

## The Second Gate

# The Gate of Humility

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Humility is a noble trait and a good quality, the opposite of pride. One who possesses this trait has already spared his soul many kinds of evils, and one who has attained this honored state is performing a mitzvah and receives reward to the extent of his humility. For humility is the root of Divine service, and a small deed of the humble man is a thousand times more acceptable to the Blessed One than a great deed of the proud man. And so did our Rabbis teach (*Berachos* 5b): “Both he who does much and he who does little, so long as his heart is intent on the glory of God.” But the deed of the proud man is not acceptable to the Blessed One, for he is an abomination to Him, as it is written (*Mishlei* 16:5): “The abomination of Hashem are all who are proud of heart.” And because of this, one shouts to Hashem and is not answered, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 1:15): “Though you multiply prayer, I shall not accept.” And he does mitzvos and they are flung in his face, as it is written (*ibid.* 1:12): “Who asked this of your hands, you trampling of My courts?” And he brings a sacrifice but it is not accepted, as it is written (*Malachi* 1:10): “Would there were one of you who would slam the doors [of the Temple] ...and an offering I will not accept from your hand.” And it says (*Yirmeyahu* 7:21): “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh [i.e., I don’t want them].” But through the trait of humility and lowliness one attains all good, for (*Mishlei* 3:34): “To the humble He gives favor.” And since he has favor in the eyes of the Holy One Blessed be He, he shouts and is forthwith answered, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 65:24): “Before they call, I will have answered.” He does mitzvos and they are accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is written (*Koheles* 9:7): “For Hashem has already accepted your deeds.” And, what is more, He desires them, as it is written (*Malachi* 3:4): “And the offering of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to Hashem.”

And what is humility? It is self-effacement and lowliness of spirit and regarding oneself as naught. A man is obliged at all times and on every occasion to be unworthy in his eyes, and lowly of spirit, and soft of heart, and broken-spirited. The root of humility is [vis-a-vis the Creator] one’s thinking of himself when he is yet calm and tranquil and healthy and rich, that the Blessed One has given him good of which he is not worthy. He must reflect upon the greatness of the Almighty and the exaltations of His glory

and think: “What am I? Am I not an extremely lowly creature in a lowly, ephemeral world?” And: “All of the good things I can do are nothing but a drop in the ocean relative to what I ought to do.” And he must do all for the sake of Heaven, not for the sake of honor, and not to flatter any man or for any personal pleasure — but all for the sake of His great Name. This is the root of humility. But if one humbles himself before the Blessed Creator when he or one of his organs is ailing, or when his children or loved ones die, or when he falls from his wealth or his greatness, or when he grows old — the truth is that humility and lowliness are always acceptable to the Blessed One, but he has not arrived at true humility this way.

One must conduct himself with humility in dealing with people and in monetary matters, to deal with all men beyond the letter of the law (*Bava Kama* 100a, *Bava Metzia* 30b, 83a). And his entire deportment with people must be with lowliness and pleasantness. True humility consists of humbling oneself to those beneath him, such as his servants, the members of his household, and those poor people who are fed and helped by him and whom he does not need or fear. And if one humbles himself before orphans, widows, and converts and bears their trials and burdens, and hears himself degraded but does not answer because of his great humility, he is manifesting a very high order of that trait.

There is another extremely high level of humility — humbling oneself before one’s teachers, before the wise, and before the righteous who walk in just paths — thinking to oneself: These are the servants of the Blessed One, His bondmen and His lovers, and, because of this, lowering himself before them and honoring them. It is also a good variety of humility if he thinks: I shall humble myself before them so that they will draw me near and teach me and chastise me and lead me in the ways of the Blessed One. Another extremely good form of humility is humbling oneself before one’s students, explaining everything that is difficult for them — to the older one on his level and to the younger one on his. And he should explain again and again with a pleasant expression and demeanor until they understand, and not say: “How can I answer so that he understands; his heart is as hard as stone!” But he must review the matter patiently numerous times. We are familiar with the reward of Rabbi Preida (*Eruvin* 54b), who reviewed a lesson four hundred times for the benefit of one student. Another great form of humility is to study before the young and to ask them what one does not know, and not to say: “How can I study before him and how can I inquire of him? Is he not younger than I?” Concerning this it is written

(*Tehillim* 119:99): “From all my teachers did I become wise.” And our Rabbis have stated further (*Avos* 4:4): “Be exceedingly humble of spirit” before *all* persons — one must be humble of spirit not only before the great, but even before the small. One who follows this course brings merit to society, for he finds favor in the eyes of all who see him, all of his deeds and practices are accepted by them, and he is always praised by them. Because of this they desire to emulate him, they all bless their children to be humble and forbearing like him, and in this way he sanctifies the name of the Blessed One. But the proud man desecrates the Blessed One’s name and causes many to sin. He is like a carcass flung out into the street, which causes each passerby to hold his nose until he has passed it (*Avos d’Rabbi Nasan* 11:2). So with the proud man. He debases Torah and those who study it and drives people away from it, causing them to say: “Of what use is Torah if those who study it are so bad?” The result is that they separate themselves from Torah and by this they have disgraced the Holy One Blessed be He.

Humility may manifest itself in six ways:

1) In the intensity of a man’s anger. If one is greatly shamed by word or deed and he is in a position to take revenge, but he controls himself and forgives the other for the sake of the Blessed Creator — this is a sign of humility. At times, however, it is forbidden to forgive, as in the case of a Torah scholar who has been shamed in public, in which case he must be conciliated before forgiveness can be granted.

2) If one suffers a great loss or his children or close relatives die and he vindicates God’s justice, accepting all with love, as it is written (*Vayikra* 10:3): “And Aharon was silent.” This is a strong sign of humility and submissiveness.

3) If one hears people praising him for his wisdom and good deeds he should not rejoice in his heart, but rather reflect that his good deeds are very insignificant relative to what he ought to do, being like a drop in the great ocean. It goes without saying that if they attribute to him good deeds that he has not done, he should not rejoice, but be distressed that he is acclaimed for what he does not possess. And if one has related evil of him, if it is true, he should not seek to twist the truth to exonerate himself, but should rather emulate the conduct of Yehudah, who said (*Bereshis* 38:26): “She speaks the truth; [she is pregnant] by me.” And he should not attempt

to contradict the man who spoke against him nor hate him for revealing the thing, but he should humble himself before the Blessed Creator, Who revealed but a small part to afflict and chastise him to return to Him. And if what was said about him is false, here too, he should not shame the speaker or be angry with him. It once happened that evil was spoken of one of the pious men, and when this became known to him, he sent a gift to the speaker, writing him: "You sent me a gift of your merits, and I am reciprocating with this gift that I am sending you." For on the Day of Judgment mitzvos are produced on behalf of many people who did not do them, and when they say: "But we did not do these," they are told: "Those who spoke evil against you had performed these mitzvos, and they were taken from them and given to you." The wicked, likewise, are shown transgressions that they did not commit, and when they protest: "But we did not do these," they are told: "These are the transgressions of those you slandered; they have been taken from them and added to yours." This is the intent of (*Tehillim* 79:12): "And return to our neighbors seven-fold into their bosoms their insult with which they have insulted you, O Hashem." For all who insult a righteous man it is as if they have insulted the Holy One Blessed be He, as the foes of Israel are referred to as the foes of Hashem in many places. It is in this regard that we are exhorted in the Torah (*Devarim* 24:9): "Remember what Hashem your God did to Miriam on the way [for speaking against Moshe]." Therefore, if one bears his shame in silence, it is evident that he is humble, as we find in the case of Hillel the Prince (*Shabbos* 31a) whom one shamed: "May there not be many like you in Israel," and who did not take umbrage. It is stated in the Midrash: "Only he is humble who hears himself shamed and does not reply, as it is written (*Bemidbar* 12:1): 'And Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe,' after which it is written (*ibid.* 12:3): 'And the man, Moshe, was extremely humble.'" About such men it is written (*Shoftim* 5:31): "And those who love Him are as the going forth of the sun in its might" (*Shabbos* 88b).

(4) If the Blessed One graces a man with wealth and children and He gives him wisdom in abundance, understanding and honor; he should be even more humble and lowly before the Blessed Creator and honor men and pursue their good to an even greater extent than before. Witness the case of Avraham. When the Holy One Blessed be He said to him (*Bereshis* 18:17): "Now will I conceal from Avraham?" he humbled himself and responded (*ibid.* 18:27): "But I am dust and ashes."

A superabundance of wisdom and wealth in this world falls into one of three categories: (1) good from the Holy One Blessed be He, (2) as a trial, and (3) as revenge. The sign of good: If the wealthy man injures no man through his wealth and the wise man does not utilize his wisdom to harm another, but instead the first through his wealth and the second through his wisdom add to the service of the Holy One Blessed be He, then that wealth and that wisdom are truly a gift from the Holy One Blessed be He. The sign of trial: If the wealthy man is always preoccupied with guarding his money, is always afraid of some mischance whereby he might lose it, and never derives enjoyment commensurate with his wealth through its proper utilization — but he does not injure anyone through his wealth nor boast about his riches, but is constantly preoccupied with the acquisition of wealth and concerned over its safekeeping, and does not do good to any man nor take pity on the poor to feed or clothe them. Similarly, the wise man, if he devotes most of his wisdom to the demands of this world, to correct his own affairs, being wise neither for evil nor for good — his superabundance, too, is certainly in the category of trial. The sign of revenge: If the wealthy man injures others through his wealth, and boasts about it, and does not perform charity with it, and is constantly preoccupied with it for his own pleasure, as in *Yeshayahu* 22:13: ‘Joy and gladness, the killing of oxen and the slaughtering of sheep,’ and (*ibid.* 5:12): “And the lyre and the lute, the tambourine and the pipe, and the wine of their feasts but they do not regard the deeds of Hashem” — and he does not fulfill thereby Hashem’s charge, about this it is written (*Koheles* 5:12): “Wealth guarded by its owner to his detriment.” And it is the same with the wise man, if he is clever in the doing of evil and does not do good, as it is written (*Yirmeyahu* 4:22): “They are wise to do evil and do not know how to do good,” then his wisdom is a stumbling block to him. Therefore, the wise man will act with his wealth and his good judgment in accordance with the abundance of his wealth and his wisdom. He will increase humility and lowliness, he will not grow haughty, and he will always worry that his wealth might be his [sole] reward and that he is one of those about whom it is written (*Devarim* 7:10): “And he pays His enemies to their faces [in this world] in order to destroy them [in the next].” And the wise man must also worry that he might be one of those about whom it is written (*Yirmeyahu* 4:22): “They are wise to do evil and do not know how to do good.” For every man must employ wisdom and thought to attain good deeds to the ultimate extent of his wisdom.

(5) If one reproves himself for having harmed another in word or deed, not needing the other in any way and not anticipating any favor from him, and he goes of his own volition, without another's intercession, and asks for forgiveness, humbling himself before him, undoing the wrong, and speaking ingratiatingly — this, too, is a sign of humility.

(6) One should be given to soft words, as it is written (*Mishlei* 15:1): “A soft answer turns away wrath,” and a low voice, this being an aspect of lowliness, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 29:4): “And you will be low. You will speak from the earth, and your speech will be low from out of the dust.” And one should not preoccupy himself with beautiful garments and adornments, as it is written (*Shemos* 33:5): “Remove your ornaments.” And his eyes must be constantly lowered, as it is written (*Iyov* 22:29): “And him of lowered eyes will He help.” And he must not be given to luxuries, as it is written (*Mishlei* 13:25): “The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul.” All these are signs of humility.

Humility is the ladder by which one ascends to the ways of the Holy One Blessed be He, as it is written (*Tehillim* 25:9): “He guides the humble in justice and teaches the humble His way.” And by means of humility one acquires fear of the Blessed One, as it is written (*Mishlei* 22:4): “Upon the heels of humility comes fear of Hashem” (*Shekalim 9b*). The Shechinah reposes on the humble, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 57:15): “High and holy do I dwell, and with the oppressed and the humble of spirit.” For the Holy One Blessed be He forsook all the mountains and hills and inclined His Shechinah upon Mount Sinai and descended. And it is written (*ibid.* 26:19): “Awake and sing, you dwellers in the dust, for the dew of light is your dew” — he who makes himself a neighbor of the dust in this world will live in the World-to-Come. And it is written (*Tehillim* 138:6): “For Hashem is high and He sees the lowly” (*Sotah* 5a). If one makes his heart soft as flesh, his prayer is heard, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 66:23): “Let all flesh come to bow down to me, says Hashem” (*Sotah* 5a), and (*Tehillim* 65:3): “You who hear prayer — to You shall all flesh come.” “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Come and see how great are the lowly of spirit before the Holy One Blessed be He. For in the time of the Temple, if one brought a burnt offering, he would gain the reward for a burnt offering; if one brought a meal offering, he would gain the reward for a meal offering. But if one is possessed of a lowly spirit, the Torah considers it as if he had brought all of the sacrifices, as it is written (*Tehillim* 51:19): ‘The sacrifices of Hashem are a broken spirit.’ And, what is more, his prayers are not

despised, as it is written (*ibid.*): ‘A heart that is broken and contrite Hashem shall not despise’ (*Sotah* 5b).

Many good things sprout from the root of humility. The humble man is patient, and patience leads to peace. For by means of humility one stills the wrath of the one who is angry with him, as it is written (*Mishlei* 15:1): “A soft answer turns away wrath.” And peace is an extremely good trait. The humble man possesses favor, as it is written (*ibid.* 3:34): “And to the humble He gives favor.” The prayer of the humble man is acceptable to the Holy One Blessed be He because he relinquishes his prerogatives. Because of this the prayer of Rabbi Akiva was accepted when he said, “Our Father, our King, etc.” (*Ta’anis* 25b). The humble man merits wisdom, for he humbles himself before the wise and sits in the dust of their feet, as it is written (*Mishlei* 13:20): “He who walks with the wise shall become wise.” The humble man is pitied by Heaven, as it is written (*ibid.* 28:13): “And he who confesses and forsakes [evil] will be pitied.” The humble man flees position and honor, and modesty hinges upon this, as it is written (*Michah* 6:8): “And walk modestly with your God.” The humble man rejoices in the portion that the Holy One Blessed be He has given him, whether large or small, as it is written (*Tehillim* 37:16): “Better the little of the righteous than the great wealth of the wicked.” He thereby frees his heart from the preoccupations of this world and gives it more leisure to occupy itself with wisdom and Divine service. The humble man judges all men on the scales of merit. One of the tzaddikim was once asked: “How did you merit becoming master of the men of your generation?” He answered: “By regarding every man I saw as better than I. If he were wiser than I, I said: ‘He also fears Hashem more than I do because of his great wisdom.’ If he were not so wise as I, I said: ‘His sins are unintentional and mine are willful.’ If he were older than I, I said: ‘His merits are more than mine.’ If I were older than he, I said: ‘His sins are fewer than mine.’ If he were my equal in wisdom and years, I said: ‘His heart is better to God than mine, for I know the sins that I have committed, but I do not know his.’ If he were richer than I, I said: ‘He gives more charity than I do.’ If he were poorer, I said: ‘He is of a more contrite and lowly spirit than I, and he is better than I.’ So saying, I honored all men and humbled myself before them.”

The defects of the humble man are forgotten because men are solicitous of his honor, and he has many assistants thereto. They tell of a certain king who one night, when many men were sitting before him, got up and tended to the lamp himself so that it would not go out. When he was asked why he

did not order another to take care of it, he replied: “I arose a king and returned a king.” The Sages say: “Men envy all qualities, except that of humility,” and “He who is despised in his own eyes is great in the eyes of others.”

What one must remove oneself from, however, in this trait is humility and self-effacement before the wicked. About this the Scripture states (*Mishlei* 25:26): “As a muddied fountain and a polluted spring is a righteous man lowering himself before a wicked man.” If he has the power, he must take revenge on the wicked for the sake of Hashem (*Berachos* 7b) and adamantly oppose them and stand up against them as a roaring lion to rescue the robbed from the robber. And he must teach men Divine service and reprove them with all his power according to his wisdom; in the beginning, gently, and if this does not avail, he must shame them. He must exhort to good and against evil with mouth and tongue according to his ability. He must be quick to exact the dues of Hashem from those owing them, and he must not humble or lower himself in doing so.

There is another kind of humility which is worse than pride — that which corresponds to the acts of the false prophets who attired themselves in the manner of the true prophets so that their deceptions and falsehoods would be accepted. In this respect it is written (*Zechariah* 13:4): “And they shall not wear a hairy mantle in order to deceive.” Therefore, those who deport themselves with humility in the matter of dress and speak gently and conduct themselves as saints and righteous men in order to be believed and trusted, and flatter those whom it is forbidden to flatter, and are deceptive in secret, and take care to perform mitzvos only in public but not in private, and mislead people — such as these desecrate Hashem’s Name more than all of the proud, causing others not to believe those who are truly good and to be suspicious of all men, saying: “Perhaps these are like those.” One who recognizes such men is duty-bound to expose them, as our Rabbis have stated (*Yoma* 86b): “The flatterers are to be exposed to prevent desecration of Hashem’s name.”

Therefore, awake and do not be remiss in curing yourself of pride and deception. Do not be held back by seeing many of your peers not abandoning their pride and deception and telling their reprovers: “Who does not have pride, and who can exercise enough care to be completely honest in business dealings and not deceive anyone and do everything properly? Are there not many people better and greater than I who do such

and such? I will do the same and what they will have in the World-to-Come I will also have.” Those who reason in this manner are guilty of folly without parallel. Is it wisdom for one whose eyes ail him and who has a sure eye remedy whose efficacy is universally acknowledged to say: “I shall not take any remedy. So what if I become blind? There are plenty of blind people in the world. What is good enough for them is good enough for me.” Is this not the height of folly!

Therefore, give heed to your soul and do all that is in your power to do. Do not focus your attention upon he who is inferior to you in wisdom and in Divine service, for in doing so, you will fall short in service and in wisdom. Set your eyes and your heart on he who is superior to you and exert yourself to pursue him and to come as close as you can to him in wisdom and Divine service. In this regard it is written (*Hoshea* 6:3): “And let us know, let us pursue, to know Hashem, and His coming forth will be as sure as the morning. He will come as the rain to us, as the strong rain that waters the earth.”