

Anavah - Humility

*Always seek to learn wisdom from everyone, to recognize your failings and correct them. In doing so you will learn to stop thinking about your virtues and you will take your mind off your friend's faults.*¹

— 1 —

The moment that another person enters our field of vision our *Yetzer Hara* prepares to defend us. It's most common defensive strategy is to enlarge itself so that all the "space" that would ideally be available for that other within us is filled. The approach of the other is deflected at the cost of the potential of our soul. For with no space within us for another the possibility of soul is nullified. This enlargement of the *Yetzer Hara* can be expressed in a number of ways (see *Mesillat Yesharim*, chapter 11) all of which are manifestations of *ga'avah*, pride. The *middah* that addresses the insidious nature of pride is *anavah*, humility.

The specific strategy that the *Yetzer Hara* uses to deflect the approach of the other is to multiply our own consciousness of our virtues. These virtues are real and we are aware of them and already predisposed to take appropriate pride in them. In fact, not taking appropriate pride in our own achievements, feigning humility rather than acknowledging our accomplishments, turns out to be one of the types of pride that we use to deflect the approach of others. However, despite the legitimacy of these virtues thinking about them in such away as to fill us up with them sorely diminishes the possibility of our maintaining our soul in that moment. And maintaining the soul is a moment-to-moment challenge. This is part of the lesson that our study of the *middot* teaches us: the choice between the *Yetzer Hara* and the *Yetzer Hatov* is the moment-to-moment mechanism by which the soul is either renewed or abandoned. This is what our tradition expresses when it teaches "every day God renews the face of creation." (Psalm 104) This metaphor of God's daily renewal of creation expresses the fact that we are responsible every day to renew our soul by appropriately constraining or transforming our *Yetzer Hara* and making room for the *face of the other*. The ability to embrace the other in this space we call our *Yetzer Hatov*.

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 145.

The instinct to deflect the other is not easily overcome. Pride swells within us almost unconsciously when another approaches, as we've said. Thus, containing pride requires an enormous act of will; an act of will, in fact, almost beyond our ability. However, in order to aid and ease this act of will, in truth to mask it, it turns out to be more helpful not to attempt to change our inner consciousness, but rather to change our perception of the other person so that from the beginning he or she does not elicit the kind of defensive response that engenders pride. How, the tradition asks, can we turn the natural threat of another, his or her very *otherness*, in such a way as to short-circuit pride? We cannot conceive of another as a parent or as a sibling or even as a friend or lover precisely because they are the stranger. But, asserts our tradition, precisely because he or she is another, we can learn something from them. Anything we learn from them makes them our teacher and as our teacher they are not only no longer a threat, but they achieve the same kind of status that we normally reserve for those closest to us.

The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* teaches us both the importance of viewing others as teachers and the fact that once they are viewed as teachers our relationship with them is changed. In Chapter 6 Mishnah 3 we learn: "One who learns from a colleague one chapter, or one *halacha*, or one verse, or one expression, or even one letter, is obliged to show respect. This we learn from David, King of Israel, who learned but two things from Ahitofel, yet called him his master..." In Chapter 4 Mishnah 15 we read: "Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua taught: The dignity of your student should be as precious to you as your own; the dignity of your colleague should be as precious to you as your reverence for your teacher; your reverence for your teacher should be as great as your reverence for God." Taking these two *Mishnayot* together we see that the tradition teaches both that we must endeavor to learn something from every person we encounter and that having done so that person becomes our teacher. As our teacher our relationship with him or her is transformed such that it achieves the status of our relationship with God.

In light of all this we return to the *middah* of *anavah*. The moment that another person enters our field of vision our *Yetzer Hara* rises in our defense against the perceived threat of the stranger. Constraining this action on the part of the *Yetzer Hara* requires a massive act of will on our part. However, rather than constraining the *Yetzer Hara* if we can transform our initial perception of the other person from stranger to

teacher, the response of the *Yetzer Hara* will be naturally different. Rather than crowding out the space for the other within us with our own virtues, it will allow the embrace of the other by the *Yetzer Hatov* in the same way that we embrace our teacher, which in turn is a sacred relationship extended infinitely toward God. Humility is thus not merely the deprecation of the self in the face of the other, but rather is the embrace of the other in a sacred and satisfying relationship. In this sense, true *anavah* is always an act of *tikkun* rather than being an act of *kibbush*. This fact, in turn, accounts for the central importance of *anavah* amongst the *middot*. It allows us to be introduced to and experience a taste of *tikkun* that will eventually serve as a model to be applied to other *middot* as well.

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Recognizing that *anavah* opens the door, so to speak, to *tikkun* provides us with an opportunity to explore this concept in more detail as well as to deepen our understanding of *anavah*. In developing our *Mussar* practice we are aware of two stages in the work that we are required to do in regard to each *middah* and in regard to all of the *middot* taken together. The first stage is the stage of *kibbush* and the second is the stage of *tikkun*. In the stage of *kibbush* we learn to become aware of the various actions of our *Yetzer Hara* and specifically the many ways that it enables us to push away our responsibility to serve another, to bear another's sheer being as a burden for which we are responsible. We recognize that the very realization of this responsibility causes our self to recoil in fear (*pachad*) and to experience a threat to its own existence. We know that when this fear is justified, when our survival is indeed threatened, we possess a *Yetzer Hara*, an inclination for self survival that helps us protect ourselves. Through *Mussar* we become aware, however, of how often this survival mechanism extends beyond any true need and diminishes the space in our being for another equally indigenous part of our constitution, the inclination that we have to do good, that is, to bear the burden of another.

Once we have recognized the over-extension of the *Yetzer Hara*, once we can identify the moments and situations in our life that occasion these over-extensions, and most importantly, once we become aware of the consequences for others of these over-extensions, we can begin the process of restraining the *Yetzer Hara* in these situations. We learn to cultivate actions that are undertaken *in spite of* and *in the face of* the pressure

that the *Yetzer Hara* exercises upon us. This is no easy matter and can and does occupy us for potentially many years of *Mussar* practice. However, it is not the goal of such practice. Rather the goal is to be able to move from this restraint, this *kibbush*, to *tikkun*, to a transformation of the *Yetzer Hara* itself so that the very need that we have indigenously to survive is understood to be best accomplished by and through our meeting our responsibility to bear the other as our burden. What, in practice, does this look like?

We could use any *middah* to explain this transformation; however it is particularly applicable to *anavah*. For example, if we chose the *middah* of *savlanut* we would need to explore how it can come to be that my *Yetzer Hara*, my instinct for self-preservation can come to find its fulfillment in my ability to “suffer” you’re taking of “space” that I heretofore accounted as my own? That this is precisely what does take place does not make it any easier to conceive or to explain at this level of spiritual development. However, vis-à-vis *anavah* we have already seen that it is precisely through my perception of another as my teacher and therefore the transformation of that person from being a potential threat into being a stand in for God, that is, a stand in for the obligation to bear the other’s burden infinitely extended, that constitutes our work in this *middah* even at its most superficial level, that recommends it as the *middah* for considering the possibility of effecting *tikkun*.

Anavah is different. When we encounter another as our teacher , that is after *kibbush* in this regard has done the preliminary work, our *Yetzer Hara* is transformed precisely because it recognizes that our survival is dependent upon that which we learn, that which we take in from others and that that has always been the case from our earliest existence. We have, in other words, what we might call a spiritual “muscle memory” in which is stored the joy that accompanied, on a regular basis, the learning that we imbibed throughout our formation and that which we craved as essential to our well-being throughout that period of our development. As the *Mishnah* that we referenced in last week’s *shiur* pointed out, the layers of meaning that constitute the concept of teacher go through the concepts of parents and extend to include the concept of God. Thus *anavah* is a mode of re-enacting that experience of joy and it is this that it differs fundamentally from *kibbush*. Regardless of how effective or important *kibbush* is, it is not an occasion

for experiencing joy. It requires a trust that in committing ourselves to the road of *kibbush* the possibility of our experiencing the joy (which in other contexts we've defined as *olam haba*) exists. But when we manage a moment of *anavah* we experience in that moment that joy. At the same time this understanding provides us with a measure by which we can evaluate our success at achieving *anavah*.

As we have already said, *anavah* is not to be understood as self-deprecation. However, we now have a positive way of assessing what it is to be understood as. To achieve even a moment of true *anavah* is to be able to experience the pure joy of learning that is associated with the earliest experiences that we have of ourselves coming into being. And the love or abundance of gratitude experienced as indebtedness that those moments bequeathed to us. *Anavah* places us back at the very moment of our creation, our recognition that we are not responsible for our own creation and our indebtedness to the Other who is responsible for our creation. Thus *anavah* constitutes an opportunity to experience *tikkun* even when we have not yet managed the spiritual strength to experience it in and through other *middot*. It also strongly suggests that there is a close relationship between the *middah* of *anavah* and the *mitzvah* of *talmud torah*. In fact, the *mitzvah* of *Talmud torah* forms the bridge between the *middot* in general and the *mitzvot* in general. That is the subject of a separate *shiur*.