

HUMILITY AND PRIDE: THE MIDDLE WAY

(Address at Convention of R.C.A. June 20, 1990)

1. Introduction:

a) I didn't reveal title of talk (Humility) to Convention chairman because if I did, no one would come to listen... (When I mentioned this to layman earlier this week, his reaction: "Good, Rabbis could use a talk on that...")

b) actually, I don't intend *מוסר*, but *עילון*--not admonish but analyze, not preach but comprehend, not lecture but *שעור*.

c) I have long been fascinated by the *הדרך* *רמב"ם*'s theory of *שמנה פרקים* (בפירוש *האמצעית* which he elaborates first in his *הלכות דעות* and later in his *המשניות* שלו). Recently, I have been talking and writing about the relevance of his concepts for the contemporary communal concerns that increasingly occupy our attention. This evening, I hope to continue this exploration by focusing on one of the two exceptions to the Maimonidean rule of the Middle Way, namely, *כעס* and *גאווה*. For now, we shall dwell on *גאווה* and try to understand them *per se* and then apply them, if possible, to our own situation.

2. Maimonides' Theory of *הדרך* *האמצעית*--*דרך ה'* and the two exceptions (גאווה וכעס)..... The case of Moses/Aaron/Miriam: *והאיש משה*, *אבות פ"ד*, and later, in *רבי לויטס איש לבנה* אומר מאוד מאוד הוה שפל רוח שתקות אנוש רימה

3. My Four Questions on רמב"ם:

a) is it true? Does the שפלות of Moses imply that he was an עם הארץ? Is ענוה-שפלות supposed to conflict with אמת?

b) is it psychologically desireable? One need not applaud the efforts of of second-rate psychologists who take it as their professional mission to turn people with injured psyches into accomplished narcissists who then terrorize all their relatives and friends with their new-found egos, in order to appreciate that the cumulative wisdom of psychological inquiry has yeilded the valid insight that in order to function properly, a person must have a strong sense of self and a feeling of self-worth. To put it personally: As parents, do we desire to raise our children with a feeling of extreme lowliness, crushing inferiority, and an exceedingly weak self-image?

c) what of גמ' מגילה דף ל"א ע"א כל מקום שאתה מוצא גבורתו של הקב"ה שם אתה מוצא ענוותנותו....

d) How can רמב"ם explain the apparent absurdity of משנה רגמ' סוף סוטה: משמת רבי בטל ענוה ויראת חטא; אמר ליה ר' יוסף לתנא לא תיתני ענוה דאליכא אנא?

4. Permit me to present an alternate view to that of Maimonides (based on conversation w my late, dear friend, Wm Frank on the difference between ענוה and שפלות. Thus, ענוה is not merely the middle way between the extremes of שפלות and גאווה, but something entirely different, a quality that speaks not of self-definition

and self-worth, which are the stuff of the שפלות-גארה axis, but rather of an attitude towards others in which one is willing to bear insult and villification in silence without rising to his own defense. It is best to translate the terms into English to get the flavor of the distinction between them: שפלות is humility, and ענוה is meekness... Another way of putting it: שפלות is בלין אדם לחברו, and ענוה is בלין אדם לעצמו.

According to this analysis, ענוה or meekness not only does not presuppose the kind of weak self-image implied by שפלות, it demands a strong and realistic sense of self--something midway between שפלות and גארה. Thus, Moses could not have contained himself in the face of his siblings' criticisms in this most exemplary demonstration of ענוה had he not possessed a healthy self-image. A שפל רוח probably could not have contained himself...

5. Thus, according to this alternate view of ענוה ושפלות we have satisfactorily answered our רמב"ם on פיר קושיות:

- a) is true, real... no conflict between ענוה and אמת.
- b) is psychologically healthy
- c) האליכא אנא makes sense...one's self-characterization as meek is not an absurdity, as would be one's self-definition as humble.
- d) G-d's עניויות similarly makes good sense, especially in context...

6. Question: can't so easily argue with Maimonides without proper sources. Are there any? Certainly!

* שלא בקש apparently agrees with Maimonides. Thus: רמב"ן (ad loc.) which is paraphrased by רמב"ם (במדבר יב-ג) to mean ולא יתגאה על מעלתו כלל, thus agreeing with רמב"ם.

* However, רמב"ן offers a different interpretation which completely accords with the alternative definitions we have been proposing: להגיד כי השם קנא לו בעבור ענותנותו כי הוא לא יענה על ריב לעולם אף אם ידע... (אבל) בספרי, רבי נתן אומר אף בפניו של משה דברו בו... אלא שכבש משה על הדבר לזכיר ענותנותו שסבל ולא ענם והשם בקשת גדולה עני. Thus, according to Ramban, עני refers not to גדולה but to סבל, bearing his insult in silence and not reacting on his own behalf.

* רש"י (ad loc.) defines עני as: שפל וסבל, i.e., a combination of both!

7. Earlier sources: Tannaitic--רבי מאיר.

While Maimonides has proof text in רבי לויטס איש יבנה, in same chapter (4) of אבות, we read a different opinion, that of רבי רמב"ן, which yields a view identical to that we ascribed to רמב"ם rather than רמב"ם. That reads: והוי שפל רוח בפני כל אדם, i.e., one should appear as שפל before or in relation to other people. Thus, there must be no גאווה, but neither must there be self-denigration. R. Meir's formula yields--ענוה.

8. Later sources-- conform with either רמב"ן or רמב"ם. General literature of course takes more austere view, which is to be expected of a didactic approach. However, in Hasidic literature we find greater sympathy for the רמב"ן's view (although it is not attributed to him by name). Reason: Jews in that period already felt inferior, abandoned, inadequate.. and moral task of leadership was to elevate sense of self-worth. Thus, as example of a later master, R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin: in his צדקת הצדיק, אות גאווה, we detect an ambivalence on the matter of pride or גאווה: it is, of course, sinful--but not altogether...

ומ"מ כמו ששורש הרע והתחלת הנפילה ע"י גיאות כך גם התחלת הקדושה על ידי הגיאות ... ובאמת א"א להגיע לשום מדרגה דקדושה רק ע"י הגיאות שיתגאה לבו לומר שגם בו ידבר ה' ... ובודאי מל שהוא בתכלית השפלות ... לסתפק במיעוט מעשים ותורה שבידו... אותו גיאות נעשה מרכבה לקדושה והוא מלבוש גיאות דהש"י שנא' (תהילים צג) ה' מלך גאות לבש וגו' וכן האדם הדבק במדותיו צריך להיות לבוש דגיאות ובפנימיות מכיר שפלותו רק מ"מ בלבוש יהיה כן.

R. Zadok's dichotomy between פנימיות and לבוש is evoked, in this case, for homiletical reasons (גאווה לבש), but its message is clear: pride is both good and evil, and while in his heart of hearts man must be humble, his pride must be used, not crushed... Hence, a view of this sort articulates far more readily with the view of רבי לויטס ורמב"ם than that of רבי מאיר ורמב"ן.

9. In order to better understand this view of עניו as meekness, and not as requiring the extreme of שפלות, we must turn again to the personality of Moses who serves throughout our tradition as the paradigm of עניו, and see how the Torah describes him and how others have interpreted those passages.

In the Korah rebellion, a series of charges, not all explicit, were levelled at Moses. Moses' reaction: -- וישמע משה -- and not more. According to Rabbis, חשדוהו באשת איש! I submit that had Moses been a שפל רוח, as Maimonides describes him, he would have failed to react not only to the personal calumny, but to the rebellion against authority as well. He could and would not have risked having his assertion of leadership mistaken for pride and personal self-interest. Only if we see Moses as an עני as רמב"ן describes him, i.e., a moderate in self-image and meek towards others, could he have kept his peace at the personal assault and yet exercised authority assertively at the national challenge. That is why, despite his refusal to offer a defense of his own person, he does not hesitate to upbraid the rebels: בוקר ויודע ה' את אשר לו ואת הקדוש והקריב אליו... רב לכם... בני לוי... שמעו בני לוי... Such courageous leadership is not characteristic of a man who has virtually no ego structure. Moses was the meekest man in the world--but he was not a wimp!

10. Before concluding this theoretical analysis of עניו, שפלות, and גאווה, let me add that the רמב"ם's theory of humility as an exception to the rule of the Middle Way is not critical to his whole conception. In other words, if we substitute the רמב"ן's

view for that of the רמב"ם, the latter's general philosophy of character still holds. Hence, it is possible to maintain the fundamental Maimonidean approach to the Middle Way and yet opt for an alternative way to his view of ענייה. For the reasons adumbrated earlier, that is the position that I believe ought seriously be considered, because it accords with both the insights of modern psychology and has respectable precedent in our agadic and exegetical sources.

11. In the past couple of years I have been attempting to apply the Maimonidean model to contemporary matters. In talks to the R.C.A., the Rabbinic Alumni, the Educators Council, and forums overseas, as well as in *Tradition*, I have attempted to demonstrate that Maimonides' Middle Way, which he calls the דרך ה', applies not only to individual character but to collective character and therefore to the nature of communal policy. I have suggested that the רמב"ם's thought yields what I call "Moderationism," that is, moderation as a policy and not only as an attribute of personality. I believe that, likewise, we can endeavor to extrapolate from the רמב"ם's view of ענייה (located within the nexus of the Maimonidean theory of דעות) to contemporary matters. Whether this will elicit your consent as a proper extrapolation or whether you will dismiss it as mere דרוש depends on whether or not you will agree with my conclusions...

12. ענייה according to both positions remains a prerequisite for communal as well as individual moral health and proper character. At the very least, both sides to this argument will agree, גארה towards others is repugnant.

In communal terms, this means that we must reject every form of triumphalism, even when we are "riding high"... Orthodoxy today is on the rise, but it cannot be so certain of its future that it can afford to crow about its final victory and assume that such triumph proves the rightness of our cause. Moreover, such an attitude betrays the kind of collective גארה that is no more attractive for a community than it is for an individual.

At the same time, according to R.Meir and Ramban, ענייה does not lead to the extreme of שפלות, and in communal terms no less than in the case of individual humans, that means that we must also abjure the weakness of defeatism!

For us of the R.C.A., and those related groups who share the same *Weltanschauung*, ענייה requires of us that we undertake a psychologically mature acceptance of realities, including our own sometimes vexatious predicament, and without either the extremes of שפלות or גארה, proceed with the determination to succeed.

The RCA--and the whole Orthodox rabbinate--is confronted by a number of difficult and distressing, but not desperate, problems. Among them:

* fewer major pulpits as *shtibelech* take their toll;

* the flight of more learned and observant graduates of yeshivot to special yeshiva-type *מנינים* and away from our larger and more formal synagogues--and hence a loss of our most learned and committed segment and a breach between ordinary laymen and this self-segregating elite;

* in many synagogues, as higher halakhic standards are more seriously enforced, the attrition of the semi- or non-observant constituency (the so-called "non-observant Orthodox") to either non-Orthodox communities or general oblivion, and the consequent absence of a pool of youngsters for us to work on to bring them into yeshivot;

* in other of our communities, the dreadful loss of prestige of Orthodoxy as the result of a concentrated campaign of "Orthodox-bashing" by anti-Orthodox movements--a campaign which only appears to have abated but which is still very powerful, and which we sometimes seem to invite with suicidal abandon;

* the shift in power in the wider community from synagogues (and hence the rabbinate) towards the Federations and the big givers and secularists;

* the paucity of of young men of talent and commitment and personality entering the pulpit rabbinate; and so on.

In all these cases, a *שפלות*-type defeatism will prove self-fulfilling. If such *שפלות* will be our approach, the rest of the Mishnah will *ה"ו* follow: to paraphrase it--*שחקות הרבנות רמה*.

Moreover, the kind of moderationism that we stand for often lends itself to such שפלות-defeatism, and we must avoid it and give battle to it, even as some of our ideologically related predecessors--such as the early Mizrachi leaders--did in their time. Thus, to cite but two examples:

* R. Yitchak Nissenbaum (1899): אנהנו הציונים החרדיים (=דתיים) נמצאים בין הפטיש והסדן. אין אנו יכולים ואיננו חפצים לותר על אות אחת שבתורתנו ולא על סעיף אחד שבציונות (המליץ גליון 274)

* R. Meir Bar-Ilan: -- אנהנו המזרחיים נמצאים במצב הבלתי-נעים -- לעמוד בין שתי החזיתות.

Their "קרעכץ" about their situation, which sounds so very contemporary, is applicable to anyone, such as the R.C.A., who keeps to the דרך ה' in both the substance of its ideology and the manner of its presentation. The way of moderation, the דרך ה', is always open to attack from the extremes. And our response must be measured and mature, firm but polite, arguing courageously on the level of ideas but not responding to personal innuendoes and villification--for this is the way of ענוה, taught to us by משה רמב"ן and רבי מאיר as interpreted by רבנו.

13. The way of ענוה, as opposed to both שפלות and גאווה, ought thus to express itself in our collective response to criticism of our fundamental policies. Excessive pride would lead us to disdain such criticism and dismiss it. Extreme humility would condemn us either to cower and submit with nothing more than a

whimper or, as often happens, to react unthinkingly, emotionally, and belligerently. Neither of these is the way of dignity, the way of דרך ה'. Communal or organizational ענייה calls for us to confront criticism with meekness, and that means not to become overly excited when our motives are impugned or we are otherwise insulted; not to disparage the critic or dismiss his complaint without reflection; not to be intimidated into either submission or compromise of our principles or policies. It means thoughtful consideration and, when we feel we are right, firm and fearless but polite advocacy of our positions in the proper forums.

By and large, this has been the approach of the RCA and all the rest of us who identify with this השקפת העולם. However, we sometimes slip in one direction or another and have to remind ourselves of the virtue of עניניות on the larger scene.

Often, we are deflected from a spirited defense of any position we consider significant because, we are told, we must shun controversy. מחלוקת, we are warned, can only increase the disunity in our ranks.

All of us deplore disunity, but we should not be so certain that מחלוקת necessarily leads to disunity. The Mishnah (אבות פ"ה) teaches us that כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים ושאינה לשם"ש אין סופה להתקיים. The Mishnah exemplifies this by referring to מחלוקת ב"ה רב"ש as being לשם"ש, and that of Korah against Moses as אינה לשם"ש. Now, this Mishnah is rather enigmatic: if controversies

are for the sake of Heaven, then one would expect that they be resolved and yield to peace and unity, not that they endure.

But that is not so. The Mishnah means what it says literally. Such is the marvelous comment of Rabbenu Yonah:

הכוונה שלעולם לתקלימו במחלוקת. היום לחלוקו בדבר אחד ולמחר בדבר
אחר. למחלוקת יהיה קיום, ונמשך בלניהם כל ימי חיהם. ולא עוד, אלא
אורך ימים ושנות חיים יוסיפו להם. ושאלנה לש"ש אין סופה להתקלים, רק
במחלוקת הראשונה יספו ויתמו ושם ימותו במחלוקת של קורה.

Controversy is neither good nor bad; all depends on motivation. A
שפל will indulge in it in the manner of קרה ועדתו; a
לשם will back off and resign. An עני will enter the fray
שמים--which means that such controversy does not contradict unity
or peacefulness, that it is creative and productive and construc-
tive.

14. All that I have said so far is simply a rather lengthy way of
congratulating Rabbi Mark Angel and his new administration. May
these thoughts concerning ענייות and דרך ה' and שמים
be his and their legacy to the future of the RCA, of American
Orthodox Jewry, and of the Torah community throughout the world
as they marshall their considerable talents, wisdom, experience,
and dedication to the sublime cause of ולהאדירה.