

"A DEFINITION OF ANIVUT"

Our Sidra of this morning introduces us, rather casually and incidentally, to one of the most important and highly celebrated virtues in the arsenal of religion, that of anivut. We read in today's portion, ve'ha-ish Mosheh anav me'od mi-kol ha-adam asher al p'nei ha-adamah, "and the man Moses was the most humble, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth." Whatever may be the particular translation of the Hebrew word anav, the idea that is usually imparted is that anivut is humility, a feeling by the individual that he lacks inner worth, an appreciation that he amounts to very little. Indeed, the author of Mesilat Yesharim, one of the most renowned works on Jewish ethics in all our literature, identifies the quality of anivut with shiflut - the feeling of inner lowliness and inferiority. According to this definition, then, the Torah wants to teach each of us to see himself in a broader perspective, to recognize that all his achievements are very trivial, his attainments mere boastfulness, his prestige a silly exaggeration. If Moses was an anav, if he was humble and able to deprecate himself, how much more so we lesser mortals.

However, can this be the real definition of this widely heralded quality of anivut?

We know of Moses as the adon ha-neviim, the chief of all the prophets of all times, the man who spoke with G-d "face to face". Do the words ve'ha-ish Mosheh anav me'od mean that Moses himself did not realize this? Does the anivut of Moses imply that he had a blind spot, that he failed to recognize what any school child knows? Does a Caruso have to consider himself nothing more than a choir boy, and an Einstein merely an advanced bookkeeper, in order to qualify for anivut? In order to be an anav, must one be <sup>either</sup> untruthful  
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or genuinely inferior?

To a very great extent, modern psychology is concerned with the problem of inferiority. Deep down, people usually have a most unflattering appraisal of themselves. Many are the problems which bring them to psychologists and psychiatrists; yet all so often the underlying issue is the lack of self-worth. Are we, therefore, to accept the Jewish ethical prescription of anivut as an invitation to acquire an inferiority complex?

In addition, the definition of anivut as self-deprecation and humility does not fit into the context of today's Sidra. The identification by the Torah of Moses as an anav is given to us as part of the story in which we learn of Aaron and Miriam, the brother and sister of Moses, speaking ill of Moses behind his back. They criticize him harshly because of some domestic conduct in the personal life of Moses. They are wrong, and they are punished by the Almighty. But what has all this to do with the humility of Moses? The substance of their criticism, namely, the domestic relations of Moses, is as unrelated to Moses' humility as it is to his artistic talents or his leadership ability.

Furthermore, the Talmud relates an exchange that is all but meaningless if we assume that anivut means humility. The Talmud (end of Sotah) tells us that mi-she'met Rabbi batlah anavah, when Rabbi Judah the Prince died, the quality of anivut disappeared with him. When this was stated, the famous Rabbi Joseph disagreed. He said, lo titnei anavah, d'ika anna - "how can you say that when Rabbi Judah died anivut vanished, do you not know that I am still here?" I am an anav! Now, if anivut really means humility, does this make sense? Can one boast of his humility and still remain humble? Is it not of the essence of humility that one should not consider ~~that one should~~ ~~not consider~~ that he possesses this virtue in himself?

It is for these reasons, and several more, that the famous head of the Yeshiva

of Volozhin, popularly known as the Netziv, offers us another definition of anivut (in his Haamuk Davar) which, I believe, is the correct one. I would say that the definition of the Netziv, in English, is not humility, but meekness. It refers not to self-deprecation but self-restraint. It involves not an untruthful lack of appreciation of one's self and one's attainments, ~~but rather a lack of appreciation of one's self and one's attainments~~ but rather a lack of arrogance and a lack of insistence upon kavod. To be an anav means to recognize your true worth, but not to impose the consequences upon your friends and neighbors. It means to appreciate your own talents, neither over-emphasizing nor under/selling them, but at the same time refraining from making others aware of your splendid virtues at all times. Anivut means not to demand that people bow and scrape before you because of your talents, abilities, and achievements. Anivut means to recognize your gifts as just that -- gifts granted to you by a merciful G-d, and which possibly you did not deserve. Anivut means not to assume that because you have more competence or greater endowments than others that you thereby become more precious an individual and human being. Anivut means a soft answer to a harsh challenge; silence in the face of abuse; graciousness when receiving honor; dignity in response to humiliation; restraint in the presence of provocation; forbearance and a quiet calm when confronted with calumny and carping criticism.

With this new definition by the Netziv, the statement of Rabbi Joseph becomes comprehensible. When he was told that with the death of Rabbi Judah the Prince there was no more anivut or meekness left in the world, he replied with remarkable candor and truthfulness: you must be mistaken, lo titnei anavah, d'ika anna, because I too am meek. There is no boastfulness here - simply a fact of life. Some people are meek, some are not. If a man says "I am humble," then obviously he is not humble; but if a man says "I am meek," he may very well be just that. In fact, the Talmud tells us that Rabbi Joseph was at least the equal in scholarship of his colleague, Rabbah, but that when the question ~~came~~ arose

who would head the great Academy in Babylon, Rabbi Joseph deferred to Rabbah. And furthermore, kol shanei di-malakh Rabbah, Rav Yosef afilu umna le'veiteiah lo kara - all the years that Rabbah was Chief of the Academy, Rabbi Joseph conducted himself in utter simplicity, to the point where he did all his household duties himself and did not invite any artisan or laborer, and physician or barber, to come to his house. He refused to allow himself the least convenience which might make it appear as if he were usurping the dignity of the office and the station occupied by his colleague Rabbah. This is, indeed, the quality of meekness - or anivut!

And this meekness was the outstanding characteristic of Moses as revealed in the context of the story related in today's Sidra. Here were Aaron and Miriam, both by all means lesser individuals than Moses, who derived so much of their own greatness from their brother, and yet they were ungrateful and captious, ~~and and captious~~, and meddled in Moses' personal life. A normal human being, even a very ethical one, would have responded sharply and quickly. He would have confronted them with their libelous statement, or snapped some sharp rejoinder to them, or at the very least cast upon them a glance of annoyance and irritation. But - ve'ha-ish Mosheh anav me'od mi-kol ha-adam asher al p'nei ha-adamah, the man Moses was the most meek, more so than any man on the face of the earth. Although aware of his spiritual achievements, of his role of leader of his people, even of his historical significance for all generations, he entertained no feelings of hurt sensitivity, of injured lavod. There was in his character no admixture of pride, of arrogance, of harshness, of hyper-sensitivity. He had an utter lack of gall and contentiousness. He was, indeed, an anav, more so than <sup>face of the earth.</sup> other individual on the <sup>very</sup> earth. And he was able to write those words without self-consciousness! Hence he did not react at all to the remarks of his brother and sister. Therefore, God said: if Moses is such an anav that he does not defend himself against this offense, I will act for him!

The quality of anivut, as it has been defined by the Netziv, is thus one of the

loveliest characteristics to which we can aspire. One need not nourish inferiority feelings in order to be an anav. Indeed, the greater one is and one knows one's self to be, the greater his capacity for anivut or meekness. It is the person who pouts arrogantly and reacts sharply and pointedly when his ego is touched, who usually reveals thereby feelings of inferiority and worthlessness, deep shiflut. The man who feels himself secure and who recognizes his achievements as real, can afford to be meek, <sup>to be</sup> an anav.

For it is this combination of qualities - inner greatness and outer meekness - that we learn from none other than God Himself. The Talmud put it this way: kol makom she'ata motzei gedulato shel ha-Kadosh barukh Hu, sham ata motzei anvetanuto. Wherever you find mentioned the gedulah or greatness of God, there also you will find mentioned His anivut. Thus, for instance, where we are told that G-d is mighty and awesome, immortal and transcendent, there too we learn that G-d is close to the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the sick, all those in distress, those overlooked, ignored, and alienated from the society of the complacent. G-d's anivut certainly does not mean His humility or self-deprecation! It does mean His softness, gentleness, kindness -- His meekness! Here, then, is a teaching of Judaism which we can ill afford to do without. When we deal with husband or wife, with neighbor or friend, with children or students, with subordinates or employees -- we must remember that the harsh word reveals our lack of security, and the impatient rejoinder shows up our lack of self-appreciation and self-respect. It is only when we will have achieved real gedulah, true inner worth and greatness, that we shall learn that remarkable, sterling quality of anivut or meekness.

Let us leave the synagogue this morning aware of that mutual, reciprocal <sup>a</sup> relationship between greatness and meekness. If we have gedulah, let us proceed to prove it by developing anivut. And if we doubt whether we really possess gedulah, then let us begin to acquire it by emulating the greatest of all mortals, Moses, and the immortal Almighty Himself, and practice anivut in

all our human relations. If this anivut does not succeed at once in making us truly great, it at least will offer us the dividends of a better character, a happier life, more relaxed social relations, and the first step on the ladder of Jewish nobility of character.