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Intellectual Humility

This week's Torah portion is generally read the week before Shavuot, motivating the commentaries to find a thematic link between the parsha and the holiday.

Bamidbar, translated as “in the wilderness,” gets its name from the opening verse which relates that “God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai” (Bamidbar 1:1). The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7), highlights the juxtaposition of wilderness and Sinai, and explains the deeper significance of God giving the Torah in a desert. It suggests that “whoever does not make himself ownerless [*hefker*] like a wilderness, cannot acquire wisdom and Torah.” What does it mean to make oneself ownerless? Chanoch Zundel ben Yosef, in his commentary on the Midrash, Eitz Yosef, explains that this teaches that a person needs to be humble

enough to learn from all and to teach all, as Torah cannot be found in an arrogant person.

Ethics of the Fathers, which is also customarily read before Shavuot, begins with a tradition of the Torah's transmission from Sinai through the time of the early Sages – “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua,” and so on. One of the many oddities of this first Mishnah is its starting point. We would expect it to state that Moshe received the Torah from God, but instead we read that he received it “from Sinai” (*mi-Sinai*). Why is a mountain, and not God, viewed as the first link in the chain of tradition?

The commentaries provide close to a dozen explanations to this question, but the one with the most moving moral message is provided by Rabbi Israel Lipschitz in his commentary *Tiferet Yisrael*. Weaving together various statements of the Sages, Rabbi Lipschitz suggests that there is a common thread between Moshe, Torah, and Sinai, and that is the trait of humility. Moshe, we are told, is the humblest of all people (Bamidbar 12:3). The Torah, we are told, is compared to water. Water symbolizes humility, as it abandons its high position and streams downwards until it collects in lowly places. Sinai was chosen because it was the humblest of mountains.

The fact that Moshe, Sinai, and Torah share the same trait may be enough to warrant this allusion to humility in the beginning of Ethics of the Fathers, but the message is deeper than just an association of nouns. Other than the person, place, and object,

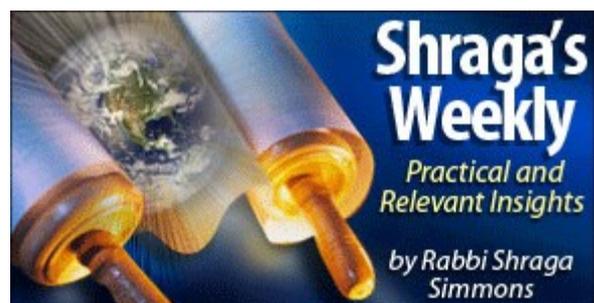
the Mishnah also uses a verb – *kibel* – meaning, “to receive.” Moshe was only able to receive the Torah because of his humility. This Mishnah omits the name of God and highlights Sinai instead, to reveal the necessity of humility in Torah learning and observance.

Why is humility such an essential trait for acquiring Torah? Humility not only positively impacts our relationship to God and to others, but also assists in improving our intellectual abilities. Dr. Liz Mancuso from Pepperdine University conducts psychological research on the concept of intellectual humility. Intellectual humility is a more specific construct than regular humility, as it pertains specifically to ideas, knowledge, beliefs and opinions, and not to global perceptions of self. People with intellectual humility accept that their cognitive faculties are not perfect, and that their perspective may not be accurate. They are not overconfident about their knowledge, they respect others’ viewpoints, and are willing to revise their own viewpoints if necessary. The research suggests that people higher in intellectual humility tend to have wider general knowledge than those who are intellectually arrogant.

Her explanation for this finding can serve as commentary on another Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (4:1), “Who is wise? He who learns from everyone.” Dr. Mancuso explains that intellectual humility is associated with a love of learning, an openness to ideas, and an ability to learn with and from others. This includes listening and reflecting on other people’s opinions, and disagreeing

assertively when appropriate, without being aggressive or prematurely dismissive. Conversely, people who are arrogant tend to be so preoccupied with their desire to be seen as intelligent that there remains little cognitive space for focusing on actual ideas. These people are so distracted by egotistical concerns that they cannot learn and understand effectively.

Humility is essential to learning because it allows us to focus on learning, instead of on our egos. It is essential for accepting and receiving the Torah. On the humblest mountain of Sinai, the humblest man, Moshe, received the Torah, a paradigmatic representation of humility. To emphasize the point, all this took place in the “ownerless” wilderness. Intellectual humility is not only desirable; it also facilitates our ability to receive and learn Torah. May we all feel motivated to acquire this valuable trait



Humility and Mount Sinai

The story is told of Novardok, the great 19th century European yeshiva, where the students were known for their great humility. To reach such levels, they would sit for 30 minutes each morning in the study hall, rocking back and forth, chanting the mantra, "I am nothing, I am nothing."

One morning, a new student arrived at the yeshiva, and upon entering the study hall, was surprised to find hundreds of students muttering, "I am nothing." He checked the sign outside the door to make sure he had the right place, then figured he might as well join them. After finding an empty seat, he began rocking back and forth, chanting, "I am nothing, I am nothing."

Suddenly the student seated next to him turns and says: "The nerve of you! I was here an entire year before I was nothing!"

The Humble Hill

The Midrash says that when God was preparing to give the Torah, all the mountains stepped forward and declared why they thought the Torah should be given on them. "I am the highest mountain," said one. "No," said another, "I am the steepest mountain and therefore the Torah should be given on me."

One by one, they all stated their claims. In the end, God chose Mount Sinai - not because it was the tallest or the grandest (it's not, as anyone who's toured the Sinai Desert will attest), but because, says the Midrash, it was the most humble.

What is this notion of "humility" and what does it have to do with Torah?

First, let's clarify what humility is NOT. Humility does not mean a meek reluctance to speak up or be assertive. Humility is not slouching your shoulders and having low self-esteem. The Torah (Numbers 12:3) refers to Moses as "the most humble person who ever lived" – yet he aggressively confronts Pharaoh, fights a

war against Amalek, and stands up to castigate the Jewish people.

Humility Defined

Humility is to know one's place. In this week's Parsha, the Torah describes the arrangement of the 12 Tribes in the Israelite camp. After a long description of who will travel first, and who will travel last, the Torah says: "The people did exactly as they were instructed" (Numbers 1:54).

What's the big deal that everyone camped where they were supposed to? The Midrash explains that when God suggested the arrangement, Moses feared that by specifying which tribe travels in the East and which in the West, who in front and who in back, disputes will break out between the tribes.

God tells Moses: Years earlier, at Jacob's funeral, his 12 sons carried the coffin. The way the sons were arranged around the coffin is the same way the tribes are to be arranged in the camp today. In this way, everyone is already clear as to his proper place. So don't worry, God tells Moses, because when someone knows their place, there is inevitably peace and calm.

This applies to our own lives as well. Our circumstances of birth and our talents (or lack thereof) to a great degree determine our choices. The higher a person becomes spiritually, the more humble he becomes - internalizing the reality of our tenuous mortality, and only God is eternal.

Moses was called "the most humble" because when he stood before God he knew his place. Anything else precludes

room for God to fit in. That's why the Talmud likens arrogance to idol worship; both push away the presence of God.

Nose in the Air

In the secular world, the biggest personalities are often the most arrogant. Picture the scene: A movie star walks into a party – strutting, cocky, head raised. His mannerisms shout: "I am great and I don't need you or anybody else." The room is silent with awe. Charisma!

Judaism says this is *counterfeit* charisma.

True humility means living with the reality that nothing matters except doing the right thing. The humble person is not dependent on the opinion of others. Because sometimes doing the right thing is popular (and consistent with one's ego needs), and sometimes it's not. The humble person can set his ego aside, to consistently do the right thing.

An arrogant person, on the other hand, is less concerned about right and wrong – and more concerned about himself. He may appear smooth on the outside, while manipulating things around him to suit his self-centered needs.

In actuality, it is humility which guarantees charisma. The humble person has the ability to rise above his self-contained narcissistic envelope and embrace those around him. Since he confidently knows his place, he can leave space for others without having an ego crisis. He honors others and helps them find their place, too.

Judaism defines it like this:

- "Arrogance" = I'm all that counts.
- "Humility" = What's greater than me is what counts.

Forward or Back?

Unfortunately humility has gotten a bad rap. Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

Humility is the ability to be objective about one's own position vis-a-vis others. If I am in the position to lead, then I should lead. And if not, I should defer. I know where I stand, and not take unto liberties. If I am in the presence of someone more knowledgeable, I think twice before speaking. There is nothing more annoying than an accountant standing in a roomful of doctors and pontificating on medical science.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa (19th century Europe) always carried two slips of paper – one in the right pocket and one in the left. On one paper was written the Talmudic statement, "The entire world was created just for me" (Sanhedrin 38a). On the other paper was written the words of Abraham, "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). In this way, the rabbi was reminded that there are times to step forward, and times to step back.

Rabbi Rafael of Barshad (19th century Europe) summed it up as follows: "When I get to heaven, they'll ask me, why didn't you learn more Torah? And I'll tell them that I'm slow-witted. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you do more kindness for others? And I'll tell them that I'm physically weak. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you give

more Tzedakah? And I'll tell them that I didn't have enough money. But then they'll ask me: If you were so stupid, weak and poor, why were you so arrogant? And for that I won't have an answer."

Modern Model of Humility

A contemporary model of humanity Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt"l, the leader of American Jewry for much of the 20th century. In the introduction to "Iggros Moshe," his monumental compendium of responsa, Rabbi Feinstein writes: "I would not have volunteered for the job of leading the Jewish people. But since this is the role that God selected for me, I must oblige."

One day in the study hall, a visitor picked up the pay phone, and the voice on the other end asked to speak with Moshe Feinstein. The visitor then walked into the study hall and began shouting: "Moishy! Phone call for Moishy" – using an informal nickname for the great sage! Rabbi Feinstein calmly raised his hand and graciously accepted the phone.

Rabbi Feinstein's sister was once asked, "What makes your brother so special?" She answered: "What makes my brother special is that he never looks at himself as being so special."

Getting Practical

How do we achieve humility? The first thing a Jew does upon awakening in the morning is to say the *Modeh Ani* prayer: "I acknowledge you, God, for graciously returning my soul for yet another day. Thank you!"

Step one of humility is to put our

relationship with God into perspective. We feel the "We," rather than the self-indulgent, negative energy. This makes us more relaxed, calm and flexible, which trickles down to all our interpersonal relationships: business partnership, marriage, community and nation-building.

More tools for gaining humility:

- Read eulogies. They're a good dose of humility. They help us get perspective on the true meaning of life. Try to write your own obituary. For what do you want to be remembered?
- Use humility to rise above arguments. You don't have to respond to every insult.
- Ask a close friend to give you criticism. As we more clearly see our own faults, we are less likely to be arrogant toward others.

A crucial step to humility is found in the opening verse of this week's parsha: "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert" (Numbers 1:1). The Sages ask a fundamental question: Why was the Torah given in a desert? Because a desert is empty. This means that to acquire Torah – to receive God's wisdom – one must first be willing to open up space inside.

The Maharal (16th century Prague) explains that the only way to learn anything is to first ask a question. A question creates a lack and a need – a space that the answer can then come and fill. But without first a question, there is no room for the answer

Parshat Bamidbar always falls out in conjunction with Shavuot, the holiday of reliving the Sinai experience. The message for us is to know our place, make some space, and let the truth of God and His Torah enter deep inside.



We All Count

With *Parashas Bamidbar*, we commence the fourth of the Five Books of Moses. This Book is also known as *Sefer HaPekudim* - the Book of Numbers - for God commanded that a census of the Jewish people be taken. One might ask what the purpose of that census may have been, especially since the Jewish nation had already been counted in the Book of Exodus, and surely, God knew our numbers without a physical census.

The Hebrew term for census-taking, *s'u es rosh*, literally means "lift up the head." Through this counting, God reminds us how precious we are to Him, that we are all part of His master plan, and because of that, we all *count*. Each and every one of us is endowed with a special purpose that *only we can fulfill*. That awareness lends meaning to our lives, for it gives us a *tachlis* (a God-given purpose) - a reason to *lift up our heads* and confront life's challenges

with strength and dignity.

DISCOVER YOUR MISSION

At the beginning of the *parashah*, the Torah mentions that, starting from the second year after the Exodus from Egypt, whenever the Jewish people traveled they were arranged in a specific formation. The 12 tribes were divided into four groups of three, with each tribe stationed in a specific location - north, south, east or west - each carrying its own flag that identified its group. One might ask, why didn't the tribes travel in this formation when they left Egypt?

A flag symbolizes one's nationality, and if each tribe had had its own flag from the time the people left Egypt, it could have splintered the nation. Indeed, history is replete with examples of people going to battle under the banner of their national flags. Therefore, our tribal flags were given to us only after we constructed the Tabernacle that stood in the center of the camp. The Tabernacle, the symbol of our love and commitment to Hashem and His Torah, unified us and molded us into one nation.

Once we were unified in our service of God, our individual flags would no longer be a source of conflict, but rather, they would galvanize us and forge us into one. This not only pertains to our ancient past, but it speaks to us in every generation. In families where parents are strong, loving, role models, sibling rivalry is neutralized, for the children are unified in their commitment to their mother and father. Similarly, Jews who truly love God and His people will subdue their individual predilections, for the sake of

the greater good of Hashem and His nation. Thus, while every one of the 12 tribes had a unique mission, for the sake of Hashem they all unified around the Tabernacle, *carried their flags*, and fulfilled their unique mission as one nation. In our contemporary world, in which broken homes are so prevalent and our people are fragmented, we would do well to absorb this lesson.

YOU ARE SPECIAL

God created all of us with eyes, noses, ears, etc., yet no two people look exactly alike. Similarly, no two souls are exactly alike. Every individual is *custom made by Him* and has a purpose that *only he or she can fulfill*. Therefore, he must carry *his own flag, know his own identity, and thus fulfill his/her task*. King David praises God Who counts the billions of stars and calls each and every one of them by *name*.^[1] Our names are not merely names; they define us, imbue us with a sense of our past, charge us with purpose, and impart a legacy.

Now, let us consider for a moment: Since God is aware of each and every star and calls each one by name, He is most certainly aware of us and surely calls us by our names. He hears and knows the thoughts in our innermost hearts. He understands our hopes and aspirations, so we are never to despair; God, our heavenly Father, is guiding our lives, summoning us daily to fulfill our mission. We need only study His holy Torah and we will hear His voice and discover our flag and our own identity.

COUNTING: AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE

Let us consider some further insights regarding counting. As we explained, "*S'u es rosh*" literally means "*Lift up the head*." When something is precious to us, we count it. The very fact that Hashem wanted us to be counted testifies to the love that He harbors for us, and that awareness is, in and of itself, uplifting. The first time Hashem mentioned the number of the Jewish people was when we departed from Egypt;^[2] that was an awesome, uplifting experience, because it demonstrated our miraculous growth. From the 70 people who had descended to Egypt, we became millions strong, a phenomenal growth that could only be explained by God's miraculous intervention and love.

We were counted once again after the sin of the Golden Calf, when we felt despondent and worthless at the memory of that perfidious act. "Count them, lift their heads," Hashem commanded Moses, and this time, we were counted through the half-*shekel* that we were commanded to contribute for the Tabernacle.^[3] The knowledge that God did not reject us, that we still counted, that we still had a share in the creation of the Tabernacle, imbued us with purpose. Our half-*shekel* served to remind us that we are all halves in the greater mosaic of God's plan.

In our *parashah*, the counting took place after the Tabernacle was completed. The counting was done in accordance with our *families*, our *tribes*, and our *names*. There are many ways to understand this. One explanation is that a person might think that since the Tabernacle had been completed,

individual contributions of the half-*shekel* were no longer critical. He might think that the service would go on, regardless of new contributions or lack of them. The Torah comes to remind us, however, that our task is never over: The Tabernacle and the Jewish people are only as strong as their individual *families*, as their individual *tribes*, and as *we, ourselves*. We dare not lose sight of that knowledge.

Lastly, there was a *head count* once again through the half-*shekel*. From this we learn that while it is important for everyone to recognize his own strengths and ideals, he must always bear in mind that God gave him his gifts so that he might enhance his family, his tribe, his community, and fulfill the unique mission inherent in his name. However, because it is forbidden to literally do a head count of the Jewish people, they were counted once again by counting half-*shekels*.

ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR TORAH LEARNING

Parashas Bamidbar is always read prior to the great festival of Shavuot, which commemorates the day that God gave us the Torah. And that in itself is instructive. *Midbar* can be defined as *wilderness* or *desert*; the word *bamidbar* means "*in the Wilderness*," teaching us that if we wish the Torah to impact on us and elevate us, we have to make ourselves like a desert. Even as a desert is barren, so too must we divest ourselves of all preconceived notions and allow the Torah to re-shape us. Even as in a desert there are no diversions, so we cannot allow anyone or anything to distract us from our Torah study. Even as in the

Wilderness of Sinai everything was free, so we must make Torah study available to one and all.

The backdrop for the giving of the Torah is equally significant. The Torah was given at Mount Sinai, a lowly mountain, and while logic would dictate that it would have been more impressive had God proclaimed His words on a tall, majestic mountain, He nevertheless chose Sinai for His revelation, teaching us that a prerequisite for Torah study is humility. At Sinai, the people saw flames and clouds dripping water; flames symbolize fiery passion, while clouds dripping water are symbolic of clarity. The verses teach us that if we wish Torah to enter our hearts, we must study it and transmit it with fiery passion; we must tackle our studies with discipline and stay with them until we have *full clarity*. All this is a reminder that Torah study cannot be undertaken casually. It is our very life and the length of our days, and must be accorded the seriousness and respect it deserves.

1. Psalms 147:4.
2. Exodus 12:37.
3. Ibid. 30:12-15.

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