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# “THE SELF-IMAGE OF THE RABBI”



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A good part of the functioning of a rabbi, in the many aspects of his career as a teacher of Torah and leader of his community, depends upon his self-confidence — a psychological and also spiritual issue which involves his self-image as a rabbi and student of Torah, and his conception of his role, his identity, and his destiny.

## MAIMONIDES ON PRIDE

At first blush, the problem is a rather simple one. Self-image is a question of *gaavah* (pride) or *anivut* (humility), and Maimonides in his *Hilkhot Deiot* is quite clear on this. In all other attributes of character, as a matter of Halakhah, Maimonides demands that we follow the middle way between the extremes. We are to shun the extremes and follow the path of moderation, the mean between the two polar opposites. This middle way, what is popularly known as the "Golden Mean," Maimonides identifies as "The Way of the Lord." But there are two exceptions that Maimonides makes in formulating this *halakhah* of character, and one of these is self-assessment. Here Maimonides identifies the two extremes as *gaavah* (pride) and *shiflut* (lowliness), and the middle way as that of *anivut* (humbleness). Unlike other characteristics, or *deiot*, a person here must choose the extreme of *shiflut* — of self-abnegation or lowliness. Thus, we read concerning Moses that **והאיש משה ענו מאד**, "and the man Moses was very humble" (Numbers 12:3). Maimonides interprets the intensive as indicating the extreme; thus, "very humble" (*anav me'od*) equals "of lowly spirit" (*shefal ruah*).

Similarly, in the fourth chapter of *Avot* we read that R. Levitas of Yavneh says, "Be exceedingly careful (*me'od, me'od*) to be lowly of spirit." Hence, with regard to a person's self-definition, the "golden mean" or middle way does not apply and, instead, one must opt for *shiflut* or lowliness—the extreme or intensive form of *anivut*, humbleness.

However, the matter is too complex and too consequential to leave it at that. An analysis of Maimonides' view leaves us with a number of troubling questions.

For one, does not *shiflut*, as Maimonides explains it, seem to conflict with *emet*, truth or honesty? If, e.g., Maimonides thought of himself as an ignoram-

us, that might be an instance of *shiflut*; but is it true?

And is it psychologically desirable? How many of us consciously conform to the norm of such *shiflut*, and how many of us are prepared to raise our own children and educate our own students towards the ideal of feeling worthless? One need not subscribe to the contemporary ideology of narcissism to be worried by its extreme antonym as a norm of self-perception and conduct.

Moreover, there are alternative sources to Maimonides' invocation of R. Levitas. Whereas R. Levitas of Yavneh demands *shiflut* as *me'od, me'od*, we read in the same chapter of *Avot* that R. Meir says וְהָיָה שֹׁפָל רוּחַ בְּפָנֵי כָל אָדָם — "be lowly of spirit before every man." Notice: there is no demand for *me'od, me'od*, of going to the extreme, and R. Meir addresses himself not to substantive self-image but "before every man," in other words, only to one's conduct in relation to and in the presence of others.

## AN ALTERNATIVE TO MAIMONIDES

I believe, therefore, that a legitimate alternative to the opinion of Maimonides exists within the writings of the Sages, even though this view may not have been formally articulated. This approach, which would follow R. Meir instead of R. Levitas, would hold that *gaavah* is a homonym for two related yet different characteristics. The first of these is self-importance, vanity, egotism; its opposite is *shiflut*—humility, low self-esteem. The second form of *gaavah* is arrogance, haughtiness, and aggressive self-assertion—more of an attitude to others than a vision of one's own place in the scheme of things. Its antonym at the other end of the spectrum is *anivut* — meekness, a willingness to abide insults without reacting in kind. *Shiflut*, humility, is a matter of self-deprecation; it is a psychological condition. *Anivut*, meekness, implies self-effacement; it is a behavioral reaction. They are polar qualities on two different spectrum bands of character.

Thus, when R. Meir demands that we be "lowly of spirit before every man," he is elaborating a social, not an existential or psychological attribute, and his "lowliness of spirit" is a synonym for a



moderate form of self-image, or: *anivut*. It is a moot question whether, using Maimonides' general system of *Deiot*, R. Meir considers *anivut* an extreme which, in this case, is desirable; or whether he holds it to be a mean between *gaavah* (as aggressive self-assertion) and some unarticulated extreme form of meekness.

Despite their assaults upon him, Moses keeps his peace, he does not respond. Instead, it is the Almighty who takes up the cudgels on behalf of Moses. The silence of Moses is the result of his *anivut*, his meekness.

According to this definition, there is no conflict between the proper form of self-definition and honesty, *emet*.

Interestingly, this will explain as well an otherwise startling passage in the Talmud at the end of *Sotah*. In the last mishnah of that tractate, we read that when Rabbi (R. Judah the Prince) died, *anavah* (the same as *anivut*) and the fear of sin vanished from the world. In the gemara on that mishnah we read that R. Joseph said to the Tanna, "do not say *anavah* (in other words, the fear of sin may have vanished upon the death of Rabbi, but not *anivut*), for I am here." Now, this is an astounding statement. Surely, the very self-awareness of humility undoes it and disproves it!

However, if we interpret *anivut* not as humility but as meekness (an interpretation suggested to me by my late, dear friend Dr. William Zev Frank), the passage makes eminently good sense. One can be aware of one's meekness without destroying it, even as one can be aware of one's musical talent or height or fair complexion without subverting any of these qualities. A man can recognize that he is meek, that he never answers an insult in kind, and the statement is not at all self-contradictory or paradoxical.

(This redefinition of *anivut* is mentioned as well by the Netziv, who cites the passage in *Sotah* as proof. See his *Haamek Davar* and *Harhev Davar* to Nu. 12:3.)

Hence, with regard to both *shiflut* and *anivut*, we may insist upon the middle way instead of the extreme, as we do with other attributes of character.

It is this doctrine of moderation with regard to self-definition which, I submit, is crucial for the rabbi of today. And even if one were to disagree with my thesis concerning this alternative to the



decision of Maimonides, surely a community, like a nation, must operate according to different rules from those of an individual (a topic too involved to discuss here, but *kavod* and *kin'ah* come to mind immediately as examples)—and a rabbi in his role of communal leadership should be viewed as representing the community as well as an individual.

It is imperative that our *musmakhim*, who bear the burden of Torah leadership and of continuing the heritage they have learned in these sacred precincts, guard against both extremes in their rabbinic role—that of *gaavah*, as exaggerated and overweening self-confidence and self-importance; and *shiflut* in the form of a weak self-image, the lack of self-esteem and self-worth.

## OCCUPATIONAL DANGERS

Young rabbis must be forewarned of one of the occupational dangers of the rabbinate: laymen sometimes look up to a rabbi (and, occasionally, to a teacher) deferentially and thus distort his perspective on his own self. It is too easy to emerge from your studies here, in this atmosphere of intense intellectual competition and spiritual ambitions, and the attendant deflation of ego, and suddenly find yourself on a pedestal where you will begin to believe some of the adulation you will receive. My advice to you is: be wise, don't believe it. It is dangerous to your spiritual health.

Moreover, a rabbi must be careful never to practice *gaavah* towards his own laymen, his “*baale-batim*.” The layman is not the natural enemy of the rabbi. He is his *talmid*, his disciple, in ways both formal and informal, and like students of all ages he is sometimes resistant to instruction. But this only constitutes a greater challenge to the rabbi to marshal both his inner resources and his acquired techniques to teach, educate, inspire, and instruct. But never, never look down upon the men and women of your community. That Jews come to *shul* or study Torah or work for the Jewish community or contribute to Israel—in this atmosphere of widespread assimilation and assertive ignorance—is already a “plus” and a sign of the Jewish dignity of your

people. You will find many of them considerably talented, learned, experienced, devoted, charitable, and self-sacrificing—even if very few will not have all of these qualities, and some will have none. They deserve not your obedience, but certainly your respect and your love.

You must live up to their highest ideals of what a rabbi should be—a man of integrity and spirituality. Scholarship and piety are necessary but they are not sufficient. A spiritual person is one whose ideals and practice transcend his self-interest, whose deportment and, indeed, very presence symbolize the values of Torah. Your people want and need and deserve a symbol not of other-worldliness, but of the sanctification of this world: a man who, together with his sophistication and secular learning, is living proof that Torah creates a spiritual personality in this very world of technology and high finance, of hedonism and narcissism.

By all means, a rabbi should have a good living salary, no less than others, but his material ambitions should never be his priority. A rabbi should always have his hand stretched out to his laymen to solicit their help and substance for *tzedakah*—but never, never may he have that hand out for a personal gift or fee.

But mostly, do not succumb to the *gaavah* that you are an accomplished scholar of Torah, that you already are a *Talmid Hakham*, that you have gotten enough Torah erudition from your masters to last you a lifetime. Semikhah is not only, as it is classically known, הוֹבֵה לֵמֻד, but also הִתֵּר הוֹרָאָה. . . . Smugness at this stage of your development is the sure road to lasting and pervasive ignorance.

Remember always the astounding tale that the Sages tell us (*Shab.* 147b) about one of the greatest of all the Tannaim, R. Elazar b. Arakh, who one time went to visit two places that were renowned in antiquity for their fine wine and sparkling waters. According to the Sages, R. Elazar overstayed his visit; the spa apparently attracted him more than it should have. As a result, he slowly but surely began to forget his learning. So much so, that when he returned to the great Academy of Yavneh, the

greatest academy of learning in the history of our people, and he was invited to read in the Torah the portion that begins with **הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם**, ("This month shall be for you . . ." Ex. 12:2), he mistook the text for three similar words that had a totally different meaning: **הַחֶרֶשׁ הִיה לָכֶם** ("Their heart was mute"). His learning did not return to him until the Rabbis prayed for him. The lesson from all this, our Talmudic text continues, is the statement in the Mishnah by R. Nehorai that one must always go to a place of Torah learning even if it means going into exile, **וְאַל בִּינְתֵךְ אֵל תִּשְׁעַן**, "And do not rely upon your own intellect."

If this is true of the great R. Elazar b. Arakh, whom his teacher R. Yohanan b. Zakkai (according to Abba Shaul) considered the greatest of all disciples, how much more so is it true of us lesser mortals. There will be a thousand reasons for us to be distracted from regular study of Torah—from the professional demands upon us to community concerns, from family obligations to the leisure pursuits of our own laymen. Excessive self-confidence in our own learning can, as R. Elazar b. Arakh learned, deaden our sensitivity—make our "hearts mute"—and pave the way to forgetfulness and corrosive ignorance.

It is only a consistent and creative uncertainty about ourselves that can motivate us to keep up our learning and to develop into mature *talmidei ḥakhamim*.

But I feel that I must caution you even more against the other extreme, that of excessive *shiflut*, which afflicts the Orthodox Jewish community generally and us, often, in particular.

## OUR COLLECTIVE SELF-IMAGE

I address myself to our weak collective self-image in several respects—professionally as rabbis; communally as Orthodox Jews; and institutionally as alumni of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and Yeshiva University.

As rabbis, our humility has its source in our perception that the rabbinate has come upon bad times. For a variety of reasons, not irrelevant but too extensive for us to address here, the rabbinate as a career has become devalued in Jewish life.

In the secular Jewish world, some of its functions



are being taken over by professors of Judaic studies, and others by executives of the various federations and other Jewish agencies. In the Orthodox world, *rashei yeshivah* and Hasidic *admorim* have captured much of the authority and esteem previously held by rabbis. Prestige and influence—sometimes even *shiddukhim*!—often can be seen slipping away from rabbis to these other groups. As a result, Orthodox rabbis emerge with a sense of inferiority, an awareness that they are no longer in the center of things, that they are marginal.

But as young *rabbanim*, as students of Torah educated in our holy Yeshiva, you must accept this as a happy challenge “to restore the crown (of the rabbinate) to its ancient splendor,” perhaps in new and unforeseen ways.

Do not allow humility to interfere with your life’s mission.

Remember the immortal rebuke delivered to King Saul by the prophet Samuel: הֲלֹא אִם קָטָן אַתָּה בְּעֵינֶיךָ רֹאשׁ שְׁבִטִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה, “Even though thou be small in thine own eyes, thou art head of the tribes of Israel” (I Samuel 15:17).

Never mind your self-doubts and the new competition to the rabbinate. If you have a clear consciousness of serving as “the head of the tribes of Israel,” of your responsibility to create and to lead a *kehilah kedoshah*, a truly “holy community,” you will enhance the dignity of the Torah and the rabbinate and raise it to a new plateau.

You will learn to speak out clearly, fearlessly, attractively, cogently, and unequivocally on issues affecting the Torah of Israel, the people of Israel, and the State of Israel.

You are rabbis. Bear your mission with pride and dignity “even though you be small in your own eyes.”

## EXTREMISM IN OUR TIME

There is yet a second area in which this pervasive lowliness has insinuated itself and caused great difficulty. In the Orthodox community generally, I see *shiflut* as the root of certain pathological manifestations of extremism that have become a source of humiliation and chagrin to all of us. Any psychologist will discern a sick sense of inferiority and grave self-doubt as one of the main causes of this violent, militant, and contemptible extremism that has cre-

ated a massive *hillul Ha-shem* for all Jews, and especially Orthodox Jews. Riots, violent demonstrations, rock-throwing—this is not our way.

דברי חכמים בנחת נשמעים — “the words of wise spoken softly are more acceptable . . .” (Eccl. 9:17).

I have no doubt about it; this contemptible extremism which has so sullied the good name of Torah—whether this militantism manifests itself in physical violence or verbal abuse or in self-righteous contempt for others—is a faithful indicator of a faithless man, and one who is מקטני אמנה, plagued by inner doubt and religious insecurity.

I bring this to your attention not because I suspect that there are extremists among you, but because we must all of us beware of a dreadful error that some of us make if we think, in the privacy of our consciousness, that somehow it is the extremists who are authentic and that moderation is merely pragmatic rather than principle and thus an unworthy compromise.

Not so! Those who throw rocks do not represent the צור ישראל, the “Rock of Israel!” Those who suffer a wrenching inner self-contempt and express it in arrogant self-righteousness—they do not represent Torah and Judaism. Remember: it is the way of moderation which Maimonides refers to as the “way of the Lord.”

The teaching of moderation is not a policy of prudence but a philosophy of character and society. Extremism may be far more successful in whipping up passions and fostering the illusion of principle. But it is fundamentally inimical to Torah and to reason and it is hospitable to bigotry. Its “idealism” is meretricious, and its claim to Jewish authenticity rings hollow and false.

Both American society and the Jewish community must be alert to the perils of political and religious extremism, whether of the right or of the left. The allure of the quick fix is all too prevalent in times of crisis or transition, and we must not fall victim to it.

## RADICAL MODERATION

One of the main contributions that a renewed and dynamic Jewish spiritual leadership can make to our community and our times is a dedication to moderation without blandness, to a kind of radical or extreme moderation which is based upon high princi-

ple, great ideals, deep faith, respect for people—together with a healthy skepticism of easy solutions and a contempt for small-mindedness and meanness of spirit.

This leads me, finally, to a few words about our institutional self-image as rabbinic alumni of RIETS and advocates of our institution and what it stands for.

I am often dismayed at our inferiority feelings, our defensiveness, our lack of self-esteem.

Let me remind you: As a group, your cultural-educational credentials are no less impressive than Conservative or Reform or secularist or lay leaders of any stripe in the Jewish community.

And your *lomdut* and the *derekh* you learned here at the feet of some of the greatest *rashei yeshiva* anywhere in the world are not one whit inferior to those of other Yeshivot, despite the perennial criticism, cynicism, and *bittul* that are as old as our Yeshiva is—which means about four times as old as any of you!

We have for too long tended to internalize the carping criticism of certain scoffers, and have developed a rankling lowliness, one that is unworthy and even corrupt.

If our view of Torah in the world is subjected to respectful critical analysis by other *benei Torah*, let us listen and assess and evaluate it openly and honestly, and respond truthfully and forcefully and respectfully. But if the criticism is petty and mean-spirited—simply ignore it. Do not dignify it with either your remonstrance or your concern. Treat it with the studied contempt it so richly deserves.

Remember that the *Torah U-madda* we aspire to is an ideal and not a compromise, a *לכתחילה*, and not a *ברעבר*, that it is ideologically grounded in our Torah *anschauung*.

## THE R.I.E.T.S. RECORD

Bear in mind what Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary has done for Torah and for the Jewish Community:

- We have reproduced ourselves in kind: so many of our own *rashei yeshivah* are themselves alumni of our Yeshiva;
- We have 367 rabbis now serving in congregations throughout the United States, and another



337 now active in various forms of education and community service;

- 157 of our alumni have made Aliyah, and are significantly involved in education and the rabbinic in the State of Israel;
- 21 of our rabbis are now serving in Canada, 4 in Australia, and others in other countries;
- This Yeshiva is involved in an effort to open up new communities where the influence of Torah will make itself felt. Its work in the Division of Communal Services, and especially its Youth work and Seminars, continues to inspire hundreds and thousands with our out-reach.

How many other yeshivot can show such a record of achievement towards the sacred goal of the advancement of Torah, **להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה**?

It is true that most of our rabbis and students do not necessarily affect the garb or other accoutrements that many students of other yeshivot do. So what? I refuse to identify halakhic authenticity with sartorial style or hats of a particular hue.

As you go out to do battle with the forces of ignorance and assimilation and hedonism in the "war of Torah," be proud and strong, never fearful and diffident and self-denigrating, never a **ירא ורך** (according to both interpretations of *tannaim* in the *mishnah* in *Sotah*). Excessive self-doubt, lack of confidence, and extreme humility are both dangerous and false!

In a remarkable story, the Sages (*T. de'b E.Z.*) relate that a young man accosted the prophet Elijah and insulted him. The response of the prophet was immediate and penetrating: **מה תשיב ליוצרך ליום הדין** "How will you answer for this to your Creator on Judgment Day?"

Elijah's telling retort had its effect. The young man answered, **בינה ודעת לא ניתנו לי** "Intelligence and knowledge were not granted to me."

Elijah was not satisfied with this answer, and pursued the matter: "My son, what do you do for a living?" The young man responded that he was a fisherman by profession.

"Ah," cried Elijah, "for the art of fishing you do have intelligence and knowledge, you know how to spin the flax and weave the nets and identify the migrations of the fish, when to throw in your nets and when to pull them up, how to prepare your product and how to market it. But, Torah—con-

cerning which it is written, 'this matter is very close to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart that you may do it.' (Deut. 30:14)—for this you do not have enough 'intelligence and knowledge?'"

Extreme self-deprecation leads to evil conduct; even worse, such diffidence is spurious and false! Those who fall prey to it will someday have to answer for it when judgment will be made, ליום הדין .

## THE SENSE OF BEING CHOSEN

You are a group of intelligent and bright young men who could have become doctors and lawyers, businessmen and scientists, psychologists and computer experts, as easily as your colleagues who graduated with you from Yeshiva College. You do have the blessing of abundant **בִּינָה וְדַעַת**, "intelligence and knowledge." But you chose to use it for Torah, which is "in your mouth and in your heart in order to do it."

Remember that—and, without becoming supercilious, bear yourselves with pride in your life's mission, in your rabbinic calling, in your Yeshiva, and in the Torah you teach. In the words of R. Nehorai (whom the Sages identify as the self-same R. Elazer b. Arakh!), "do not rely upon your own intelligence." Do not *rely* on it—but also do not *deny* it!

Your task is a psychologically difficult one, but one that is a sacred and inescapable obligation: to choose the right theme at the right time, to shun both arrogance and humility in their extremes, to know when to be more humble and when to be more proud. Such moral moderation requires an abundant intelligence and a high degree of wisdom. But without a sense of balance, without that dynamic equilibrium, you will have failed in your mission—and "how will you answer for this to your Creator on Judgment Day?"

All that we have said is summed up in a comment of Rashi on the verse, "And Moses said to Aaron, **קָרַב אֶל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ**, "draw close to the altar" (Lev. 9:7). Rashi comments: **שֶׁהָיָה אֶהְרֹן בּוֹשׁ וִירָא לַגִּשְׁתָּה**, אמר לוֹ "Aaron was diffident and afraid to approach the altar. Moses said to

him, "Why are you diffident, seeing that this is what you were chosen for?"

The insight of the author of *Sefat Emet* is that from this we learn that one who prepares for a life of sacred service must wrestle with two opposing forces within him—the ambivalence of *bosh ve'yarei la-geshet* on one side, and an awareness of *ki le'kakh nivharta* on the other; it is a struggle of the dialectic of personal humility and a sense of destiny.

Never lose that healthy consciousness of shyness, diffidence, and apprehension about taking on too much responsibility: it is an excellent antidote for *gaavah*.

And never be without a sensitive and historical awareness that, "For this you were chosen," that you are entering a "calling," a great and noble and historic mission—that of the rabbinate and the teaching of Torah.

And so, with this awareness— קרב אל המזבח , וכפר בערך ובעד העם , "draw close to the altar, and atone for yourself and for the people."



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