

## **Being the Somebody that We Ought to Be A Jewish Concept of Humility**

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Shana Tova.

There's a famous story about a rabbi right before Rosh Hashanah. In a frenzy of religious passion, he rushes in before the ark, falls to his knees, and starts beating his breast, crying "I'm nothing. I'm nothing."

The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, soon drops to his knees and starts beating his breast, crying out, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing."

The synagogue custodian, watching this scene from the back of the room, soon finds he can't restrain himself either. And he too drops to his knees and starts calling out, "I'm nothing. I'm nothing."

At which point the rabbi nudges the cantor with his elbow, points at the custodian and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

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I know you've probably heard this story before, but it struck me as a meaningful place to begin a sermon about humility.

Jewish tradition praises humility as one of the most important virtues one can cultivate. The prophet Micah asserts that it is 1 of God's big three. "You have been told what it is good and what the Lord requires of you," says Micah. "To act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

What is the Jewish concept of humility though? Is it bowing low? Beating our chests? Believing that we are nothing? I don't think so.

Just look at the Torah for an example.

Who does the Torah describe as the most humble man who ever lived? Moses. Not exactly a picture of meekness. You might expect this characterization of Moses at the beginning of his career, when we meet him as the stuttering, reluctant servant. But no. The Torah is talking about the Moses who stood up to Pharaoh, who led the

people across the sea, who stood at Sinai, who weathered rebellions, who talked with God face to face.

Moses did know how to prostrate himself on the ground, when the moment called for it. But I don't think it was those gestures alone that earned him the description as humble.

The Talmud sheds a different light on the concept of humility.

In Brachot, page 6b, Rabbi Chelbo teaches in the name of Rav Huna:

Kol Hakove'a makom l'tfilato - Anyone who sets a particular place for himself to pray in the synagogue (a makom kavua), the God of Abraham will be a help to him. And when he dies, they should say of him: **This was a humble person.** This was an "anav." From the students of Abraham our forefather.

What's so humble, you might ask, about sitting in the same place every time you pray?

Alan Morinis, the great modern day teacher of Jewish Mussar, a thousand-year-old exploration of spiritual virtues such as this, explains. "By fixing yourself to one spot, you free up all the other space in the room for others to use."

I find great wisdom in this teaching. The exemplar of humility is not the one who stands at the back and makes himself invisible. The exemplar of humility is the one who claims a regular seat, thereby letting others know where he is, and similarly, where he isn't. It is in taking his regular seat that he actually frees up every other seat in the room.

Morinis sums it up quite memorably.

**"Being humble doesn't mean being a nobody. It just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be."**

It's about taking up the right amount of space.

Moses was not meant to be just another shepherd. God had a mission for him, and expected him to fulfill it. He needed to be a

somebody, but the right amount of somebody, to both lead and empower others.

The Mussar masters, following Maimonides, speak of humility as being on a continuum. Humility occupies the middleground, actually, between arrogance on the one side, and self-abasement on the other. The middle is where there is room both for self and for others. This is humility.

The Mussar teachers go on to say that the extremes of the continuum are actually a form of idolatry. To believe that you are a god, or to believe that you are a worm, either way is a perversion of the truth.

There is a similar sentiment, actually, in the world of Alcoholics Anonymous, or 12-Step Recovery. In the world of A.A., humility means accepting that we have both ends of the continuum within every one of us. We are both saint and sinner. We are both beast and angel. What we are is human. Humility, human - they come from the same root. To be human is to be imperfect. To be humble is to accept our imperfection, to embrace it even, and to go out in the world and be somebody.

In this spirit, I'd like to share with you a story. It's called The Jester.

Once there was a king who ruled his kingdom with wisdom and compassion. As he approached the end of his days, everyone in the kingdom wondered who would be the next ruler. Would it be one of his children? An adviser? A general?

To keep the contenders from fighting over the throne, the king put the name of his chosen successor in a letter, which was to be opened only on the day of his death.

When that day arrived, the kingdom mourned its wise and caring leader. And then all eyes turned to the king's letter to see who would rule in his place. With great ceremony the prime minister opened the letter and read the instruction. Whom had the king chosen? Not one of his children, nor an adviser, nor a general. The king had chosen... the jester. The jester would be crowned king!

Everyone in the kingdom thought this must be a joke. How could a fool be king? But these were the king's instructions. And so, the jester was brought before the royal court. Royal retainers removed his jester costume and cloaked him in the robes of the king. They removed his jester hat, sat him on the royal throne, and crowned him king.

At first this situation was quite awkward - both for the new king and for his kingdom. But over time, it turned out to have been a brilliant choice. The jester was every bit as wise, as compassionate, and as insightful as the old king had been. He treated everyone who came before him with respect and kindness. To the amazement of all, the jester came to be a superb ruler. And everyone in the royal court - indeed, everyone in the kingdom - came to love him.

But there was one mystery surrounding the jester-king. Every so often, he would retreat to a distant room in the palace, a room to which only he had the key. For a few hours, he would lock himself in that room. And then he would return to the throne and resume his duties. Most members of the royal court assumed he went to the room to think, to meditate, or perhaps to pray. They accepted the mystery as part of their beloved king's life.

But one day an ambassador came from a far-off land. The ambassador spent many hours with the king and quickly grew to appreciate his special wisdom and kindness. The ambassador noticed that the king would occasionally disappear to a distant room, however, and he became obsessed with finding out what this mystery was all about.

So one day, when the king retreated to his room, the ambassador secretly followed behind. When the king closed the door, the ambassador crouched down and peered through the keyhole, where at last he beheld the king's great secret.

In the privacy of the room, the king took off his crown and his royal robes, and put on the costume of a jester. Round and round the room he danced the jester's dance, making funny faces and singing the silly songs of a jester. Then he stood before a great mirror and recited to himself, "Never forget who you are. You may look and

sound and act like the king. But you are only the jester. You are only the jester, who gets to serve as the king. Never forget who you are.”

Now the ambassador understood it all. He understood the source of the king’s deep wisdom. He understood that the king’s kindness and greatness emanated from his humility. And now he knew the secret of the king’s humility.

This knowledge made the ambassador love the king even more deeply, and he vowed to keep the king’s secret forever. But one day when the ambassador and the king were alone, the ambassador couldn’t contain himself any longer and he confessed what he had done.

“I promise you on my life that I will never reveal your secret,” he declared. “But there is one thing I have never been able to figure out. Of all the people in the royal court whom the old king could have chosen to succeed him, why did he choose you? Why did he choose the jester?”

The king smiled at his friend and replied, “And who do you think he was before he became king?”

I heard this story just a few weeks ago from Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Los Angeles, and I fell in love with it. It resonated for me personally (maybe it does for you too), and, to me, it elucidates the Jewish concept of humility.

Humility doesn’t necessarily mean saying no to becoming king. Humility is about allowing yourself to try being king, while knowing that you’re also a jester. It’s about recognizing our imperfections. And also recognizing our gifts.

In the story, the royal crown is not passed to the king’s son or any other of the people who might feel entitled to become king. Instead it is given as an unexpected gift. And the jester creates a ritual to remind himself that it’s a gift.

Judaism offers us rituals for this purpose too. One of them is Rosh Hashanah.

This anniversary of the creation of human beings is our chance to reflect on what it means to be human. To remind ourselves of our imperfections and also of our potential. We are flawed, and we are fragile. And we also have been given tremendous gifts - each one of us, our own unique set.

The question I want to ask you today is: What are those gifts? What are the precious gifts that you have been given? And what are you going to do with them this new year?

Perhaps initially you might feel I'm asking you to be arrogant. To think about your gifts to offer the world. But actually, I think I'm asking you to be humble. To acknowledge what you have in your life - your health, your family, your money, your abilities - and to label them as gifts.

Perhaps you're thinking, that's all well and good, but I'm old, or I'm young, or I'm sick, or I'm too busy, or I really don't have any particular talents to share with the world. If that's what you're thinking, I want to remind you of David Hahn.

For those of you who didn't know him, David Hahn was the son of Michael and Susan Hahn, brother of Laurie Hahn, and he died two weeks ago today, just before his 36th birthday. David had something called Williams Syndrome, and most people could probably tell from meeting him that he was "developmentally impaired." He wouldn't have a "normal" life, wouldn't be in "normal" classes in school, and wouldn't be able to have what many would call "normal" relationships. But David had gifts.

He had a talent for names. He had an exuberant way of greeting people - a high five, a slap on the back, a big hug, or often all 3. And, he had time. He made time. When he wasn't working at his job in a Stanford dorm cafeteria, David spent his time hanging out, shmoozing his way up and down California Avenue, hanging out with the Stanford Marching band, cheering on the members of countless Stanford athletic teams, all of whom he knew personally, and on holidays like today, sharing his distinctive spirit with all of us.

David had the gift of knowing how to cheer. How to cheer for a team, and how to cheer for an individual - whether he was rock star, a rabbi, or a homeless person on the street. He had the gift of good cheer, and he used it well. I don't think anyone could imagine just how well. His memorial service filled this room beyond capacity. Some 600 people came, from every walk of life, to give testament to the gifts David had shared with them.

David is a model to me, this Rosh Hashanah, and perhaps might be a model to you too, of making the most of the gifts you've been given.

So I ask you - What are the gifts that you have been given? - A keen mind, a listening ear, a particular ability?  
And what are you going to do with them this year?

Unlike Moses, most of us will not get a direct call from God to tell us what we should be doing. Instead, we must ask the question ourselves (prompted, perhaps with a little card). It is up to us to push ourselves to be that somebody that we ought to be.

There's no guarantee that we will succeed. But that's where the humility part comes back in.

We aren't God. And we aren't perfect.  
We'll probably make mistakes in whatever we try to do.  
But we're not nothing either.

We have been blessed with innumerable gifts. Our job is to see them and to put them to good use.

Shana Tova.