



Parashat Bereshit



English version

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## THE ART OF ASSERTIVENESS

After Adam ate from the Forbidden Fruit and transgressed G-d's only command, G-d approached him in the most unusual way. Adam, ashamed of not heeding G-d's command, embarrassed now that he realized that he was in the undress, was hiding. G-d asks Adam, with the first word He spoke to Man. אַיָּנָה "Where are you?" Adam answered, "I heard You coming through Gan Eden, and I was afraid, for I am naked, so I went into hiding."

Why did G-d ask a question that He knew the answer to? Surely G-d knows where Adam is?!? Rashi explains that G-d wanted to open up a conversation so that Adam won't be shocked to answer, suddenly, if he would be punished. This is how G-d approaches people and communicates with them when He has a message to relay. When approaching Kayin after Kayin killed his brother Hebel, G-d asked, Where is Hebel, your brother? When G-d approached Bilaam, He asked, Who are these people who came to visit you?

This is a fantastic lesson in people skills, of knowing how to communicate when you were mistreated, abused, or wronged—conversation instead of criticism, understanding instead of accusation, assertive instead of aggressive or passive. Allow me to explain.

R' Shimshon Pincus asks, what was Adam supposed to answer when G-d asked him where are you? The answer is, Adam had a golden opportunity, but he blew it. Adam could have said, "I was wrong! I sinned! I was irresponsible!" If Adam had only said that he made a mistake immediately, G-d would not have been put him under trial, He would not have brought death to the world, and G-d would not have him thrown out of Gan Eden's gates. Bilaam knew this "technique" of immediate confession, and when he was faced by the angel who had come to punish him for planning to curse the Jews, he confessed, and the angel could not punish him! The immediate confession was the difference between King David's response to the prophet after being informed about his sin with Bat Sheva and King Saul's response to the prophet after being told of his mistake in not killing out Amalek. This answers why even though Adam lived a life of self-infliction, of repentance, Adam could not go back to his original status, because there is nothing like repenting at the first message. G-d opens conversation first to give you a chance for confession and resolution. He sends you hints and gives you space before He acts. If only Adam would have run into G-d's hands with tears and regret, when G-d asked, "Where are you" the story would have had an entirely different ending.



G-d is teaching us the most crucial lesson in people skills and how to confront people. There is a spectrum of how people react to conflict, crisis, insult, unfairness, disrespect, or awkwardness. On one extreme, you have a passive approach. Better not to say anything. After all, maybe I do not have the right to be first, even when I was. Perhaps I do not have the right to say I don't have the time, money, energy, head-space for something when I don't. Maybe I don't have the right to ask for a raise, although I deserve one. Perhaps the awkward relationship can never be fixed because making mistakes is not acceptable, even though I intend to learn from them. Maybe I don't have the right to confront the person who abused me verbally, physically, emotionally, or other sorts of abuse because, for whatever reason, the abuser has some kind of privileged position in the relationship dynamic. The passive mindset is the lose/ win type, never stand up for rights, only listen, accept, surrender, never confront. Always be the doormat to the insensitive.

On the other side of the spectrum is the aggressive approach. The aggressive type is the one who has a win/lose mindset and brings about a competitive atmosphere, with an I'm right/your wrong attitude. The aggressive does not listen to others' ideas, "It's my way or the highway." This, of course, alienates family and friends when one has a "me-first" mindset: recognition first, served first, and go through the door first. Even the nicest, well-meaning people can be aggressive and not take "no" for an answer. It is not that the aggressive type is in the wrong of how he thinks or feels. It is his approach that is overwhelming.

The middle of the spectrum, the healthy balance, is the assertive approach. The one who knows how to stand up for his/her rights without stepping on the feet of others and can

express negative emotions without personalizing the problem. The assertive one makes reasonable requests, knows how to give feedback, and recognizes that he is relaying a message to another person. The assertive always look for a win/win. Not pushy or intimidating, not causing resistance, but inspiring confidence, honesty and openness in others. The assertive one never makes another person feel victimized or put upon, and when the assertive criticize, it is always well justified and allows the other person an honorable retreat. Somehow, the assertive one knows how to make the conversation a positive experience for everyone. By opening conversation, by giving room for win/win, by giving Adam a chance to confess, G-d teaches us how to deal with confrontation assertively and humbly.

And G-d wants His creatures to follow in His way. G-d punished Moon, to minimize itself because of its aggressive/competitive message. Moon wanted to have its light reflect G-d, not to reflect Sun. But that is not what it asked. Moon asked, Why does Sun have its own light? The way you request, whatever you ask, determines what response you will get. Moon! What is it your business what Sun has or what it does not have!?! If you want that your light should be a reflection of G-d and not of Sun, so ask for it, without putting Sun down! When G-d split the water, between the upper waters of Heaven and Earth's lower waters, the lower waters of Earth cried that they, too, want to be close to G-d. G-d granted them grace and accepted their wish. We need to sprinkle Sea salt on every sacrifice, and on Sukkot in Temple times, we rejoice when we pour water on the Alter. Why did G-d push Moon away, לְכִי וּמַעֲטִי אֶת עֲצֻמְךָ, Go, and make yourself small!, while the waters of Earth are brought close to G-d, at the most precious moments of



sacrifice? Because of the way of the ask. Are you aggressive, or are you assertive?

You were born knowing how to breathe, smell, eat, cry, fill a diaper, crawl, and crave candy. You were not born knowing how to deal with

people, give them space, or constructive criticism and feedback. Assertiveness is one of the most important interpersonal relationship skills to develop to succeed in life and a skill well worth learning.

Selfie steps to express yourself assertively.

1. The fine line between passive, aggressive, and assertive, can be pivotal in the type of life you live. Passive people let others decide. Aggressive people decide for others. Assertive people decide for themselves.
2. Pay attention to how you drive because it's a good indicator of what kind of character you have. Are you assertive, cautious, and confident when you need to be? Are you aggressive and reckless? Or are you the passive driver type, timid and overly paranoid?
3. Be respectful. Look confident, stand up straight, smile, or keep a neutral facial expression.
4. Don't interrupt when others are speaking, listen respectfully. Try to understand their point of view. Differences don't mean you are right, and the other person is wrong. Don't allow differences to annoy you, upset you or make you angry.
5. Be simple, direct, and concise. When asserting yourself, remember, less is more. Keep your requests free of long-winded explanations.
6. Be present. Stay calm when expressing yourself. Remaining calm will make you more confident and allow the other person to relax.

## A HUMBLE NATION

If you had one message to pass on to your children, one lesson, one virtue, what would it be? The Ramban, one of our people's greatest rabbis, left one message to his son, and to all of us, in his Iggeret. Humility. And he promises us that any day that we take humility to heart, G-d will give us our heart's desires! Why is humility such an important thing? I will explain, but first, allow me to relate a recent coaching experience.

A certain Rosh Yeshiva sent an 18 year-old boy to me to help him overcome his fears. When he phoned me, I went straight to the

point, using some CBT tools from my toolbox. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy focuses on challenging and changing unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. "What are you afraid of?" "I am afraid that I have fears that others don't have." "Like what?" "Like that I might get old, and be alone, and then die."

I challenged his fears. I guided him. And then, at the height of my work, when he confronted the fear of death, and I helped him not to be afraid ... the battery on his phone died. He did not call me back, so a day later, I called him. He said he did not call me back, because I



made his fears worse. I said that we had only just begun, and we should continue. I think we should meet in person. (Something I regret not having done at the outset.) He said that he would call me back, if he was interested.

Since the Rosh Yeshiva was already involved with and responsible for the boy, I felt the responsibility to tell him how our conversation went, and that the boy is no longer in touch with me. Hearing how I worked with the boy, the Rosh Yeshiva smiled, and said, R' Yosef, you were *too* good. You conquered his fear; but now, he is afraid of *you*. He must be afraid that if you won over his fears so easily, while he could not do this easy thinking on his own, he must have a *real* anxiety problem!

How did I forget the first thing that R' Geizler taught us in coaching? The coach's job is not only to help make the client great, but to make him *feel* great as well! To put *him* in the spotlight. If I come out being Mr. Smarts, if I "won", and the client comes out *feeling* inferior, that is not coaching. If the solution is too obvious, or if I feel I can solve a problem like fear of death in one session, I am not doing my job. Because the job of the coach is to make himself small, so that the client can make himself big.

After giving what the Rosh Yeshiva told me some thought, I realized the following lesson. Humility is a much better self-help tool than CBT, challenging the negative thoughts and beliefs, or any other gentile method. G-d made life in a way that life itself makes us humble. We have no power over death; we can just do our best to live a healthy lifestyle. We have no power over aging. No matter what we do, age somehow creeps up on us. And the best chance we have over not being alone in life is if we learn how to get along with people better, something that requires humility.

*Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi questioned the contradiction: one passuk says that Hashem made two luminaries, while the other passuk says, "the big luminary and the small luminary". The moon said before G-d, Master of the Universe, can it be that there are two kings ruling under the same crown? (How can both the sun and the moon rule the world equally?) G-d told her, Decrease yourself. "Master of the world! Because I expressed before You a good point, I need to make myself small?" G-d appeased the moon: Go and become what the Jewish Nation will use to count days and years... And the tzaddikim will be called "small", in your name. G-d saw that Moon was still not appeased, so He said to His People, Bring an atonement for Me, for I have made the moon small. Resh Lakish says, that is why on Rosh Hodesh, the Torah says to bring a goat of atonement "for G-d". This goat is an atonement for G-d making the moon small (Chullin 60b).*

If G-d needs atonement in any way, why do the Jews need to bring it? And what type of consolation is it that the Jews would use the moon for their calendar, or that the great men are called small?

It is obvious in the words of the Blessing on the New Moon, that there is a parallel between the moon and the Jewish Nation. The moon reflects the sun. The Jews reflect G-d. Gentiles' calendars are solar, while Jewish calendars are lunar. Similar to the dynamic factor of the moon, the Jewish People go from small to becoming great, for our Nation has its times of darkness and its times of glory. And similar to the moon, the Jews are to be a beacon of faith in a world lacking in G-dliness and morality. But the greatest similarity of all is the element of reflection. The belief of our religion is that we are only a reflection of G-d, and what G-d wants us to have is exactly what



we will have. Therefore, one of the fundamental beliefs of our Nation, is that the greatest way to go through this world is with humility. This is the message we are meant to learn from the moon.

In Judaism, in the self-help of the Torah, Humility is first and foremost. But the gentiles and their philosophers are not too impressed with humility. Aristotle omits it from his catalogue of virtues; both David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche are critical of the humility trait. “Humility is a trait that serves no manner of purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment.”

Advancing fortunes? Becoming qualified entertainment of company? Increasing power of self – enjoyment? Since when are these the purposes of life? How dumb! That’s the American lie. So many people have learnt, after much frustration and failure, that this is not what life is about. The only purpose that has real value in Nietzsche’s list, is becoming a more valuable member of society. And humility is probably the most fundamental trait you need in order to become valuable to others. The gentiles do not like humility, because humility is acceptance that G-d is in charge. In Judaism, life is about accepting that G-d runs your world, not you. And the greater your humility, the more successful you will be. If you don’t have good relationships in your family, or with people you know, if you are not entertaining, or if you do not enjoy life, the problem is likely to be an inflated ego, something that can actually be remedied through humility. Humility is something that

G-d wants from His people, and that is the secret of success of all the Tzaddikim: they make themselves small.

The Midrash adds to the conversation between Moon and G-d. *G-d said, I really wanted to make you great, and the sun small. But, since you complained, make yourself small, a 60<sup>th</sup> of the sun.* Moon asked, “Why, because I made a point, You make me small?” G-d answered, “That is why, in the future, when Mashiach comes, I will make you great” והינה אור-הלכנה פאור הסמה ואור הסמה יהיה שבעתים פאור שבעת הימים ביום חבל יקנן את-שאר עמו ומסץ מפתו ירפא (Yeshayahu 30;26) (Midrash Konen).

G-d is waiting for us to be really humble, and in that merit, He will bring Mashiach. In most Siddurim, after the three Amidahs, there is a humility prayer. *May it be the will in front of You G-d, that I not become jealous, nor that others become jealous of me. That I not become angry, and not make You angry. And save me from my Evil Inclination. And put in my heart, humility and modesty, and fear of G-d. Our King, Our G-d. Make Your Name one in Your world, and build Your Home. Fix Your Sanctuary and gather our exiles. Free Your flock, and make Your congregation rejoice hurriedly in our days. And place our portion in Your Torah. Amen.* Look at how great G-d will make us, if we would only work on our humility!

The moon is still small today, until Mashiach comes, because we have not learned this lesson of humility yet. And until we learn this lesson of humility, G-d wants us to bring the atonement sacrifice, every Rosh Hodesh. May we merit to be humble, speedily in our days.



## I VERSES ME

The nature of people is that there are a couple of voices inside us, a few different emotions. When we decide the way we feel or how we would like to think, this means that we just chose one of the many things going on inside us that we prefer to support. Impulsivity is when there is no conscious decision of which emotion is the healthiest or most effective, or which thought is the truest. Instead, the most powerful emotion or most repetitious thought just takes over without the person being aware of what is going on inside. This also true when people talk about themselves. We may hear someone say, “I hate myself”, and the like. This just means that “I” is not “myself”. And that there is a voice, deeper inside than myself. Getting in touch with that deeper voice can help us to understand who we truly are and ultimately, what we truly want.

In our parasha we discover something amazing about the Evil Inclination, the inner voice, and we learn exactly how “inner” it is. The Talmud (Shabbat 146a) writes that the Nachash did not just push Chava. He had marital relations with her and put in Chava his זוהמה foulness. R’ C. Volozhin explains this foulness to mean that the Nachash put the Evil Inclination in Chava and in all humanity. Before the Nachash was together with Chava, the Evil Inclination was outside the person and tried to persuade him – from outside – to do evil. After the Sin, the Evil Inclination became a part of the inner person. In other words, when the Evil Inclination is talking inside the person, the person thinks that it is himself talking. When one feels that he wants to sin, to give in to lust, get angry and the like, it is the inner voice that says, “I want to sin, I want what I lust, I am angry. I am hungry. I am

tired.” This is in stark contrast to the Good Inclination that says “You need to learn Torah”, “You must pray”, and not “I want to learn” or “I want to pray”. Being that the Evil Inclination became so integrated in the “me” after the Sin, it is so much harder to recognize it and fight it. The first thing that one must do is, of course, to recognize that the inner voice that is suggesting we sin is not the real “me”. (See **נפש החיים א, ו הגהה**)

When listening to people, I follow them all the way through. And then I ask them, “So, what do you want to do about this?” And then they say that they do not know. This is amusing. Before they poured out their hearts, they approached me knowing what they wanted to do. After being listened to, the person listens to himself and realizes that what he wanted to do at first is not at all what he *really* wants. This is probably what happens with the Evil Inclination inside people: that the person at first has this inner feeling saying this is what “I” want. And then he realizes that this is not at all what he really wants.

And this is the secret of the successful as well. They have only one inner voice going on. They know how to control all the other voices inside that lead them away from what they really want to do. They have only one ambition inside, one goal. This is what is meant in the recital of the daily Shema, to love our G-d with all our hearts, all our soul and all our being, even with our evil inclination. The only way one can succeed is by realizing that all the inner voices say that the “I” wants to love G-d, to serve Him and be dedicated to Him.



## LOVE AFTER HATE

In the Talmud (in Sotah 14a), R' Simlai states that the Torah starts off with Gemilut Chassadim (kindness) and it ends with Gemilut Chassadim (kindness). It starts off with G-d's kindness because it says "And Hashem made for Adam and for his wife Kotnot Or, and He dressed them". And the Torah ends with G-d's kindness, regarding Moshe's burial. *And G-d buried Moshe in "Guy" in the land of Moab...* This Midrash seems to be telling us about the importance of doing Chessed, doing kindness, by stating that the Torah begins and ends with kindness, and that the Torah is full of kindness.

The question is obvious. Why does R' Simlai bring out the point that the Torah starts with Hashem's kindness of clothing Adam and Chava after the Sin? Why not mention that the Torah starts off with G-d's ultimate kindness in creating this Universe with so much good in it to give to mankind?

The answer I saw for this is that the level of kindness after sin is on a completely different level from that before sin. G-d's kindness to humans *after* the sin shows how kind He really is. This is somewhat similar to what happens with newlyweds. They are loving toward each other, excited to be together, until their first disagreement. Then, after their first dispute, they have the real test to see if they love each other or not. Can they get back together again, or not? A loving couple is not one that does not disagree. It is one who knows how to deal with the differences and look past shortcomings.

Sukkot is a beautiful holiday, and it is hard for all of us that is over. The holiday of Sukkot is

one of love and happiness. So, I thought it would be nice to connect the aforementioned idea, explaining exactly why the holiday of Sukkot is one of love and of happiness. Sukkot is, in some ways, a celebration of our ability and desire to live with G-d and His commandments. It is for a purpose that Sukkot is immediately after Yom Kippur. We are happy to live in His Presence, knowing that He can still find place to accept and atone our sins. This was the love of G-d that we felt when He gave us the Second Tablets and gave us the Mishkan. He wanted to live in our midst, despite the Sin of the Calf. And this is why we make a Simchat Torah after Sukkot, and not on Shavuot. There is no dancing on Shavuot. On Shavuot we accepted the Torah through G-d's command, not knowing what was in it. We were afraid that we might not be able to live by the Torah. After we receive the Torah and know what it says, when we know that it has a Yom Kippur in it, and that G-d is forgiving, we know that G-d in His Mercy will have patience with us, although we are humans and have human flaws. We now know that He is willing to accept that and forgive us after true repentance. This is a new happiness, a new love. So we dance with the Torah, circling the Bimah seven times, as a remembrance of the seven times we circled the walls of Yericho with Yehoshua, bringing down the walls. On Simchat Torah we bring down the walls that stand between G-d and His People. The day of Simchat Torah is over, but the relationship is not. The relationship has just begun, and it just went up to a new level.



## SIBLING – FRIEND OR FOE

Siblings are either friends or rivals. There is no pareve. There is no position where one says I do not love my brother but I do not hate him. This is because the natural state of brothers is to love each other. If they do not love each other, then they have to give a reason why they do not love each other. This reason, whatever it is, is an excuse to hate. Sometimes, it is not felt as hate. But that is just a misinterpretation.

When brothers have something like a block between them, such as the thoughts, “Why does he not care for me?”, or “How come he always outsmarts me and gets more out of my parents, more out of our relationship than I do,”- there is not usually something rational that can help such a person get over things and get on with his or her sibling relationship. The reason is because such issues have been hashed and rehashed in the mind, with all types of negative beliefs and thoughts of how things should go, the way “I” perceive them. By adding to the hurt sibling a piece of information, or helping to change perspective, this does not have a long lasting effect in him getting along with the situation at hand. The reason for this is because it is not a matter of having knowledge or perception. It is a matter of applying it.

We find this in the last conversation Kayin had with his brother, mentioned in the Midrash (Breishit Rabba 22). *And who was stronger of the two? R' Yochanan says that Hebel was stronger than Kayin. We see this from the words that Kayin “got up” to Hebel, and he killed him. The word that Kayin got up intimates that Kayin was on the floor, pinned down by Hebel. Hebel was about to kill Kayin to defend himself. But then, right before his defeat, Kayin pleaded with Hebel,*

*saying , “We are the only two people in this world, and our father Adam will know that it was you who killed me. How are you going to explain this to Dad? Hebel was immediately filled with mercy on his father and brother, and he let Kayin go. Then, Kayin “got up” and killed his own brother..*

R' C. Chechik points out that Kayin should have asked himself the same question he asked his own brother:, “What are you going to answer your father?” But this did not cross his mind when he was overcome with jealousy. When he was incensed about his brother, he had something – compelling emotion – that he just could not rein in. *It was not the lack of knowledge. It was a matter of applying it.*

Another thing we notice about sibling rivalry. The answer given by Kayin to G-d, when G-d asked Kayin where his brother is, “Am I to be the one to watch my brother?” The Midrash explains that Kayin was actually saying, “Excuse me G-d, but it is your fault; You did not save my brother – it is not *my* job to watch him, it is Your job! You gave me an Evil Inclination, but how did you let me kill him?” The brother who hates has, and will find, any justification he can in order to back up his side of the argument, and there is just no way to help the angry brother by explaining to him that he is wrong.

As a matter of fact, the fights between siblings are always deeper than it appears on the surface. According to P' dR' Eliezer (21), Kayin was so jealous because Hebel's first-quality sacrifice was accepted and his low-quality sacrifice was not. Even deeper than that, Hebel's twin sister (who Hebel took as a wife) was the prettiest of all woman, prettier than Kayin's twin sister. Kayin awaited the





time that he could get rid of Hebel and then marry his wife. The Breishit Rabba adds another opinion. Hebel was a triplet with another two sisters, while Kayin was born with only one twin sister. Kayin claimed that he had rights, for he was the oldest and deserved double portion, while Hebel claimed that he had the rights to her for she was born together with him. And to top all this off there is something else underlying Kayin's animosity. Kayin did not believe that the curse of the land that Adam received after the sin of the Tree of Knowledge was applicable to him. He split the whole world with his brother Hebel: Kayin got all the land, and Hebel got all the livestock. Kayin said that the decree was only given to my father, for only he sinned, not his offspring. (Midrash Aggada) Kayin believed in every way that his brother was to be killed for stealing; Hebel's livestock were eating from *his* grass, without permission. The law of Noachites states that one who steals is to be punished by death. So, Kayin believed that he was doing the right thing by killing his brother. And this is what G-d told him, **הלא אם תיטיב הלא אם תיטיב** If you will become better, you will be forgiven, and if not, the sin will haunt you... This is the simple explanation. But this can be understood in another way: if you, Kayin, would be able to better yourself, and get over your jealousy towards your brother and forgive him for allowing his livestock to eat your grass, he would not be considered as having stolen, and

he would not be liable for death.( Alter of Novordohk, Madreigat Ha'adam)

The Zohar says that this is why the Torah forbids wearing wool and linen together in the same cloth. Wool is from livestock, and linen is fruit of the land. They must always be separated, for they caused the first fight. Only in the Holy Temple, the place of real peace and harmony in the total absence of jealousy, was shaatnez, a mixture of wool and linen, allowed on the garments of the Kohen. But in essence, wool and linen, Kayin and Hebel, are to be separated.

“Separated”, here, does not mean that they should go each his own way. Not at all. It means that if Kayin, as is true for most of us, was living with a competitive mindset, one in which he looked at what his brother had, he could have done much more had he been busy doing the best he could do within the framework of his own given circumstances. He could have brought another sacrifice, one with a higher standard. For some reason, he did not think of that. Why? Because he was busy looking at his brother and what his brother had.

The way that a sibling can get over something is by asking himself, or having others ask him, “So, what can you do about this? Sometimes, something. Sometimes, nothing. But this is a better way of dealing with jealousy than by comparing one person to the other and “seeing” who was right.

In loving memory of Shmuel Ben Rachel and Chaya Bat Rachel.

Refuah Shelema for Avraham ben Mazal

