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**PRIDE, HUMILITY, AND MEEKNESS**

Maimonides' theory of character, as formulated in his Commentary on the Mishnah (the section on Avot, more popularly known as "The Eight Chapters") and later in his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah, posits the famous rule of the mean as the key to character. The Middle Way is identified by him as the derekh Hashem, the "way of the Lord," and thus the way man must follow in forming his own character. Maimonides allows for only two exceptions, in which it is mandatory to go to one of the extremes. In each of the cases, Maimonides declares the Middle Way to be inoperative; here, in these two instances, one must necessarily go to the extreme. Thus, in the case of pride, Maimonides posits three points on the character bar: pride on one end, humility or lowliness (shiflut) on the other, and a mid-point he calls anavah. This last is the compromise between arrogant self-importance and self-debasing humility. Yet, while ordinarily the Middle Way calls for just such a moderate balance of traits, that does not hold true for this case of one's self-image, and also not for temper where too one must go to the other extreme.

Maimonides offers two proof texts for his assertion of this exception. The first is the character of Moses in the enigmatic accusation against Moses by his brother and sister, Aaron and

Miriam. We are not privy to the details of the siblings' complaint, but what is underscored is the remarkable reaction of Moses: he does not say a word, despite all temptation. Thus, Moses earns the Torah's encomium, **והאיש משה ענו מאוד מכל האדם**, אשר על פני האדמה, Moses was very anav, more so than any man on the face of the earth. Since the Torah qualifies the anav sobriquet with the intensifier "very," that means that this mid-point must be extremely anav, which means: humble or lowly. And later, in Avot (chapter 4), we read: **רבי לויטס איש יבנה אומר מאוד מאוד** --R. Levitas of Yavneh said: Be very very lowly of spirit, for the hope of man is naught but the worm.

Now, this statement of Maimonides is not much discussed in the exegetical literature on his works--a rather surprising phenomenon considering how almost every word of the master has been weighed and measured for the past eight centuries. Yet the question of these exceptions, especially pride, is not without serious difficulties and bears further investigation. Following are four difficulties with this particular position of Maimonides:

a) is it true? Does the shiflut of Moses imply that he was an ignoramus? Is humility supposed to conflict with the demands and standards of truth?

b) is it psychologically desireable? One need not applaud the efforts 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 yielded the valid insight that in order to function properly, a person must have a strong sense of self and a feeling of self-worth. Do parents desire to raise their children with a feeling of extreme lowliness, crushing inferiority, and an exceedingly weak self-image?

c) What of the statement in the Talmud (Meg. 31a) that wherever (in Scripture) one finds mention of the Lord's greatness (or might, i.e., His remoteness or transcendence) one also finds mention of His anavah. Surely it cannot be said of the Deity that He has a lowly opinion of Himself!

d) How can Maimonides explain the apparent absurdity of the passage in the Talmud (at the end of Sotah) where the Mishnah tells us that when Rabbi (Judah the Prince) died, anavah came to an end. The Talmud records the following statement of R. Joseph to this Mishnah: do not read anavah (i.e., that this quality disappeared with the death of Rabbi) for I am here (i.e., I possess that virtue)!

These objections appear valid and thus force us to look for an alternative to the Maimonidean conception of pride and humility. (What will here be presented was first suggested to me in the course of conversations with my late, dear friend, Dr. William Zev Frank ז"ל.) Such an alternative is based upon making a distinction between the terms anavah and shiflut. The latter is not seen as merely the more intensive form of the former. Anavah is not merely the mean between the extremes of shiflut and



gaavah, but something entirely different, a quality that speaks not of self-definition and self-worth, which are the stuff of the shiflut-gaavah axis, but rather of an attitude towards others in which one is willing to bear insult and vilification in silence without rising and taking the cudgels in his own defense. It is best to translate the terms into English to get the flavor of the distinction between them: shiflut is **humility**, and anavah is **meekness**... Another way of putting it: shiflut is a category of man's relation to himself (bein adam le'atzmo), and anavah is a social virtue, "between man and man" (bein adam le'havero).

According to this analysis, anavah or meekness not only does not presuppose the kind of self-denigration or weak self-image implied by shiflut, it demands a strong and realistic sense of self--something midway between shiflut and gaavah. Thus, Moses could not have practiced self-constraint in the face of his siblings' criticisms in this most exemplary demonstration of anavah had he not possessed a healthy self-image. A "lowly" person probably could not have contained himself...

Thus, according to this alternate view of anavah and shiflut we have satisfactorily answered our four criticisms of the Maimonidean thesis:

a) Anavah is true, it does not at all require bending the truth. There is no conflict between anavah and emet.



b) Anavah is psychologically healthy, since it does not require one to suppress his normal ego and ego needs.

c) R. Joseph's statement, fort I am here, makes good sense, for one's self-characterization as "meek" is not an absurdity, as would be one's self-definition as "humble." It is merely a recognition of one's personality traits.

d) G-d's anavah similarly makes good sense, especially in context. His closeness to the downtrodden of the earth is a function of the divine meekness.

However, an opinion of Maimonides cannot be challenged so easily; it requires support from other acknowledged authorities. Is such support available?

I believe there is. A search in the writings of the Rishonim on this matter--and it is unfortunately not extensive--yields three sources: one in apparent agreement with Maimonides, one opposed, and one which can be read as advocating both (contradictory) views.

R. Abraham Ibn Ezra apparently agrees with Maimonides. Thus, in his comment to our text (Nu. 13:3), he writes: שלא בקש גדולה על (במדבר יב-ג) אחיו which is paraphrased by Nahmanides (ad loc.) to mean ולא יתגאה על מעלתו כלל, that Moses had no sense of superiority at all, thus agreeing with Maimonides.

However, Nahmanides himself 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 יזכיר ענותנותו שסבל ולא ענם והשם קנא לו. Thus, according to Nahmanides, anav refers not to the absence of a quest for superiority or mastery over others, but to bearing one's insult in silence and not reacting on one's own behalf. Clearly, this is the meaning of meekness, and neither humility nor lowliness.

Rashi (ad loc.) defines anav as: שפל וסבלן, one who is lowly and bears the burden of insult, i.e., a combination of both!

Now that we have established that there are two different views amongst Rishonim (plus a third that paradoxically combines both), it is important to trace and test the sources of these opinions, especially that of Maimonides.

While Maimonides has a proof text in the dictum of R. Levitas of Yavneh, in the same chapter (4) of Avot we read a different opinion, that of R. Meir, which yields a view identical to the one we ascribed to Nahmanides rather than Maimonides. That reads: והוי שפל רוח בפני כל אדם, be lowly of spirit before (or: in front of) every man, i.e., one should **appear** as "lowly" **before** or **in relation to** other people. Thus, there must be no pride, but neither must there be self-denigration. R. Meir's formula yields--anavah, meekness.

Later sources conform with the views of either Maimonides or Nahmanides. The musar or ethical literature of course takes a more austere view, which is to be expected of a didactic ap-

proach. However, in Hasidic literature we find greater sympathy for Nahmanides's view (although it is not attributed to him by name). There is probably good historical explanation for this: Jews in that period already felt inferior, abandoned, and inadequate. The Chmelnitzki pogroms, the Sabbatean heresy, and the widening gulf between the learned class and the general Jewish population had demoralized most of East European Jewry, and hence the moral task of spiritual and communal leadership was to elevate the people's sense of self-worth. Thus, as an example of a later Hasidic master who dealt with the question of pride and self-worth, we may point to R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin. In his אוֹת רמ"ו, צדקת הצדיק, we detect an ambivalence on the matter of gaavah or pride: it is, of course, sinful--but not altogether so: ומ"מ כמו ששורש הרע והתחלת הנפילה ע"י גיאאות כך גם התחלת הקדושה על ידי הגיאאות ... ובאמת א"א להגיע לשום מדרגה דקדושה רק ע"י הגיאאות שיתגאה לבו לומר שגם בו ידבר ה' ... ובודאי מי שהוא בתכלית השפלות ... יסתפק במיעוט מעשים ותורה שבידו ... אותו גיאאות נעשה מרכבה לקדושה והוא מלבושי גיאאות דהש"י שנא' (תהילים צג) ה' מלך גאות לבש וגו' וכן האדם הדבק במדותיו צריך להיות לבוש דגיאאות 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 (i.e., to conform with the verse גאאות 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 R. Meir and Nahmanides than that of Levitas and Maimonides.



In order better to understand this view of anavahp as meekness, and not as requiring the extreme of lowliness, we must turn again to the personality of Moses who serves throughout our tradition as the paradigm of anavah, 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 was: "and Moses heard" --nothing more. According to the Rabbis, he was openly suspected of adultery! I submit that had Moses been a man of shiflut, as Maimonides describes him, he would have failed to react not only to the personal calumny, but also to the rebellion against his 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 anav as 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!

Before concluding this theoretical analysis of anavah, shiflut, and gaavah, let me add that Maimonides' 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 Nahmanides' view for that of Maimonides, the latter's general philosophy of character still holds. Hence, it is possible to maintain the fundamental Maimonidean structure of the Middle Way and yet opt for an alternative to his view of anavah. For the reasons adumbrated earlier, that is the position that I believe ought seriously be considered, because it both accords with the insights of modern psychology and has respectable precedent in agadic and exegetical sources.

Elsewhere, I have attempted to demonstrate that Maimonides' Middle Way, which he calls the derekh Hashem, "the way of the Lord," applies not only to individual character but to collective character as well, and therefore to the nature of communal policy. I have suggested that Maimonides' 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 Nahmanides' view of anavah (located within the nexus of the Maimonidean theory of deiot or character) to contemporary matters. I hope this will be considered a proper extrapolation and not dismissed as the illicit exercise of homiletic license.

Anavah, 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, gaavah towards others is repugnant.

In communal terms, this means that, as a community, 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 its cause. Moreover, such an attitude betrays the kind of collective gaavah that is no more attractive for a community than it is for an individual.

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

Anavah requires of us in the Orthodox camp that we undertake a psychologically mature acceptance of realities--including our own sometimes vexatious predicament--and, without the extremes of either shiflut or gaavah, proceed on our sacred tasks with determination to succeed.

The 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 minyanim and away from the larger and more formal synagogues--and hence a loss of their 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 constitutency (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, there has been a marked 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 Orthodox Jews and leaders 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 shiflut-type defeatism will prove self-fulfilling. If such shiflut will be the approach of Orthodoxy, the rest of the Mishnah will unfortunately but inexorably follow: to paraphrase it--"for the hope of the Rabbiante is but the worm."

Moreover, the kind of moderationism that we stand for often lends itself to such shiflut-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): אנחנו הציונים החרדיים (נדתיים) נמצאים בין הפטיש והסדן. אין אנו יכולים ואיננו חפצים לותר על אות אחת שבתורתנו ולא על סעיף אחד שבציונות (המליץ גליון ש' ½).

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

Their krechtz about their situation, which sounds so very contemporary, is applicable to anyone or any group that keeps to the "way of the Lord" in both the substance of its ideology and the manner of its presentation. The way of moderation, the "way of the Lord," 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 vilification--for this is the way of anavah, taught to us by Moses as interpreted by R. Meir and Nahmanides.

The way of anavah, as opposed to both shiflut and gaavah, 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 derekh Hashem, the "way of the Lord." Communal or organizational anavah 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 modern expression of Orthodoxy. However, we sometimes slip in one direction or another and have to remind ourselves of the virtue of anavah 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 or mahloket in our ranks.

All of us deplore disunity, but we should not be so certain that controversy necessarily leads to disunity. The Mishnah (Avot, chap. 5) teaches us that כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים ושאינה לשם שמים אין סופה להתקיים, "a controversy for the sake of Heaven will endure; a controversy not for the sake of Heaven will not endure." The Mishnah exemplifies this by referring to the disputes between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai (the two great schools of Halakhah during the last years of the Second Commonwealth) as being "for the sake of Heaven," and the



rebellion of Korah against Moses as "not for the sake of Heaven." 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 יתקיימו במחלוקת. היום יחלוקו בדבר אחד ולמחר בדבר אחר. למחלוקת יהיה קיום, ונמשך ביניהם כל ימי חייהם. ולא עוד, אלא אורך ימים ושנות חיים יוסיפו להם. ושאינה לש"ש אין סופה להתקיים, רק במחלוקת הראשונה יספו ויתמו ושם ימותו כמחלוקת של קורח.

Controversy is neither good nor bad; all depends on motivation. A person of gaavah will indulge in it in the manner of Korah and his coterie; a man of shiflut will back off and resign. An anav will enter the fray "for the sake of Heaven"--which means that such controversy does not contradict unity or peacefulness, and that it is creative and productive and constructive.

A major question, of course, is how one can guarantee that any opinion or view is indeed "for the sake of Heaven." Integrity, after all, is a matter of the heart, and no one is qualified to certify such inner dispositions. Scoundrels have, throughout history, been known to lay claim to sincerity and piety. That the Sages of the Talmud were sensitive to this tendency to cloak one's self in the mantle of "for the sake of Heaven" illegitimately is abundantly clear from their reluctance, in some sources, to permit the claim of "for the sake of Heaven" even for people of undisputed righteousness.

Thus, regarding the halakhah of kana'im poge'in bo, the law permitting one to take the law into his own hands in the case of a scandalously public act of immorality, the Jerusalem Talmud (Sanhedrin 9:7) maintains that Phineas, the archetypical biblical case of such zealous vigilantism (Numbers 25:7-15), acted contrary to the wishes of the Sages who wanted to excommunicate him for his execution of Zimri but refrained from doing so only because the Holy Spirit intervened explicitly. In other words, except for the case of a special divine revelation, we cannot trust one to violate the law based upon his claim of good intentions. (See too the comment on this matter in Torah Temimah to Nu. 25:13, #31.) The case of fomenting controversy for the sake of Heaven is not different from that of Phineas. Nevertheless, we are here simply asserting that there can be controversies that qualify as "for the sake of Heaven," even if we do not here offer any clues as to how such a determination is to be made.