

It's My Life, and It's Not All About Me.
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When I was a toddler, one of my favorite movies was the classic Disney animated Cinderella. I watched it more times than I can tell you now. One day, I noticed something that my three-year-old felt was missing, and turned to my mother and asked, "Mommy, how come Cinderella never brushes her teeth?"

You see, as a toddler, I wanted to see her not only as the hero of the story, but to see her doing the human being things I was learning to do. One I could really relate to. So I wondered, if I never see Cinderella go to the bathroom to brush her teeth, why isn't she doing the things she's supposed to be doing to take care of herself? Does she not feel like she's supposed to? Maybe her evil stepsisters and stepmother won't let her?

My mother said that she did, it just wasn't relevant to the story. It's not how movies work.

I have to say, I appreciate that our Torah doesn't take quite the same approach as Disney does as far as what gets included or excluded from the story. It gives us at least a little bit of the mundane bits of our ancestors' lives as we're figuring out how to be human beings. We get to see how they figured it out so that we can also figure out how to be. We see them have family squabbles, whine, rebel, complain, work, love, find food...Disney didn't tell me when Cinderella needed to brush her teeth because it wasn't relevant to the story. The Torah finds those moments relevant. The Torah gives us opportunities to learn from the mundane moments *between* the climaxes of the story.

There is one story in particular that I find myself returning to again and again. It lies in between two of the biggest climaxes of the story. It sits in between the parting of the Sea when the Israelites left Egypt, left slavery and went forth toward freedom, and standing at the mountain at Sinai and getting the Ten Commandments. Two huge climactic stories. They're singing and dancing; they're fearful and excited. Between these two stories, we also see their first moments in the wilderness at their most vulnerable. Most alone, most unsure of what their new life is about to hold.

And, they're hungry. They're overwhelmed, and they're hungry. The food they took with them from Egypt has run out, and they are in the wilderness with no knowledge of when it's supposed to come next. They turn to Moses and start complaining. "You brought us out here!" they say, "If we were supposed to just starve out here, why did we have to leave slavery?"

So God says that bread will rain from the sky, and thus God will give them the gift of miraculous food that will come each and every day. All they need to do is leave their tent and go get it.

Much has been written on manna over the centuries. What it tasted like, what the texture was like, how fully it served their nutritional needs, but I have always been fascinated, not by the manna itself, but by how the people deal with it in this story, this first time that they encounter it.

Moses give them the following instructions to heads of household on God's behalf:

"Gather as much of it as each of you requires to eat...each of you should fetch for each person in your tent." And they do exactly this. They go out to gather the manna, and they do indeed gather exactly as much as each person needed. A perfect serving for each member of their family. Moses then gives his next instruction: "Let no one leave any of it over until morning"

And here is the piece of this story that has always fascinated me: They followed the first instruction. Every single person has the perfect amount, exactly as much as each of them needs--no less, as slaves might be used to getting, and no more. There shouldn't be a concern about leftovers, if each person has his or her or their own perfect, miraculous serving size. But Moses *anticipates* leftovers, and tells them not to have any. Do not leave any over.

And this instruction they do not follow. They don't finish it, and they do leave some for later. And everything that is leftover ends up getting rotten, infested, and malodorous. Unusable. Moses is angry with them for not following his instructions. Many commentators seek to answer why Moses is angry. But I have often wondered...why *did* they leave it over?

Abraham ibn Ezra, an Eleventh Century Spanish commentator, says that it was an issue of faith. When Moses told them to not leave any over, it was a test of their faith: Did they believe that God would provide manna again the next day? Moses, says ibn Ezra, is upset because they failed the test. They didn't expect to see it again the next day.

For me, ibn Ezra seems to be looking at the situation from inside *Moses'* head, but not the Israelites'. He has the one-on-one relationship with God, and expects the Israelites to not trust it since theirs is different--it's distant, through him and God's miracles. But they'd *just* seen the plagues and the splitting of the Red Sea. Did they really doubt whether God would send more manna the next day? Their relationship with God was constant miracles. I think there was something else going on for them, something more individual and emotional.

It seems to me there was something in them that made them think that they didn't really *deserve* the full serving they had each received. They didn't think they were worthy of all of it, so they denied themselves some of it. Just to be safe. Maybe I'll need that tomorrow. Even when the Torah is abundantly clear that they each had a valid claim to everything in front of them, and that there would be more tomorrow.

Have you ever done that? I know I have. Felt like I don't really deserve all of the blessings in front of me, even if no one else needs it. And I find myself not taking full advantage of it. What makes us do that? What makes us deny ourselves the gifts we receive?

The Mei HaShiloach, Rabbi Mordechai Lainer of Nineteenth Century Poland, seems to think somewhat along the lines I do. He said the Israelites' failure was not that they didn't believe that God would provide for *all* of them the next day; indeed, they had seen all of the miracles in Egypt. Their failure, he says, is that they believed that God might not send the right amount for *each* of them the next day. As individuals, they each thought themselves small, disposable.

"God will provide for *us*," each thought, "but maybe there won't be enough for *me*. I am just one person, and there are thousands of us. God will forget about just little Me."

Rav Lainer concludes his teaching by saying that no person should believe that he or she or they is any less than anyone else in God's eye. To believe so, he says, would be *anava p'sula*.

This phrase is an interesting one, and one I'd like us to explore today. *Anava* in Hebrew translates to humility. *P'sulah*, or *pasul* in the masculine, is a negative word. One might translate the phrase as "false humility," or "fake humility," but I'm not sure that's the connotation that Mei HaShiloach is going for here, certainly not with the connotation the English phrase usually carries. False humility would be them *pretending* they don't expect enough, but still eating all of the first day, then grabbing the next day before anyone else could.

Pasul is usually used as the opposite of kosher when it comes to doing mitzvot, often specifically for the ritual objects used in those mitzvot. A Shofar can be *pasul*, unfit for use on Rosh Hashanah, if it's got a hole in the side or too big a crack for repair. A Torah scroll can be *p'sulah* if there are mistakes in the writing. A sukkah can be *p'sulah*. A menorah. Basically, it usually means "unfit," or "invalid." Something needs to be fixed before it can be used. So it's not false humility as we would use the phrase; it's invalid humility.

So how can humility be invalid? And if we can have *Anava p'sulah*, what is *anava k'sheira*, kosher humility?

To answer this, I think we need to explore the feeling *behind* the thought process of the Israelites. What lies *behind* the thought of, "God will provide for us, but not for me"?

Behind that thought is one that I think we all feel far too often.

Behind it is, "I am just one person. And because I am just one person, I don't matter."

That, I think, is invalid humility. Thinking that I don't matter, thinking that I am just one person and am therefore unimportant and powerless. Perhaps humility--kosher humility--is knowing exactly *how much* you matter, and when.

Too many of us walk around life thinking we don't really matter. And it makes us do tremendous harm to ourselves, and can be harmful to others.

When we think we don't matter, we don't take care of our physical selves. We become like Cinderella who didn't brush her teeth. We overeat or we undereat, we over-exercise or we under-exercise. We ignore signs of illness. We say we'll worry about our own health once we've worried about what everyone else around us needs. We don't take the breaks that we need to allow ourselves to recharge.

When we think we do matter, we neglect our spiritual and emotional selves. We might find ourselves falling into traps of substance or situational addiction and abuse to fill the holes we leave in our souls when we tell ourselves we're unworthy of love, since we're just one, unimportant person. We don't reach out to others, who may even *want* to hear from us, because we assume we're a burden, we're going to bother them.

When we think we don't matter, we don't speak up when we do have the skills or knowledge to fix a particular situation. We don't share our own strengths or talents that we've worked to hone because we assume someone else can probably do it better than I can. No one needs to hear it my way.

In some ways, when we think that we don't matter, we disappear ourselves from the world. We forget that God created each of us unique, and has a role for each of us to play. Rebbe Nachman of Brezlov famously said, "The day you were born was the day the Holy One decided the world could no longer exist without you." We're each supposed to use all of our own manna. To God, each of us matters.

In Judaism, *anava*, humility is not a simple opposite of arrogance. It does not require self-humiliation, even if those words are clearly related in English. *Anava* the spectrum *between* arrogance and self deprecation. That spectrum seeks to avoid the self-damage I just listed, to remind us that our lives are precious gifts. The usual Western assumption about humility is that it means to act in a way that is totally non-boastful and that always puts the self last, but that is not how Mussar, the Jewish spiritual practice of examining our personality traits, works.

As Dr. Greg Marcus put it in his 2016 book, *The Spiritual Practice of Good Actions*, “Mussar teaches that humility in balance also recognizes that sometimes it is okay to be boastful or to project oneself into a situation. In fact, sometimes it is required.” In other words, humility is not that your strengths are never to be shared, just that they shouldn’t lead you to think too much of yourself too much, think of yourself as better than others. It’s that you state what your talents are in order to share them, not to show them off. It’s to acknowledge how you matter to the fabric of the world.

It’s taking up exactly the right amount of space that I am supposed to--no more, *and no less*. In that way, it is like my serving of manna, exactly the right amount for me. I am to take the space I am supposed to, step up and fill the role that that space and my strengths afford me. And I am *only* to take the space that I am meant to, so that I do not prevent another from getting to the space *they* are to fill.

It's not that I don't matter, it's that you do, too. That's humility: I matter, and you matter.

We know the dangers of arrogance, and the frustration that we feel when we see others whom we perceive as thinking they matter too much (and rarely do we think that we ourselves are the arrogant ones, but that is a different sermon). This sermon is about the dangers of the self deprecation side of the humility scale.

I think our world is currently facing a social imbalance of humility. And I actually don’t think it’s because we’re skewing toward arrogance--I think it’s the opposite. We’ve siloed ourselves away, blocked out those who make us feel ignored, and allowed ourselves to think we don’t matter in the world. We’ve been suffering from loneliness and depression, and we don’t think we matter. Reports of anxiety, depression, and loneliness are at an all-time high. This leads to all of the consequences I listed earlier. And I think there’s one more consequence we might not expect: Selfishness.

We think ourselves too small to be noticed, cared about, we don’t matter...then my actions shouldn’t matter to you, either.

“If I don’t matter, then it doesn’t matter what I do. It’s my life, and it’s just me. It doesn’t affect anyone else.”

If I am certain, however misguided I may be in that certainty, that I don't matter to you, I might work harder to matter to myself, and therefore I will do whatever I want to make myself feel good, cared for, bolstered. And since I don't matter to you, I don't care if my actions do, either.

There is a famous story of a group of people on a boat, each with their own little space on that boat. One man begins drilling a hole in the bottom of the boat, and the others cry out to him, “What are you doing?! You will sink this whole ship! You’ll kill us all!”

The man responds saying, “What does it matter to you if I drill in my own space? I want a little water here. I’m not touching your spot, there’s no hole over there.”

“The water will come through from your space,” they say, “and into ours, sinking the whole ship.”

The man drilling the hole doesn’t realize that he matters to the whole, to the boat.

When we think too little of ourselves, we forget that our actions have consequences for others. We drill our own holes because “it shouldn’t be their business anyway.” When we think that even

God will forget about little old me when tomorrow's manna is sent, we decide to forget others, too. We look out for only ourselves, maybe we'll extend it to our tribe. Ironically, by thinking we don't matter to the world, we might actually slip back around to the arrogant and selfish side of the humility spectrum. We act only out of our own self-interest, even if it means others will suffer. We've decided we're too small to matter to them, and nevermind the consequences to others. It's not my personal fault, I'm just one person. I don't matter in the grand scheme of world history.

That, too, is *Anava P'sula*.

The opening verse of the Torah portion Re'eh, Deuteronomy 11:26, says,

רָאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרִכָּה וּקְלָלָה:

See, this day I set before you blessing and curse.

The command "see" is in the singular. Each of you, see. But "before you," is plural. *Each* of us is to see that blessing and curse is presented to *all* of us.

Kli Yakar, a commentator who lived in Prague in the late sixteenth century says that this verse teaches that each of us can tip the scales for all of us. We each matter. He spells it out further by suggesting that each time we have the opportunity to act, we should, for that moment, imagine that the entire world is standing at a perfect balance between good and bad. That the world's account is standing at exactly zero, with positives and negatives exactly cancelling one another out.

My next deed will make all the difference in the world. I am about to choose for all of us: blessing or curse?

Imagine what the world could look like if we behaved like *that!* I will admit, it sounds overwhelming. It seems like too much of the world is always on my shoulders alone. But I don't think Kli Yakar is trying to suggest that we each *are* always in that situation; I think he's trying to encourage each of us to behave *as though* we can tip the scales. Because if we each believe we are big enough to bring blessing to the world, together we will.

Throughout our Torah, we are reminded to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger. We are told to tithe our bounty, to recognize that some of what we produce--which is not the same as the gifts given to us in order for us to produce it--is to be shared. We are to be a part of a humanity that works together to choose blessing. We remember that even the most marginalized in our society *matter*.

I asked before what *anavah k'sheirah* would be. Kosher humility. It is simultaneously knowing that I am important and that I am not the center. I *do* matter, and that my mattering doesn't negate that others matter. I have to take care of myself and treat my life as the precious gift that it is, and protect it. And I have to remember that we are connected, that my actions affect you.

In other words, "It's my life, but it's not all about me."

Rabbi Simcha Bunam, a Hasidic rabbi who lived in the late eighteenth century, gave a classic teaching for how we balance these two things. He would tell his students to carry two slips of paper in their pockets. On one, they were to write, "I am but dust and ashes," and they were to look at it when they found their thinking a little too self-focused or self-aggrandizing. When they needed to be reminded that they were just one person, that their actions do affect others, and that they were not the only ones who mattered.

On the other paper, they were to write, "The whole world was created just for me," and they were to look at that one when they found that they felt a little too small, when they thought too little of themselves, forgetting they *did* matter in the world.

It's a tricky balance to walk, and one that has been made even harder in the last year and a half when we've felt more isolated, smaller and more out of control than ever. But I think we can, if we can carry those thoughts, and carry both sides.

It's my life, and it's not all about me.

It's my life. To paraphrase the great poetess Mary Oliver: It's my one wild and precious life! I must care for it. I must take care of myself. I must not think that I am too small to be cared for, that I do not deserve the full bounty of my gifts. I must use every drop of manna that God has given to me, because perhaps there's a reason *I* was the one to whom that particular morsel was given.

And, it's not all about me. I am not inferior to anyone else in God's eyes, but neither am I superior. I must remember that my actions affect others, that they may face similar struggles. I must be of service, remember that I am meant to give to others, share my bounty. I can tip the scales, and others will have to live with my choices.

I. Matter. It should be simultaneously the most affirming and the most overwhelming thing I ever tell myself.

Because if I forget that I matter, I will walk with *Anavah P'sulah*.

As we repent this Yom Kippur, may we repent all the times we forgot we mattered.

When I let it hurt me.

When I let it hurt you.

When I let it hurt us.

I matter.

You matter.

We matter.