

## **Humility is a Strength, Not a Weakness**

Starting from my middle teenage years I became very enamored of philosophy. I avidly read Plato's dialogues and loved "the Socratic method," that is Socrates' manner of helping people arrive at their own conclusions by asking them questions that would help them logically think through the issues they were discussing. He was helping people learn how to think critically and pursue truth themselves. This mode of inquiry shares something with the scientific method. The opening assumption is that the person asking the questions and employing the scientific method wants to honestly pursue truth and not simply find a way to justify what they already believe regardless of whether or not there is sufficient evidence to support their belief. The next step is to ask the right questions.

Developing the ability to ask good questions is a great tool for learning – as is learning how to listen. The study of Torah, as I was taught it, was oriented around questioning. The more incisive the question, the more penetrating the possible answer and the more sophisticated our thinking might become. Along with the skill of asking probing questions is our ability to use language well. Language is an amazingly powerful tool for communication. Precise use of language can help us think more carefully and clearly. The opposite, unfortunately, is also true. The less precise our use of language, the less precise our thinking might become.

Any powerful tool can be used constructively or destructively. For example, music can deeply move a person, touch someone's soul so profoundly as to bring them to tears or bring them great joy. Music can also be used to rouse armies to shed blood. A great orator can inspire people and lift their spirits. On the other hand, a demagogue can abuse language to manipulate people and to obscure the truth rather than to shed light on issues. I believe, however, that eventually (as the Talmud says): "the Truth will stand, but a lie will not stand." Eventually that which is not true will be exposed or discovered as such because it will be inconsistent with reality.

People who desire to address the public need to earn our trust. Today public discourse, particularly in the field of politics, has degenerated to such a degree that perhaps a majority of the populace does not trust politicians. As we watch televised debates we too often witness the spectacle of candidates insulting each other, interrupting each other, and doing everything they can to "win" and convince the public to support them. After a debate, news analysts will

sometimes invoke fact-checkers reporting on the number of falsehoods uttered by the respective candidates. This is done in a matter-of-fact manner – as though there’s nothing outrageous, or particularly out of the ordinary, for politicians to say things that are not true. Clearly candidates guilty of distorting the facts must not imagine that being caught in these untruths will particularly hurt their chances of winning an election. The sad fact is that they may be right. Is this a quality that we want in our elected officials?

I can’t help but think of Moses at the Burning Bush – Moses who did not want to be a leader, finding various reasons to disqualify himself – what a contrast with the lust for power so prevalent today! In the Book of Numbers 12:3 Moses was said to be “the humblest person on the earth.” This quality made Moses Israel’s greatest leader according to the Torah. When someone possesses a modicum of humility they recognize the enormous responsibility that true leadership demands. The very futures of the people who elected them are in the hands of the leader. Watching our current presidential candidates jostling with one another, one would think that they see humility as a weakness rather than a strength. Shimon ben Zoma, one of the sages of the Talmud, who lived in the beginning of the second century asked: “Who is the powerful one? The one who conquers himself/herself.” “Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone.” How can you even begin to learn from others, if you don’t know how to listen?! Being willing to listen and interested in listening also requires humility and the recognition that however sure we may be of ourselves, we may not have all the answers. Listening to other people is also a sign of respect for others and a sign of caring about what other people think.

Once in New Mexico while visiting a friend’s farm, I saw some male goats fiercely butting heads. The sound of their heads banging against each other was striking, not to mention the ferocity of the effort to become the alpha male. That may be fine behavior for goats, but I would prefer to see our society emulate and reward different qualities such as compassion, tolerance, and love, including love for those different from ourselves. The Torah, in Leviticus 19:18, exhorts us to “Love your fellow as yourself,” and also (19:34) “you shall love (the stranger) as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Hebrew Bible often speaks of having a “circumcised heart,” which means a sensitive heart. Despite the proclamations of religious faith generally expected from candidates, we’re not seeing much evidence in this election season of the humanistic values that religion should cultivate in us.

Maybe we need to make it clearer to those who wish to represent us, that we the people have higher expectations.