

Please turn to page 62 in the Mahzor. The small print paragraph second from the bottom beginning with the word "l'olam" was originally a line of instructions, telling us to say the paragraphs that follow every morning upon awakening in order to practice reverence for God and truth. But the message of the two lines by themselves was so powerful, that they became incorporated into the Siddur as a meditation. I'd like to teach you a melody for L'olam. The niggun repeats itself, and I would ask you that when or if you are comfortable, please join in, create harmonies, and let yourself meditate on the meaning of the words.

[Sing "l'olam."]

Let's read the next two paragraphs together.

These two paragraphs lay out for us a dilemma. On one hand, we are nothing, and nothing we do makes a difference. Our lives are short and empty. On the other hand, by virtue of the covenant we have with God, our lives have meaning.

The dilemma is this: How important do we consider ourselves to be -- are we of infinite value or of no value?

Tending toward either extreme will impair our ability to function at our highest capacity. If we believe that our lives are of no value, such low self-esteem likely will leave us unmotivated to take any action or initiative to enhance our lives or the lives of our families or communities. On the other hand, when we see our lives as having infinite value, we recognize our power to make a difference, but we open ourselves to the possibility of falling into the trap of losing control over our egos.

We live out our lives on a narrow line between the the loneliness of self-abnegation, and the arrogance of unchecked ego.

The Hasidic Rabbi Simha Bunim of Pzisha suggested the following bit of wisdom to his disciples:

"Everyone must have two pockets, so he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are the words: Bishvili nivra ha-olam (from Sanhedrin 37a), 'For my sake was the world created,' and in his left: Anokhi Afar va-efer (from Gen. 18:27), 'I am dust and ashes.'" (Buber's Tales of the Hasidim, vol. 2, p. 249)

We exist as beings whose lives only makes a difference in the world if we project our inner existential lives out onto other people. If we lived entirely internal lives, we would live in absolute loneliness. We project ourselves onto the world of others because we can't stand the loneliness. But it is the unchecked projection of our selves onto others that leads us into arrogance -- when we don't realize or consider the negative effect that our projected personhood is having on others.

As the meditation and paragraphs we read together suggest, the character traits, or middot, of humility and truth are intertwined -- in order to prevent oneself from sinking into arrogance, one must have the fortitude to look at oneself without deception -- am I

self-centered? -- am I quick to criticize? -- am I condescending? -- am I quick to anger and slow to forgive? -- do I hold a grudge? -- do I look for ways to make problems and disagree? -- do I admit when I am wrong?

We should strive to criticize less and understand more -- we should try to see the goodness in the ideas with which we disagree -- we should be patient and learn from each person whose life touches our own -- we should freely admit when we have erred, and just as freely let go of anger when we have been wronged. Most of all, we should act as if the other person is the center and we are merely privileged to be present.

You might ask -- Why? Why be humble - what's the benefit? Is there a benefit to being humble, other than following in the path of God? As the prophet Micah said (6:8): "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God."

הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה-טוֹב וּמַה-ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לֶכֶת עִם-אֶלֶּהֶיךָ:

What's the harm in having a touch of arrogance, of being self-assured in taking pride in our accomplishments? Why is cultivating the midah of humility a better way to live one's life?

I'll answer by posing another question. Who would you rather spend time with: the person who talks incessantly about his/her job, honors received, awards won, accomplishments, children, etc., or the person who downplays himself/herself and shows sincere interest in you?

The Psalmist prayed for protection against people who think the world was created solely for themselves, that the normal rules don't apply to them, that everything and everybody exists for their sake:

Judge of the earth, punish the arrogant as they deserve. How long, Adonai, how long shall the wicked exult? Swaggering, boasting, they exude arrogance. They crush Your people, Adonai, and oppress Your own. Widows and strangers they slay; orphans they murder. They say, "Adonai does not see, the God of Jacob pays no heed."

That Psalmist could have been one of those in the New Orleans; in the city, the Convention Center or the Superdome following Hurricane Katrina. Life in New Orleans in Katrina's aftermath is a graphic demonstration of how civilized behavior might break down when the structures of society that rein in human impulses become paralyzed.

The violence -- assault, rape and murder -- could only have been committed by people who place their immediate need for self-gratification above all else. People who believe that if they need or simply want something, they have the right to take it. People who have no self-control -- if they are enraged, they release the anger on the next man or woman who dares to get in their way. This is arrogance, in the extreme.

Beware also of those who disguise arrogance with false humility. The Hasidic Rabbi

Meshulam Feivush taught:

We ought to strive to walk in the ways of truth, to serve God in Torah and prayer with sincere love without any self serving awareness, to attain truly to serve with awe (yir'a). It is false humility to say, who am I to attain such a level? Who am I to attempt to be as great as the most spiritually refined individuals? I will do as my parents did, my grandparents did, and that will be enough. Such humility is false and self serving -- merely a way to get out of serving God fully (Yosher Divre Emet #28).

How then do we authentically and truthfully assert our infinite value as human beings created in the image of God, while conducting ourself with true humility?

Bahya ibn Pakuda was a Jewish philosopher and rabbi who lived in Saragossa, Spain, in the first half of the eleventh century. In his work "Duties of the Heart," he outlines seven means of acquiring humility:

1. First, remember that the God created mosquitoes and gnats before human beings, so at the moment that we become excessively puffed up with our own self-importance, a lowly insect buzzing around our face can bring us back down to reality (adapted from Sanhedrin 38a).
2. Second, we must acknowledge our shortcomings and limitations. Be constantly aware of the fact that we are not perfect, and will always fall short if absolute perfection is our goal.
3. Third, remember that we are mortal. Our time is limited. Live your life each day with the question -- how do I want to be remembered after I am gone?
4. Fourth, how many of our accomplishments did we really do without help? Be grateful each day to those who gave us the opportunity to become who we are.
5. Fifth, the ultimate giver of our gifts is God -- take time each day to acknowledge the Divine Presence.
6. Sixth, live as if each action we take will be judged by a human and/or Divine court. This is, after all, a central metaphor of Rosh Hashanah.
7. Seventh, remember that no matter how carefully we plan, existence is unpredictable. Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, illness - the unexpected occurs, and we are ultimately powerless to stop it or even predict it.

Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto a Jewish philosopher and rabbi born in Padua, Italy, in the 17th century, added four more guidelines:

1. First, cultivate deference - don't insist on honor and entitlement and recognition.
2. Second, practice controlling anger - don't get angry and retaliate when you feel insulted or when you think you have not been recognized or honored sufficiently. Humility includes not needing to prove what intelligent, honorable people we are.
3. Third, appreciate being appreciated, but don't gauge your own personal worth by

the number of offices held or the length of your resume. Leadership is a mark of good citizenship, not a reward to be vainly displayed.

4. Fourth, make it a practice to honor and show appreciation to others. A Ladino proverb teaches, "Honor is more appropriate for those who share it than for those who hoard it."

I'd like to conclude with a true story, "A tale of two drivers" by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman (Jerusalem Post, 8/23/05):

I always knew that Israeli drivers were deranged, second only in madness to the Italians, so what happened did not shock me. What did shock me was the aftermath.

I was driving along a Jerusalem road when a car appeared on a small side street. The driver saw me, and I fully expected him to wait until I had passed. But he was impatient. He darted out in full throttle, made a screeching turn directly in front of me and sped down the road. Had I not swerved and slammed on my brakes he would have struck my car.

I was furious. I drove behind him, honking my horn repeatedly just to let him know that he was a fool. These demented Israeli drivers, I muttered to myself, always in a hurry, filled with hutzpa, oblivious to the dangers they pose to everyone around them.

The country is filled with driving schools, and no one knows how to drive.

It did not help alleviate my "road rage" when I noticed that his car was flying a blue ribbon – supporting disengagement – while I am a staunch man of orange. I also noticed that he was not wearing a kippa. Aha! This madman was a reckless secular supporter of the Gaza withdrawal. Wait until he stops at the next light, I'll give him a good tongue-lashing.

A moment later he stopped at the light. I pulled in beside him, rolled down my window, and motioned to him. He rolled down his window, ready for the confrontation. His wife, sitting beside him, cringed, expecting the worst.

I don't know what came over me at that moment, but, somehow, like a certain heathen prophet with whom I would rather not be compared, the words that emanated from my throat were not the ones I had thought I would utter. I said to him: "You have a blue ribbon and I have an orange one, but we are both Jews, right?"

Puzzlement spread over his face. "Most definitely," he said.

"And we both love Israel, right?"

"Sure." He was completely bewildered.

"Wonderful," I said as pleasantly as I could, a smile on my face. "May God bless you with all good things. May you have good fortune in all you do, good health and a long life."

His jaw dropped, and he looked at me as if I were a lunatic.

"Thank you, thank you," he finally blurted out.

Then, after a long pause, he added, “By the way, I apologize for what I did back there. It was stupid, and I am truly sorry” – which may enter the *Guinness Book of Records* as the first time in the history of mankind that a reckless Israeli driver apologized for anything.

The light turned green. He made a left turn, I a right. We went our separate ways.

The benefit of humility is the creation of a soul that knows itself well enough not to have to prove its worth to others. A soul which doesn't have to prove its worth is more likely to grow in wisdom and contentment. A contented soul is more likely to express gratitude to its spouse, parents, children, siblings, friends, and strangers with whom it comes into contact -- and in return will receive positive energy from them.

May we live lives of contentment and gratitude, with truth and wisdom and humility, and may we in turn receive the reward of a life of blessing.