

"HUMILITY - AN ANALYSIS"

That humility is a virtue, is a specific Jewish contribution to the ethics of Western civilization. In the pagan world this particular quality was unknown and unrecognized. The highest type of pagan virtue was an exalted form of self-esteem. It was Judaism which crowned its chief prophet with the grace of humility: "and the man Moses was anav me'od, very meek, more than any man that was on the face of the earth."

Yet the matter is not quite so simple. Humility is a complex phenomenon that needs understanding and analysis. We shall read this afternoon in the 4th chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers: R. Levitas of Yavneh says, me'od me'od hevei shefal ruah she'tikvat enosh rimah, "be exceedingly humble, for the hope (or, as Dr. Philip Birnbaum translates it, the end) of man is the worm." It is completely logical and realistic for man to be humble. Humility issues from a contemplation of the realities of existence: mortality, inevitable eventual death. It is ludicrous of man to pamper his ego when sooner or later it must become nothing more than food for worms.

Maimonides obviously agrees with Rabbi Levitas that one must be me'od me'od shefal ruah -- very, very, or exceedingly, humble. In his analysis of character, which he includes as part of his Halakhic code, Maimonides teaches the principle of the golden mean. In every characteristic there are two extremes from which a man

ought to keep away, and endeavor to find the middle path. Thus, for instance, a man should be brave -- neither foolhardy nor cowardly; he should spend his money generously, neither throwing it all away nor hoarding it. But there are two exceptions to this golden mean, according to Maimonides, and one of them concerns man's view of himself. Maimonides defines the three points on the spectrum as follows: On one end is arrogance. In the middle is anivut, moderate humility. On the other extreme is shiflut ruah, lowliness of spirit, or true humility. In this case, the wise man must choose not the moderate or middle path, that of anivut, but he must go to the extreme of humility: me'od me'od, be exceedingly, very, very shefal ruah, humble. It is simply not enough to be anav; one must be, as was Moses, anav me'od -- very humble.

This is an important ethical contribution to our understanding of character. But, to be perfectly honest, it does not accord with the findings of modern psychology. Despite all the changes in direction taken by contemporary psychological thinking, each step of which is always articulated as a dogmatic assertion as if it were the final truth valid for all eternity, the fact is that the cumulative wisdom of the past fifty years has taught us that man cannot live without self-esteem. It is a commonplace that bragging is often the disguise for an inner sense of inferiority. It is no accident that many modern folk, contemplating the man who is a true shefal ruah according to the definition of R. Levitas and

Maimonides, will conclude that he suffers from an "inferiority complex."

Is the Jew who wishes to live by Judaism forced to ignore this view of modern psychology? Is it not a fact that in raising our children we strive for a compromise between self-assertion and self-abnegation, that we are sick to death with worry if we notice a child who lacks self-esteem and who in effect lives up to the commandment of me'od me'od hevei shefal ruah?

Furthermore, does not the Jewish tradition itself confirm the necessity for being aware of one's own position and one's own worth? When the first king of Israel, Saul, acted overly humble, the prophet Samuel said to him, "If you are small in your own eyes, you are yet the chief of the tribes of Israel!"

The answer, I submit, lies in the recognition that there is yet another opinion, equally valid to and different from that of R. Levitas. In the same chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers, we chance upon a mahaloket tannaim, a controversy amongst the Sages of the Mishnah, that is not immediately apparent. R. Levitas' insight into the nature of humility is controverted by that of R. Meir who said: hevei shefal ruah bifnei kol adam, "be humble before every man."

There are three important differences between the opinions of R. Levitas and R. Meir. While R. Levitas insists upon extremism in humility, me'od me'od, R. Meir omits this requirement. Apparently,

he is satisfied with a moderate dose of humility, with shiflut ruah without the me'od me'od. Second, R. Meir omits the reasoning of R. Levitas, she'tikvat enosh rimah, that the end of man is the worm. In other words, whereas R. Levitas argues that in effect man has no reason to assert an ego, R. Meir acknowledges the existence of the ego and its legitimacy. Man possesses self-worth despite death. For R. Levitas, humility is a metaphysical judgment based upon man's physical condition: since he will physically disintegrate, he has no metaphysical self worthy of esteem. R. Levitas thus negates the ego. For R. Meir, however, humility is an ethical-social obligation. R. Meir affirms the ego, with limitations. Finally, whereas R. Levitas is absolute in his denial of the ego, R. Meir urges that it be limited only bifnei kol adam, "before every man," that is, man should not manifest arrogance in his human relations. He should seek out the ways in which to convince himself of the worth of his fellow man, even the superiority of his neighbor over himself, but he need not deny his self-worth.

Now, this last point deserves further thought. Does R. Meir really mean that in comparing myself with others -- and this is something that all of us do, whether with siblings or colleagues or competitors -- I must always believe that they are superior? Is this not dishonest at times? Must the Vilna Gaon really believe that he is inferior in scholarship to the town porter, and must Prof. Einstein acknowledge that I am a greater mathematician than he?

My late grandfather, of blessed memory, in an ethical Will

which he left for his family, cautioned us never to dilute the truth as we see it. If I honestly think that I am more competent than a friend in some respect, it is foolish and dishonest for me to deny it -- to myself. But, he concludes, never let anyone else know that fact! This is the meaning of humility: to be a shefal ruah, a humble person, bifnei kol adam, in the presence of anyone else. So that I may affirm my self-esteem, I must be honest; but I must never be arrogant, I must never tear down another man in order to build myself up. I must be humble "before every man."

Indeed, to take the argument a step further, this may well be the difference between two synonyms for humility in Hebrew: shiflut ruah -- which we have been using until now, and which literally means "lowliness of spirit" -- and anivut. According to Maimonides, the difference is only quantitative: shiflut ruah is nothing but an intensified anivut, the extreme form of humility of which the latter is but the moderate form. But according to R. Meir, and my grandfather's instruction, the difference is qualitative, not in degree but in kind.

In order to explain this, let us pose two questions.

First, the Mishnah teaches us that mi-she'met Rabbi batlah anavah, from the time that Rabbi Judah the Prince died, all anivut (tentatively: humility) vanished. Whereupon, according to the Talmud, R. Joseph replied: ha-ikka ana, how can you say that with Rabbi Judah the Prince all humility vanished, am I not here? Now,

if anivut really means humility, that statement does not make sense. Humility is the only virtue that is automatically denied by asserting that you possess it.

Second, the Talmud tells us concerning God, that kol makom she'atta motzei gedulato shel ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu, wherever you find mention of the greatness of the Holy One, sham atta motzei anvatanuto, there too you will find mention of His anivut. Now, if anivut means humility in the sense of the repression of one's ego, is it conceivable that God is humble? Does the Creator consider Himself in any way limited by and inferior to His creatures?

The answer, I believe, lies in this difference between the two terms: shiflut ruah means "humility," and this concerns the definition of one's self and the esteem of his ego. Anivut, however, should be translated as "meekness," that is, softness of response, unwillingness to reply with an insult to an insult, inability to take offense or give offense. A man who is humble is usually meek; but even a man who honestly recognizes his own worth and even superiority, may very well be meek, that is, gentle and gracious in his expression.

Thus, it was perfectly natural for R. Joseph to maintain that meekness had not disappeared, for he too was meek. In fact, we know from several incidents in his life that R. Joseph was indeed a very meek man. It does not mean that he thought of himself as an ignoramus, which he most certainly was not. But he never imposed himself on anyone else, he never acted arrogantly or superciliously towards another human being: he was meek, and he knew it. In the

same way, the anivut of the Almighty expresses itself in gentleness and graciousness to the downtrodden, the orphan and the widow and the stranger. Indeed, of Moses we read that he was anav me'od, very meek, after the incident where his brother and sister spoke ill of him and he refused to answer them in kind. That is the perfect definition of meekness.

Hence, shiflut ruah according to R. Meir should be pursued with moderation, bifnei kol adam. We must always beware of an excessively swollen ego, but we need not destroy it entirely. Anivut, however, must be taken to an extreme! Every one must endeavor to be like Moses: anav me'od -- very meek. A man's ego is important, but never so important that it must feed on someone else's ego. A man must have enough ego to guarantee his psychological integrity, but enough shiflut ruah to preserve and intensify his anivut so as to keep him from psychological imperialism. There is nothing in logic or psychology to question this teaching of R. Meir. There is everything in ethics and religion to commend it.

This ethical-psychological teaching applies to nations and communities as well as individuals. England, for example, was once a country of great pride, even of arrogance. Every Englishman participated in the great collective national ego. He knew that the sun never sets on the British Empire, which is undoubtedly superior to all countries by some kind of divine right. Nowadays, there is a real danger of the Englishman's self-evaluation going to the other

extreme, that of shiflut ruah. This is a country which lost an empire and whose influence is constantly waning. It finds itself beset by a harsh economic crisis, it has been humiliated by DeGaulle who is dragging it, kicking and screaming, into Europe. It is confronted with a racial problem of great proportions which threatens the harmony of the country, and it is completely unnerved by the fact of this problem which it once ascribed only to those uncouth, uncultured, and uncultivated Americans. In short, England faces an ego problem, and it must try to avoid either of the two extremes, that of arrogance or that of shiflut ruah. It must find its own soul, and relocate its ego in proper proportion, without superciliousness and yet retaining its self-worth, learning from others and practicing inter-dependence.

The same holds true, in large measure, for the Jewish community of England. English Jewry was once a proud and dignified and self-confident Jewish community. In more recent years, unfortunately, it has experienced a loss of faith in itself and an apprehensiveness concerning the future. To a large extent it has suffered from the general sense of defeat that has afflicted the larger English community. It has been torn apart by unfortunate polemics of great hostility, aided and abetted by a competent but irresponsible Jewish press. It now totters dangerously at the precipice of the other extreme, that of shiflut ruah. My impression from my recent visit, however, is that the situation has begun to improve. In the year that

Chief Rabbi Jakobovits has come to England, a new spirit has been generated in Anglo-Jewry, a refreshing view of its collective selfhood. There is the same sense of history and tradition, but with the realization that a proud history and a grand tradition must not become the dead hand of the past which chokes the present and stultifies all endeavor for a future. There is a sense of worthiness, yet a willingness to change, to adapt, to experiment and learn and build. Would that English Jewry yield to such expert direction and such wise guidance!

The same question of humility and meekness applies to the State of Israel. There are some professional American Jewish liberals, especially those who border on the New Left, who always seem to demand of Israel that it make concessions, that it become the world's only worshipper in the cult of Federalism or the United Nations. Only of Israel do they demand that it be magnanimous and humble and self-sacrificing. This is a part of the sickness known as Jewish masochism or self-hatred. Certainly, we must reject that.

Yet the answer is not the reverse: an expansion of Israel's collective ego, which would be out of keeping with Jewish character and tradition. I do not refer to Israel's policy of immediate responsiveness to Arab military incursions. Of course, this is a military necessity and completely justifiable, although I am sure that those in charge of Israel's security do not need ecclesiastical endorsement or rabbinic advice from New York.

I refer, rather, to the manner in which Israel traditionally celebrates its birthday, its Yom ha-Atzma'ut or Independence Day. This is not a matter of national security, but of a people's self-image. And here I would prefer not shiflut ruah, but certainly anivut.

I can appreciate that once it was announced that the twentieth birthday of Israel would be celebrated by a military march, that Israel had no choice but to go through with it despite all threats. I can applaud the fact that the celebrations were to be held in all of Jerusalem, including the newly acquired areas. I can sympathize with the need for military marches in past Independence Day celebrations. But I earnestly believe that they have outlived their usefulness, and that Israel should have outgrown it. When a little boy is beset by a bully, and administers a sound trouncing to him, we should not begrudge the little boy the opportunity to flex his muscles; he deserves it, and it serves as a warning to the bully to refrain from future aggressiveness lest he again become the victim of beatings. But if it is overdone, then somehow there develops an unattractive little-boy-bully complex.

Israel's national ego has been asserted, and properly so, in many ways, from the technological to the military. Now is the time for national anivut, for moderation, for meekness, for gentleness in its self-definition.

I am therefore pleased that the 28th day of Iyyar, the day

of thanksgiving for the reunification of Jerusalem, will be celebrated without the flexing of military muscles. It is a day for which the rabbinate of Israel has proclaimed a service of prayer. I should like to see a parade on this day too -- not a parade of jets, and not a parade of tanks, but a parade of our prophetic visions of universal peace, of our scientific accomplishments, of our educational achievements. It is time that we were sufficiently convinced of the Jewish ability to bear arms and to do so well. Now is the time to recapture our ancient spirit of being a light unto the nations. In the final analysis, such restraint will be not an admission of weakness but a profession of strength. And, above all, it will cause no abrupt break or discontinuity with the traditions of our people or the national character of Israel formed for the past 3500 years.

Unlike other nations, we celebrate our freedom not by claiming descent from the sun-gods, but by the exclamation that avadim hayyinu, we began as a slave people. And unlike other religions, we include in our Sacred Writ, not peans to our own superiority or the impeccable record of our heroes, but prophetic denunciations of these self-same heroes and of the inadequacy of all of us as a people.

As individuals and as a people, therefore, R. Meir teaches us always to be moderately humble -- and extremely meek.

For as with God, so with us: kol makom she'atta motzei

gedulato, wherever you find greatness, sham atta motzei anvatanuto, there you will find meekness. And for both God and Israel, the reverse is true as well: kol makom she'atta motzei anvatanuto, where you find true meekness, sham atta motzei gedulato, there you shall authenticate greatness.