodus 6:9). Despite the fact that he comes wielding a heady promise of redemption from God and that he is able to present himself as God’s messenger, something falls flat. The Israelites are simply too overwhelmed by their circumstances to internalize Moses’s message. We can empathize with the despair Moses might feel—with prospects for redemption so high, the sting of failure is all the more painful.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk noticed something strange in the text and asked Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Varkaw about an earlier promise God had made to Moses: *V’shamu l’kolecha* (וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקֹלְךָ), “They [the Israelites] will listen to you” (Exodus 3:18). If this promise did not come true, can it be the case that God’s words have failed to come to fruition? Our second Rabbi Menachem Mendel parses the verse carefully. He explains that the text is very specific to say *l’kolecha* rather than use *b’kolcha*—that is, “to your voice” rather than “in your voice”—implying a looser connection between Moses’s words and the people. The text seeks to say, “It is your voice alone that the people will listen to, not the specific content of your words,” since, at this point, the people are too spiritually and physically oppressed to understand the fine details of their redemption. However, even if they cannot hear Moses’s words, they can hear his voice. They can tell that in their hour of sorrow and pain, God’s servant is there for them.²

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Varkaw teaches us how to understand our perceived failings. In times of struggle, we may feel that our words fall flat. Moses may perceive himself as having failed his mission. However, from a different angle, his presence still has a palpable effect. With the right dose of *anavah*, we can see that the results of our work might not be what we expected; but, balanced with the right amount of confidence in who we are, we can still bring good into the world. Moses’s effect on the people is not the anticipated one, but it is powerful nonetheless.

Additionally, *anavah* demands that we aim to understand the context of who we are based on the forces larger than we are. This notion of relationality is established at the beginning of the parashah: *Va-eira el Avraham, el Yitzchak, v’el Yaakov b’El Shaddai ushmi Adonai lo nodati lahem* (וָאֵלֶּם וְאַרְאָ אֶל־אַבְרָהָם) אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וְשָׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִוְדַעְתִּי), “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make Myself known to them by my name *YHVH*” (Exodus 6:3). From this we can learn about the power of Moses’s relationship to the Divine and to the narrative that sets the stage for his life journey and how they both diminish his isolation at this moment. *Anavah* can allow us to understand that fundamentally we are not alone.

The Chatam Sofer sees a linguistic connection between *avot* (אָבוֹת), the word for “ancestors,” and the verb *le-evot* (לְאָבוֹת), “to want or desire.” He claims that “the Holy Blessed One connects with those who have longings for God.”³ The Chatam Sofer connects his understanding of the immediate

importance of our longing for God to the Ramban's interpretation of God's famous and opaque self-description, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה), "I will be that I will be" (Exodus 3:14) as "Just as you are with Me, so I will be with you."⁴ The Ramban and Chatam Sofer both suggest that God's presence is directly linked to our capacity to cleave to God. This is an empowering idea—our actions in the world can change the essence of the Divine. Moses may experience himself as alone and useless, but just as earlier he did not necessarily perceive the impact of his words on the oppressed Israelites, here he might miss that his engagement with God has divine repercussions.

When we feel that we are failing, we wallow in our loneliness; but if we look outside of ourselves, we can see those whose legacies sustain us. Here, God also reminds Moses that it is not just God who is in relationship with Moses, but that Moses too is connected to our Patriarchs and Matriarchs before him through God's revelation of God's self in the world. Practicing *anavah* may help us to realize that we are not alone when we attempt to change the world. We are part of a story much larger than our own. When we understand our place within a Jewish story that began thousands of years ago, we can hearken back to those who have handled moments of deep pain and difficulty before us and find strength.

When we find ourselves in moments of difficulty, a practice of *anavah* can push us to ask three questions: How might my impact be different than expected? How can I find the Divine in this moment? How can the

story of those who came before me support me at this moment? If we engage in this personal reflection, we can work toward following the path of Moses, who later in the Torah is noted to be "a very humble man, more so than any other human being on earth" (Numbers 12:3).

We may not have a chance to be Moses or Hélène Cazès-Benatar, but everywhere we allow *anavah* to guide our steps, we can navigate our uncertain times.

Questions to Ask

In times of failure, how have you been able to use *anavah* to understand your stumbling?

What forces do you think allowed Moses and Hélène Cazès-Benatar to rise to the occasion at their time of need?

Practice for the *Middah* of *Anavah*

When you struggle at home or at work, use *anavah* to consider unintended, positive consequences of your action.

Another *Middah* to Consider

What roles do you think *emunah* (אֱמוּנָה, "faith") plays in the work that Moses and Hélène Cazès-Benatar did?

NOTES

1. For more, I recommend the masterful *Destination Casablanca* by Meredith Hindley.

2. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, *Mei-Otzar HaMachshevah shel HaChasidut, Iturei Torah*, 55.

3. Chatam Sofer, *Iturei Torah*, 48.

4. Ramban on Exodus 3:14.