



Paashat Vayera



English version

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THE METHOD TO GREATNESS

The most confusing thing about humility is the misconception that humility means to be submissive, passive, shattered emotionally, bashful... But it's the exact opposite! The Jews who made the most notable changes to our nation were those who were most noted for their humility. Avraham Avinu. Moshe Rabenu. David Hamelech.

In this week's *parasha*, Avraham said about himself, וְאֶנְכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר – *And I am like dirt and ashes (Bereshit 18; 27)*. What?!? The Father of Nations? The man who won the first world war, solo? He is nothing? The man who was thrown into the furnace of Ur Kasdim and came out alive! He is nothing?? Also, truly humble people don't call themselves humble, if only because they're too humble to ever say it. What did Avraham mean, then, when he said, "I am like dust and ashes"?

Avraham told G-d, I owe You everything!!! If not for you, G-d, I would have been burnt to ashes in Nimrod's furnace. And without You, G-d, I would have died at war in the hands of King Amrafel and deteriorated into the dust of the desert" (Yalkut Shimoni). These words are the key to Avraham's humility, and the key for us to access humility. Avraham wasn't saying, "I am nothing." That is false. He was saying, "I am nothing without You."

This reminds me of a joke my Rabbi told me a few times.

A non-religious driver in Tel Aviv has difficulty finding a parking spot. He goes around the block a few times but every space is taken, even the

parking on the sidewalk. He is late for his meeting. He turns to G-d and says, "Master of the world! If you find me a parking spot, I swear to You that I will put on Tefillin today!" As he turns the corner for the fifth time, there it is! An open parking spot! He turns to G-d and says, "Thank you G-d, but no need to find me a parking spot. I managed without You."

This is an awesome thing to meditate on. Think of all the great things that you have done, all the strengths that you have, all that you own. And then think how the worst things *could* have happened to you and all that you call yours, and how everything, *somehow*, is fine. Then, you will be humble (See *Orchot Tzaddikim*).

The next humble person was Moshe Rabbeinu. At the height of his "career" in *Parashat Beshalach*, after he took the Jews out of Egypt, split the sea, and brought the *mannah*, Moshe said, וְנִבְרַחְנוּ לֵמָּה, – *and we are nothing (16;7)*. But that was after a lot of working on himself to achieve humility.

When Moshe wanted to become great, like his great grandfather Avraham, he knew that the only way was to first become small. But G-d told Moshe that he was far from reaching Avraham's humility. For when I asked Avraham to bring up his son on the altar, he said the word, הִנְנִי. Here I am. I am ready to do anything you ask of me, even if I will never understand Your reasons (See Midrash Sechel Tov, Vayera 22:1).



Rashi comments that this word, *Hineni*, refers to being humble. What? How does being ready to give up his son mean that Avraham was humble? *Because when you really, truly feel that all you have has been given to you by G-d, you are ready to give everything back.* If you are not constantly working on being ready to give back to G-d, you are not humble. Humility, in its greatest form, is about being ready to give all you've got. Hashem was telling Moshe, *If you're trying hard to be humble, you're not being humble.* Humility is not something that you do. Humility is something that you are.

Avraham was the king of humility, for he was the most ready to do whatever G-d hinted that He wanted. וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם. וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי אֵלֶּיךָ וַיִּקְרָא בְּאֵלֵיךָ מִמְּרָא – *And it was after these things, and G-d tested Avraham and He said, Avraham. And he said, Here I am (Bereshit 22:1). After what things? After the Ministering Angels said in front of G-d, “Master of the world, this Elder, you granted him a child at the age of 100, and from all of the feasts that he made, he did not bring before You even one turtledove sacrifice?” G-d answered them, “All that he has done, didn’t he do everything for his son? If I would ask him to offer his son as a sacrifice, he would do it immediately!” (Pesikta).* R Yisrael Salanter asked: What exactly was the big test of the *Akeidat Yitzhak*? If G-d told Avraham to do something, Avraham had better do it, or else G-d, the Big Boss, could take Yitzhak and Avraham if He wanted to!? What was Avraham’s alternative?

The test was to see how *ready* Avraham was to do the will of G-d. So, G-d did not tell Avraham to slaughter Yitzhak; He asked Avraham only to bring Yitzhak up to the Altar. The test was to see if Avraham was really ready to do G-d’s will, on his own, even if that means being ready to slaughter, if that is what G-d *maybe* meant. This is why the Torah emphasizes, וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת- – *And Avraham sent his hand, and he took the knife to slaughter his son.* Of course he sent his hand! How else could he slaughter his son? When G-d told Avraham that he passed the test, He said, אַל-תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַבְּעֵר, – *Do not send your hand to the lad...* Why? Because the whole test was to see how *ready* Avraham was to

do G-d’s will. The sign of your humility, the gauge of your humility, is not what you say. It is not even what you do. It is how ready you are to give back because of a recognition of how much you owe. The magic is in the word הִנְנִי. Here I am, G-d. I am all Yours.

We all want a better relationship with G-d. And we all want to make our homes into a better place, a place that G-d calls home. But the only way G-d will enter our homes, the only way G-d feels comfortable in our homes, is if we are humble. As we see in the words, וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְקוֹק בְּאֵלֵיךָ מִמְּרָא – *And G-d appeared to him (to Avraham) in the planes of Mamre.* The commentators ask: Why didn’t the Torah just say that G-d appeared to Avraham? Why say, to “him”? The Kli Yakar answers that Avraham received this amazing prophecy in the merit of his being humble, and not taking credit for his greatness.

To become the greatest father, you need humility. To become the greatest teacher, you need to be humble. And to be the greatest king, you need to be the most humble. Avraham, The Father of All Nations, was able to be the patriarch because of his great humility. Moshe was able to be the great leader and teacher of the Torah of our nation because of his great humility. And King David was the greatest King, for he was the most humble king. וְאֲנֹכִי תוֹלַעַת וְלֹא אִישׁ – *And I am a worm, and not a man (Tehillim 22:7).*

The humility in these men brought about such a change in humanity, and caused such great ripple effects. How so? *It has been said, that every action that is real and holy causes a chain reaction (Shlomo Carlebach).* To be a leader, to cause a ripple effect, you need to be real. The only way to be real is to be humble. Because the real you is the humble you. Why?

To be humble is to accept being human, and to accept that we are powerless in so many areas. We make mistakes. We are dependent. And all we have is solely what G-d has given us. And all that we do not have is all that G-d has decided is not good for us to have. Being human is accepting that there are so many things that we just don’t know the answers to. Haughtiness is like a mask that conceals one’s

being “human” and real, and being human is something that the haughty one can’t accept. This mask of haughtiness fits so well that the haughty one forgets how beautiful being human actually is.

This being said, we can better appreciate the words of the Orchot Tzaddikim. *Most problems in life are solved with humility. The greatness of a mitzvah is as great as the humility of the one performing it. Just as a small mitzvah done with humility is worth a thousand times more than a mitzvah done with haughtiness, a mitzvah done with haughtiness is despicable to G-d; it is an abomination in His eyes and He doesn’t want it. G-d rips up the prayers of*

those who are haughty. The humble one gets all the good in life, for grace is G-d’s present to the humble. Once one has humility, G-d answers his prayers immediately. G-d has such pleasure and happiness when the humble person does a mitzvah; this is what G-d desires...

Let us not forget our great grandfather Avraham Avinu and what made him so great. And let us not forget the Jewish Greatness Method. Humility makes you Ready, and Humility makes you Real. And when you are Ready, and when you are Real, you cause great Reaction.

MEETING WITH G-D

There was a great man I remember from my childhood, Jack Adjmi, of blessed memory. He was my best friend's grandpa. He gave substantial amounts of charity to the shuls I grew up in. I remember how, when eulogizing him, one of his sons quoted his father, using a statement I can’t get out of my memory: “If you want to pray, you have to pay”. I assumed that what he meant was that if you want to pray, you need to donate money to the shuls you are praying in. Otherwise, the shuls can’t pay their bills.

But this week, I learnt that there is a deeper meaning to his words. If you want to pray, if you want to see G-d, you need to give tzedakah. When a person gives a coin of tzedaka to a poor person, he merits seeing the Shechina. Rebbi Elazar would first give a coin of tzedakah to the poor, *and only then pray*, as it says in Tehillim, אָנִי בְצַדֵּק אֶהְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ (B Batra 10a). And the Talmud compares giving tzedaka to giving a present to a king, saying how much greater it is to give tzedakah. Because when you give a present to a king, no matter how big the present, he can decide if he wants to see you or not. But when you give tzedakah, no matter how small, you will certainly meet the King. Even if you are not worthy, G-d will accept your giving tzedakka, no matter how low you may have fallen. Even Nebuchadnezzar, one of the biggest reshaimever, was advised by Daniel to give tzedaka, as a good deed that would help him to attain G-d's grace. (Also see Sanhedrin 104b,105a)

This is why the Shulchan Aruch (92;10) writes that it is good to give tzedaka before prayers. And the commentaries mention that the custom is to give during Vayebarech David, when saying וְהַעֲוֹשֵׁר בְּכָל הַהַכְּבוֹד לְפָנֶיךָ וְאַתָּה מוֹשֵׁל בְּכָל . This is why we stand during Vayebarech David, because it is the time that we give tzedakah (Arizal) (see Yalkut Yosef Tefillah 92 ; 6 footnote).

It seems that giving tzedakah, being generous, tapping into the altruism we all have inside of us, is a means for building our relationship with G-d. And, on the contrary, if a poor man asks you for tzedakah because he needs food, and you do not give him even a minimal amount, that is like idol worship (Sheiltot D’Rabbi Achai, Terumah 63). What is the connection? Why is it that when someone gives tzedakah, he gets a direct, personal meeting with G-d, and when he does not give tzedaka, it is as if he is serving idols? Why is being altruistic a condition for being connected to G-d and serving Him?

The reason is that when you give Tzedaka, you are showing that you believe in G-d. You believe that העֲוֹשֵׁר וְהַכְּבוֹד לְפָנֶיךָ וְאַתָּה מוֹשֵׁל בְּכָל - that all the money and the honor in the world belong to You, G-d, and that You, G-d are in charge of everything. And if you hold on to your “hard-earned money”, and you can’t give a coin for a poor man’s bread, you do not believe that G-d provides you with money. You believe that your boss, business plan,

family relative, or client brings you your money. It is almost as if you believe in these elements as sources of livelihood, more than you believe in G-d.

It is amazing that the founder of Emunah, Avraham Avinu, was known for his Chessed, more than anything else. He even asked G-d for permission to excuse himself to welcome guests. This is because Avraham saw the tzelem Elokim in people, so he perceived serving them as serving G-d. He saw that by doing Chessed, he was serving G-d.

It seems that the Parasha is highlighting this stark difference between the worldview of Avraham Avinu and the selfish, miserly, cruel people of Sedom. While Avraham saw an opportunity to worship G-d in every act of kindness he did with people, the Sodomites were rabidly anti-chessed, to the point that it was against their principles to deal kindly with any person. We know that Lot's wife, Irit, (see Baal Haturim 19; 26) turned into a pillar of salt for disobeying the angels' request and looking back at the people of Sedom. Why salt? Because the people of Sedom found out about Lot's having invited the "angel guests" through Irit. When the angels came, she went to the neighbors to ask to borrow salt. They asked her why she needed salt. "Didn't you know how much salt you need for supper?" She said, "Yes, but I have guests that suddenly showed up". She "spilled the beans" to the whole of Sedom, knocking on every door, asking for salt, and the whole city knew that Lot had transgressed their anti-chessed constitution. The Pesikta points to the words - ומצות אפה - and he baked Matzot. Only Lot prepared the Matza supper for the guests (as it was the night of Passover). Irit did not even put salt on the table. So, she was punished by becoming a pillar of salt. Again, note

the contrast. In Avraham's house, everyone got involved in inviting the guests.

The K'li Yakar asks why Irit got punished only later, when running away from Sedom with Lot, when she turned back to see what happened to her family. Why was she not punished right then and there, not only for not having invited the guests, but for having exposed her husband and the guests to the wrath of Sedom?

The answer is that when Lot left Sedom, he left with his hands on his head, and he could not take anything with him. Just his soul. המלט על נפשו (Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10;8). The K'li Yakar makes a twist on the words of the passuk, ותבט אשתו מאחריי. The word מאחריי does not mean only that Irit looked behind Lot to see what was happening back home. It also means אחריי, after the end of Lot's life. Lot's wife looked at Lot's end, worrying about her Ketubah, knowing that she was not going to have any of the wealth they once possessed, as her inheritance. The fact that at such a crucial time she was concerned about money, viewing it as her source of living; the fact that her central concern was the same as America's greatest fear - the fear of retirement - her worrying about her ketubah at this time of judgment - joined together with her lack of giving tzeddakah to bring about her punishment. For the two are directly connected. Giving tzeddakah is an expression of the fact that you are not worried about how much you will be left with, which is a direct result of how much faith you have in G-d.

It is clear that doing chessed, giving tzeddakah, is a fundamental part of faith. Your constant giving charity is the litmus test for your degree of Emunah

Shabbat Shalom, Yosef Farhi

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