

The Meaning of Humility – Kol Nidre 5774
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Tonight is one of the more difficult nights of the year to deliver a sermon. It is late, we have eaten big meals, we have prayed together ... and some of us are a little tired. But don't worry. This is going to be one of the best sermons you've ever heard. It's about humility.

It's Yom Kippur eve in a synagogue not unlike our own. The cantor stands up to chant Kol Nidre and is suddenly filled with trepidation and awe. He runs up to the Aron Kodesh and prostrates himself, shouting, "I'm not worthy! I am nothing but dust and ashes." The rabbi, deeply touched by the cantor's actions, joins him at the ark: "I'm nothing in Your eyes! What have I ever done that is worthy?" At this point a congregant in the last row is also moved and he runs up the aisle and shouts out, "I am nothing! I am a man of no values, a miserable sinner!"

The rabbi taps the cantor on the shoulder and says, "Now look who's calling himself a nothing!"

Humility is very much the theme of this sacred night. We wear white, to remind us of the traditional burial shroud and the fact that we are mortal and therefore limited. The liturgy repeatedly asserts that we are small, we are nothing – especially when compared to God. My favorite *al chet* is: "For the sin we have committed against God by extending the neck, בנטיית גרון," by walking too tall with too much undeserved pride. The protocol calls on us to bring ourselves down a notch, to admit mistakes, to humble ourselves so we can hear God's voice.

It's an important idea in a world where the 24 hour news cycle and the need to get attention have erased all notions of humility. Politicians are usually rewarded for expressing certitude in the righteousness of their own opinions, for putting down anyone who disagrees with them. Leaders who are willing to listen to the other side, those humble enough to sometimes question their own beliefs are portrayed as weak and indecisive.

But that is not the Jewish view on leadership. The Talmud teaches that for 2 ½ years the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai disagreed about a particular matter of Jewish law. They debated and exchanged arguments, but the matter was never resolved until a voice came down and proclaimed: "אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים", Each side speaks the word of the Living God ... והלכה כבית הלל but the Halakha, the law is like Hillel."

The Talmud then asks: If both Hillel and Shammai speak the truth, why does the law almost always follow Hillel? The answer is that in debates, Hillel was always sure to acknowledge the view of Shammai first. The School of Shammai didn't do that. They were confident in the rightness of their own opinions. Hillel's school also believed in its own views, but they maintained a healthy level of humility; they maintained a little self doubt. They always began with: "This is what the other side believes and maybe there is some truth to their view, even though we understand the law differently."

It is a truism that if we want to be right in life, we have to acknowledge and accept the possibility that sometimes we might be wrong. The biographer Stanley Hirshson tells of an incident where General George Patton joined General George Marshall and members of their

staffs for a meal. Each place setting contained two cups – one for red wine and the other for coffee. Patton was busy telling a story and without realizing what he was doing he poured sugar and cream into his red wine. As he lifted the cup to drink, a young aide touched him on the arm and said, “I beg your pardon, sir. You put sugar and cream in your wine.” Patton answered quickly, “I like it that way,” and then he drank it down.

Contrast that determination to always appear right with the famous medieval Torah scholar Rashi, whose commentary is often synonymous with *the* meaning of the Torah text. 77 times in his Torah commentary, Rashi sees a confusing passage and writes something like “איני יודע מה מלמדנו, I have no idea what that detail teaches us.” And he admits something similar 43 times in his commentary to the Talmud.¹ What a great lesson! We don’t have to know everything to be wise. We don’t have to always be right to be right. Humility is a sacred value.

Some time back, David Brooks wrote a column in the New York Times, where he accused us of being “an overconfident species.” Among the statistics: 94% of college professors believe they have above-average teaching skills. 70% of high school students believe they have above-average leadership skills and only 2% believe themselves to be below average. In the 1950s, 12% of high school seniors said they were a “very important person”; by the ’90s, 80% believed that they were. Brooks wonders if our tendency to think so highly of ourselves has had a negative effect on citizenship. Maybe we think we are too good to worry about the troubles that other people face. Let them just rise as I have, we say, not fully recognizing the help and assistance we’ve received along the way.

Maimonides wrote a lot about the importance of moderation, kind of Aristotle’s “Golden Mean”. But there are some values that are impossible to practice with moderation, he says, and humility is one of those. We must distance ourselves from overconfidence as much as possible, even to the point of embarrassment.

“Embarrassment,” wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. “Embarrassment not only precedes religious commitment. It is the touchstone of religious existence.”

Maybe that’s one of the reasons Jewish prayer is so complicated and difficult, why we continue to pray in Hebrew and don’t rush to delete difficult or challenging passages that we don’t completely understand. It’s okay to feel lost. We are experts in so many things. It’s not easy to sit with an unfamiliar book in a service we don’t fully understand; but maybe it’s good that we have to sometimes get out of our comfort zone to pray, if only just to remind us that we don’t know as much as we think we know. We are not as great as we think we are.

The Talmud teaches that in the presence of those who have returned in repentance, even the completely righteous are not worthy. The Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunam explains it is because there is no such thing as the completely righteous. There are only people who see themselves as completely righteous and comfortable and confident; and they are on a lower

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¹ See Artscroll Rashi, p. 304, note 6

spiritual plane than one who has sinned and repented. The sinner has broken his pride and admitted that there is room for real improvement.

This is the real meaning of *teshuvah*, repentance, and our challenge on this holy night. Stripped of all outward signs of achievement, we are challenged:

- To own up to our imperfections
- To examine our deeds and resolve to do better.
- To think about relationships that have gone sour and try to figure out our role in causing the problems; not just how we were wronged or treated poorly, but what we might do to improve things, to change.
- To realize how important community is, and to find more ways of getting involved and making a difference.
- To admit we are not as accomplished as we want to think we are, to seek opportunities to learn and discover.

Moses was our people's greatest leader. A teacher, a lawgiver, a miracle worker. "ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל כמשה", There never arose another prophet like Moses." But the Torah only speaks directly about one attribute: "והאיש משה עניו מאוד", Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble."

I pray that we may learn from that example. May we humble ourselves, that we might grow on this night and every night into the people we once might have pridefully imagined we already were.

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Hatimah Tovah, may we be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life. Amen.