

PART I: The HEART of the Matter

Welcome to the Backstage

It occurred to me the other day that this space is very much like the “backstage” of life. You know when you go to a show and see the actress on stage looking perfect and beautiful? Well, there’s a backstage too. That’s where real life happens, where the makeup and stage lights aren’t yet there to do their magic.

Often, it happens that we come home from *shiur*, or finish watching or reading one, whether it’s on *emunah* or *simcha* or humility or parenting or any other topic, and we’re so inspired. We have that clarity that we can do this. And then, what happens? Life happens. When things don’t go as we imagined, we ask ourselves, “What is it that’s inhibiting me from feeling this serenity/having this *middah*/being this kind of parent?” Often, when I write the weekly column for Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi in *Ami Living*, I feel this way. The topics discussed are so deep and beautiful, but I wish I could expound on the part where we human beings find ourselves getting stuck in actually fulfilling the Torah’s directives. A recent article that I facilitated is just one example of that, which I would like to expand upon here. The topic of that article was Moshe Rabeinu’s humility. It’s in parshas Behaloscha that we read of his most virtuous attribute: “and the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of earth.” In our Shabbos davening, we state, “*Yismach Moshe bematnas chelko ki eved ne’eman karasa lo.*” This was his greatest source of joy—that Hashem called him a loyal servant. In the article, the Rabbanit discussed that due to his humility, Moshe Rabeinu was able to be in a leadership position in one moment, and in a completely different role in another: He was exactly where Hashem wanted him to be at every moment. We all understand the beauty and virtuousness of humility, but what is it that may inhibit us from feeling this complete *bitul* to Hashem and the lack of superiority to others? Let us understand the depths of this trait so we can absorb how enmeshed emotional and spiritual health are. What *anivus* really means, and how it pertains to us in our daily lives, is directly connected to our emotional health.

Bye, Ego

Humility is a complete and utter recognition, not only in the mind but also in the heart, that I am a vessel for Hashem’s service, surrendering entirely to His will at every moment. Sounds lofty, right? From an emotional perspective, though, this means the complete and utter eradication of the ego. What’s so hard about doing that? What keeps us stuck in our ego-driven existence?

First, we live in a very driven culture, probably the most of all time. The Western world is focused on success, on the outcome, on reaching goals. Who are you if you haven’t made it? This attitude has unfortunately infiltrated into frum culture, as well. We all have our perceptions of “top” yeshivos/schools/careers. Whether it’s “brand name” fashion or “brand name” lineage, all of this is a reflection of identification with “stuff” as a means to establish worth. For many of us, if we haven’t “made it,” we live with the subconscious question of “Who am I without all of this?” We’re strong on setting goals, with an eye to

the future. Even a most seasoned educator may be subconsciously impacted by this. We may tell struggling children or students, “You have so much potential,” implying that who you are right now isn’t good enough, but you’ll get there one day. As if only if “you’ve made it” are you worthy of praise and love. What about the right now? This very moment? What is my value right now even if I don’t conduct myself exactly as others appreciate?

While setting goals may bring about very positive results (if they’re approached from a healthy perspective of true desire), when life becomes centered on outcomes, we find ourselves moving away from the present, from the people we are right now, from the opportunity that is available to us in the here and now. We shift from being human beings with a rich present to robots that do an incredible job at meeting demands. And all this time that we’re accomplishing, meeting goals, checking off our lists, we’re providing more and more support to the ego. “You see?” It says. “Look, I *am* a Somebody.”

How It All Started

Who says we need to be a Somebody? Our ego. And who is the ego? **The ego is the part in us that is afraid to feel unloved.** It’s the part in our mind that is so fearful that we won’t be recognized, that we won’t matter. That’s a very reasonable fear. No one wants to live a lonely, unloved existence. No one. But what the ego doesn’t get is that becoming a Somebody will do nothing, in the best case, to help with that fear. In the worst case, the fear will only grow and blossom under its tutelage.

With the ego burning inside of us, especially if we don’t feel loved, we start from a very young age to look around us: What do people do to feel loved? What does my society/ the adults in my life see as “wow”? And subconsciously, that’s what we want for ourselves. This can be so subconscious that we’ll have 100 ways to explain why what we want is good for us, but at the end of the day it boils down to this. And so, as we mature, we start working toward obtaining all that “stuff.” Whether it’s certain positions, appearances, societal roles, we’re hard at work. **The more things we can identify with, we believe, the more of a Somebody we’ll be.** For some, their identity is bound in their religious affiliation. For others, their career. For most of us, it’s a combination of many things. Who am I? I am these things.

But what is the real truth? **The real truth is that we are already a Somebody, regardless of what we do or identify with.** We’re a Somebody just as we are, but this Somebody is just as much a Nobody. It’s like a little baby, who doesn’t need to feel superior in order to feel good. It doesn’t need to live up to certain standards in order to maintain its worth because its value is as real as it gets: it’s a part of Hashem, fashioned in His Divine image. *Oh please, just that?* Yes, *just that.* Everything else we think is more major, more “substantial,” is our ego talking, afraid to let go of what it perceives as respect-worthy.

The ego is the one who tells us, “Seriously, you’re *her* friend?” Or “This is below your dignity!” Or “When you’ll get/have that, you’ll feel like a million dollars,” or “Look how much better you are than...” Or “Only perfect will do.” It’s the ego that doesn’t let us show our humanness, our “try and fail.”

It's important to realize that our need to identify with "stuff" emanates from our need to feel loved. It's a result of a fear we're feeling, not because we're horrible. For whatever reason, we've perceived that only if we do ABC or are ABC are we deserving of love. The more we see ourselves this way, with compassion toward this fear, as opposed to as haughty or with an inflated ego, the bigger our chances that we will allow ourselves to let go from these identities and appreciate ourselves just as we are.

PART II: Take It to HEART

Introspective Implications

You may want to take a pen and paper, or just take the time to think: What do I identify with? What are the things in my life that I would be afraid to live without lest I become a "nobody?" These can be physical attributes, traits, assets, intellect, lineage, career, even "spirituality." As long as I feel superior to anyone with any of my "things," even if it's a *chumrah* or more stringent lifestyle, that's my ego, afraid that I will feel unworthy of love. Realize how these things are helping you build/maintain your ego. How are they affecting the way you relate to others who don't have what you have? That's a big first step.

Until we don't rid ourselves of our ego, we can't ever fully appreciate our Divine self. *After all, everyone has one so what's special about it? I need to be something more.* Only when we fully appreciate our Divine self can we lead a life of true connection. But neither denying it or resisting it helps us get rid of our ego. Rather, it's first identifying it (the more we want to see it, the more we will) and recognizing how much we need it that is vital to the process. Then, once we recognize it, we can realize how everything we've been depending on for our "identity" is either a gift from Hashem or just "fluff." What counts is that we are a part of the Divine, and that in itself is special enough. The more loved we feel, the more okay we are with who we are, the less of a fear we have to feel unworthy, the less our ego has a say in our lives.

One of our deepest wishes as parents is to raise children who don't have an ego. Having this *middah* will not only enable them to connect more easily to others and enjoy fulfilling relationships in life, but it will make their own lives so much richer and less complicated. One way to do that is not to attribute the love we express to the things they do or are. "I love you because you're you," is the healthy message that encourages them to feel the same way about themselves. Of course, this is very difficult to do if we don't work on feeling that way about ourselves at the same time.

PART III: P'sach Libi Besorasecha

Torah Tidbit

So how was Moshe Rabeinu *zocheh* to reach the height of humility? Not because he didn't appreciate himself, but *davka* because he appreciated himself—his real self. And because he had a deep recognition of his *chelek Eloka'ah mima'al*, he had complete *bittul* to Hashem's will. If Hashem wanted him to play a leadership role one day, he was on call. If he needed to do something else entirely the next day, he was on call too. It wasn't about what looks good or feels good, but only about what *was* good. Because he was completely *batul* to Hashem, nothing was below his dignity. For Moshe Rabeinu there was no, "Wait? Is this my 'type?'" If his purpose required him to be zealous at one moment and gentle at another, that's exactly who he was at that point in time.

(Frightening for the ego, right? :))

The lashon kodesh word for I, *ani*, is the root for the word *aniyah*, boat. **Who am I? I am like a boat at sea, riding along with the waves wherever Hashem decides to carry me.** When we live with this reality, we are not only *batul* to Hashem's will, but there is no place left for superiority at all. So yes, it could very well be that Hashem blessed me with greater intellect/more beautiful features/more assets than he did someone else, but as long as these attributes are affecting the way we feel in relation to others, they are part of our ego, they are part of our fruitless quest to feel loved. When we realize that they are gifts, and that our core value is unaffected by them, we can not only appreciate ourselves unconditionally but also share these gifts with others.

PART IV: *Vehashevosa el Levavecha*

Summary of FOUNDATIONS:

- 1. The ego is the part in us that is afraid to feel unloved.**
- 2. The more things we can identify with, we believe, the more of a Somebody we'll be.**
- 3. The real truth is that we are already a Somebody, regardless of what we do or identify with.**
- 4. Who am I? I am like a boat at sea, riding along with the waves wherever Hashem decides to carry me.**
