

Anivus, the Meaning of Being Humble

One of the nice changes in Jewish education that I see happening with my children, which did not occur when I was in school, is a focus on Midot education. Midot are aspects of personality and behavior that the Torah community sees as desirable in the way an individual approaches the world. By educating children in regard to these things, we raise not only ritualistically aware Jews, but Jews who approach the world and the encounters of day-to-day life from within the values of our sacred tradition.

One prime example of this type of value which Judaism sees as important appears at the end of this week's Torah portion (Shelach). I speak here of the quality of Anivut, of being an Anav, of being humble, of being filled with modesty. Within our Torah portion, this value appears in the context of Miriam and Aaron speaking against Moses.

This story is presented somewhat ambiguously in the text. This leads to discussion among the commentators as to exactly what their complaint was regarding their brother. Certainly, as the text indicates, it dealt in some way with Moses' wife. It also, simply from superficially reading the story, must have included something relating to the power of prophecy that, to a certain extent, all three -- Moses, Aaron, and Miriam-- possessed.

Combining these two elements allows us to follow the approach of some of the commentators, who say that Aaron and Miriam were trying to protect Moses' wife from abandonment by Moses. Moses, in fact, had separated from his wife in order to always be available to receive the word of G-d.

If one understands the story in this way, then Miriam and Aaron's complaint questioned Moses taking this step. "After all, we, too, are prophets, and we clearly are not taking this step. G-d calls on us as well, and Moses is simply being arrogant in taking this step," is the way these commentators understand Miriam and Aaron's criticism.

If we look, then, at the next verse, the one that appears immediately after the challenge of Miriam and Aaron, we find the famous statement, "The man, Moses, was very anav, more so than any other human being in the face of the earth."

The question can then be asked, What does "anav," mean in this context, and how does humility fit the context? If we understand it as we usually understand being humble, this is a defense of Moses. Miriam and Aaron are accusing Moses of being a show-off, of putting on airs, of being arrogant, of taking his position too seriously and going too far. The narrative, then, defends Moses by saying, "No, he's really very humble," and therefore, that Miriam and Aaron are wrong.

This is certainly a possible reading, but it is a weak one. It makes the debate into a sort of "did too -- did not" argument, with one side claiming that Moses is arrogant, and the other side claiming that Moses is humble. Following this reading, the rest of the section then has G-d explaining Moses' special degree of prophecy. The fact that Moses speaks to G-d "face-to-face," "clearly and not in riddles or allegories," means that he is not putting on airs, but rather that he is doing what is necessary.

There are, it seems to me, two problems with this reading. The first is that a "did too -- did not" argument is unseemly for the level of dialogue which Torah normally presents. It sounds childish and evokes the image of toddlers sticking their tongues out at one another.

Second, while one may be able to argue that Moses is not putting on airs, the fact is he is not displaying humility in separating from his wife, at least as we usually understand the term. If this is, then, an argument about his general modesty, then the text is bringing in an element that is extraneous to the story told here. Such a device would be very weak in a literary sense, as it would prevent analysis of the story as it stands. To put it another way, it is literarily tantamount to solving the murder on the last page of the mystery with information available in the author's previous book. If the text wanted to be consistent within its own terms, it could have said, for example, "The man Moses was very holy, or very dedicated, more than any other human being on the face of the earth." Holiness and dedication are, after all, the reason for the separation, and humility is not. Further, holiness and dedication are implied from the very beginning of this incident, and other outside information is not necessary.

This suggests that there is another definition of "anivut," and it is that definition that I want to develop. Let us start to do that with a Rabbinic statement. The Talmud tells us that anyone who sets a particular place for himself to pray in the synagogue, "The G-d of Abraham stands in his aid, and when he dies, people say of him 'this was an anav'."

Now, praying in the same place may be a nice thing to do, but it hardly suggests humility.

Let us move to another source. Another person, other than Moses, famous for his "anivut" is Hillel. Two elements are cited by the commentators as reasons for Hillel having been described in this way. The first is the fact that in debate Hillel's opinion is always recorded in the Talmud after Shammai's. The second is the famous story of the three converts. As I am sure most of us recall, these involve a prospective convert who wanted to become Jewish on the basis of learning the Torah while standing on one foot, a second convert who wanted to become Jewish based on accepting the written and not the oral law, and a third convert who wanted to convert in order to become the High Priest. In each case,

Shammai chased the supplicant away while Hillel pursued the individual to the point where he developed the correct attitude and converted the petitioner.

While the first explanation describing Hillel's giving way before Shammai suggests humility as we understand it, the second dealing with the converts does not seem to fit at all with our definition of humility. This again suggests that the true definition of the term must include some aspects of humility, but must take it a good bit further.

Let us look a little more closely at the story of the prospective converts. As indicated, this is not humility as we understand it. It is, rather, the ability to find room for these individuals when others could not. Hillel did so by taking the things that they said and rather than refusing to have anything to do with the individuals, using the comments they made as the starting point for a discussion that yielded a more appropriate and successful result.

To put it another way, Hillel left room for each of them to find a proper place within Judaism. He did so by withdrawing enough so that they could find a space from which to operate and to do what was necessary. If we define "anivut" in this way, as limiting oneself to an appropriate amount of space while leaving room for others, we will find that this definition fits well with all of the sources thus far discussed.

Hillel allowed Shammai his space at the beginning of each Talmudic argument, and so he is called an "anav." Similarly, finding and remaining in one's place of prayer in the synagogue leaves room for everyone else to find their own place in which to function.

Coming back to this morning's Torah portion, we find that Moses is truly the greatest "anav." Moses stayed in his space, from which he could best be available for G-d to contact as necessary. Moses never strayed from that space, never gave in to any other calling or need. Moses even went so far as to separate from his wife so that he could remain within that space that would allow him to be in constant contact with G-d.

We can even provide a clincher to this suggested definition of "anivut" from a discussion about G-d's "anivut" that one finds in the Talmud. The Gemara in Megilah says, "Any place where one finds the "gevurah" (power of G-d), there one finds His 'anivut'."

If "anivut" means humility as we previously understood it, I would find it difficult to understand this Rabbinic statement or to conceptualize a humble deity. What does such a being say? "I am all-powerful but I do not make a big deal out of it"? Or "I am all-knowing but I pretend that I am ignorant"? There is no formulation that I can think of that makes any sense in this regard. However, if we understand "anivut" as meaning, "limiting oneself to a particular space", and

"gevurah" of G-d meaning the opposite, i.e., the expansive manifestations of G-d, then this is entirely intelligible. "Gevurah" speaks to when G-d is all-encompassing and all-embracing and "anivut" to the opposite. The translation of the statement in Megilah would then read, "wherever one finds G-d's all-encompassing nature, there we also find a sense of G-d limiting His presence to one particular place."

If one then goes through the Gemara's proof texts, they all fit. The Gemara proceeds to provide one example of "anivut" following "gevurah" from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and the three are, in essence, all the same. Prototypically, the example from the Torah of "gevurah" is the verse, "For the Lord your G-d is the god of all gods, and the lord of all lords." And what follows is a verse of "anavah," i.e., that "G-d does the work of justice for the orphan and the widow." The first verse obviously speaks of G-d filling a large space, while the second focuses the divine energy into a much more limited and smaller space where one finds the downtrodden, the widow, and the disadvantaged. This same pattern appears in the verses chosen from the Prophets and the Writings.

This, then, is the characteristic we are asked to develop, when we speak of "anivut." We are asked to fill certain roles, and in so doing, to remain within a limited space, even when stepping out of the role might be to our advantage. We are further asked not to occupy too much space and to leave room for others, even for others who differ from us in the way they think and function in order to learn to operate correctly. We are taught to understand that even G-d in all of His grandeur and glory, will occasionally focus His energy into a limited space. He does this to enable those who themselves take up the least amount of space to be given what they need. In this way, G-d can, as it were, occupy Himself fully with these people in distress.

One last point is important to mention. Essentially, all of the Midot, no matter how important they are, can reach a point of excess that leads to fanaticism in their performance. This obviously is not good and must be guarded against.

The Talmud tells a famous story about the excessive use of "anivut" in its devastating judgment of Rabbi Zechariah, son of Avkilus, a fairly well known story often studied on Tisha B'av.

The one section in question begins, "The 'anivut' of Rabbi Zechariah son of Avkilus caused the destruction of our house [the Temple in Jerusalem]." It comes at the end of the story of Bar Kamtza.

Bar Kamtza, you may remember, was angry at the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, and went to the Romans to claim that the Jews were rebelling. In order to prove that this rebellion was occurring, he had the Roman leadership send a sacrifice to the Temple. Normally, such a sacrifice would be offered by us, but Bar Kamtza caused a minor blemish on this animal which was not one which the Romans

would recognize as a defiling blemish. Unfortunately, the Rabbis did see it as a defiling blemish and therefore would refuse to give it as an offering, thus "proving" that the Jews were actually in rebellion against Roman rule.

When the sacrifice came before the Rabbis in the Temple in Jerusalem, they understood what was going on. Their first suggestion was to offer the sacrifice anyway. Zechariah ben Avkilus, however, argued that if they did so, people would say that one may offer sacrifices that have blemishes. The Rabbis then suggested that this Bar Kamtza be killed because of the danger which he represented. To this, Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkilus responded by saying, "If we do so, people will think that those who offer sacrifices with blemishes on them are put to death."

As a result of Zechariah ben Avkilus's unwillingness to accept either course of action, Bar Kamtza succeeded in his plan. The sacrifice was denied, the Romans assumed the Jews to be in rebellion, attacked, and ultimately destroyed, the Temple.

After telling the story, the Talmud repeats, "the anivut of Zechariah ben Avkilus caused the loss of our home, the burning of our sanctuary, and our exile from the land." Now, if "anivut" meant humility, there would be no understanding this particular statement. Zechariah ben Avkilus was not being humble. If, however, as we have shown, "anivut" means limiting oneself to a particular space, this is certainly what Zechariah ben Avkilus did. For him, the law needed to remain in its limited space, no matter what. The problem is, of course, that Zechariah ben Avkilus showed this quality to an excess that was not healthy. He carried the point to an extreme, he did not balance the value with other principles, and as happens with any excess, his "anivut" became almost an act of idolatry, of worship at the altar of something, even a good thing, other than G-d, and the trouble resulted.

Remember, too, that Moses, the great man of "anivut," when he saw an Egyptian beating a Jewish slave, killed the Egyptian, and did not allow his "anivut" to get in the way. Similarly, Hillel did not simply accept the prospective converts, he found a space for them to stand from which he could educate and debate so that they would eventually get to a point where their conversion was one that met our standards.

This, then, is "anivut." It is not humility. It is the ability to not take up too much space and to leave room for others. It is, perhaps, the most important of all the Midot, and one which I hope we can all educate ourselves to follow.

I conclude with the following comment from the Midrash. "The man Moses was very 'anav'." Says the Midrash, "There is no man other than Moses and the reason is because he was truly and to the greatest extent an 'anav'."

