

On Humility

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Erev Rosh HaShanah 2017

My husband Ron has introduced me to the joy of mountain biking. We have a beautiful, regular route at Brown's Ranch, just challenging enough and still fun. Except, that is, for the first 90 seconds. You've barely had time to process the fact that you're off road, on a bike, adjusting to pedaling and shifting, and suddenly there's a turn. A narrow turn. Between two rocks. Going uphill.

I've probably attempted this climb 50 times. I have successfully transited this spot and remained on the bike about 5 times. Let me tell you, mountain biking is a humbling experience.

As we enter into this High Holiday season, humility is at the forefront of our spiritual agenda. Our culture is plagued with examples of extreme arrogance. Our own spiritual accounting and humble consideration of our own shortcomings is the antidote to the pervasive temptation of arrogance. Jewish teaching emphasizes humility as the foundation of character. As we assess the ways in which we would hope to grow, humility is really the only appropriate response.

One of the great things about this particular mountain bike trail is that it is less rocky than others. But that doesn't mean that there are no rocks. There is no

such thing as a path through the mountains, or through life, for that matter, that does not contain rocks. The only question each of us faces is how we will traverse the rocks we encounter. If we're lucky, we can glide over them, experience a little bumpiness, and keep going. As we look within and set goals for our own character development, it is inevitable that the path will not be completely smooth. And that's okay.

Sometimes there are so many rocks that you just can't get over them. If you're an experienced rider like Ron, you might be comfortable continuing to ride. If you're a novice as I am, it is a sign of both wisdom and humility to dismount and walk until I reach smoother ground. Knowing what you CAN do and what you CAN'T do, knowing what you know and admitting what you don't know, this is what it means to be humble.

It has been humbling for me to be in the role of a rank beginner. Most of my life is spent in an arena where I am the teacher and others are the students, where I am the subject matter expert. Humility requires taking a step back so that I can listen and learn. And, it requires Ron to step forward and be in that leadership role - which he does, by the way, with kindness and expertise. It is not arrogance for a leader to lead.

Listening to others is a vital part of humility. The sages say that Hillel's opinions prevailed over those of his rival, Shammai, because Hillel and his students were willing to humbly study points of view with which they disagreed. "Who is wise?" ask the sages. "The person who learns from everyone." Perhaps as an exercise during these Aseret Y'May Teshuvah, these 10 Days of Repentance, you can make it a practice to identify one positive trait you see in each person that you encounter, one area in which their level exceeds yours. This will not only inculcate humility, it will inspire you to grow spiritually.

Mountain biking has brought new meaning to the expression - don't get in a rut. I always thought that a rut meant the boredom of a tedious routine. After some serious rain, I encountered serious ruts on the trail. I discovered that trying to ride in a rut is frightening. The narrow confines of that rut are a harrowing place. The High Holidays are a good time to reflect on our lives and where we may find ourselves in a rut. Getting out of a rut may not be easy, yet, surprisingly, it may also lead us to a smoother ride.

We are blessed to live among glorious mountains. When we reach the summit, the views uplift our souls. However, there is only one way to reach those heights, and that is to climb. Ascending from the base of a steep incline requires fortitude, perseverance, strength, and, the right gear. When we reflect on the

year that is drawing to a close and contemplate the inevitable challenges of the year ahead, we want to engage all the support we can, from family, from community, from our own innate gifts, so that we can make it up the hill and revel in the view.

The mountain biker who is traveling up the hill has the unspoken right of way. We recognize that going uphill is not easy, so we yield to support them in their climb. We humbly recognize that we can't do it alone - we need each other. I am so grateful when another rider sees me struggling up a hill, and they politely and patiently wait at the top for me to pass, sometimes even adding a word of encouragement.

When I was first learning the art of mountain biking, I crossed paths with a woman on the trail who said, "We all start somewhere." Humbling and touching and a beautiful reminder of the tremendous impact we can have just by reaching out to each other with a kind word.

Passing other riders on the trail is a unique challenge. Mussar, the study of Jewish ethics of character development defines humility as occupying, "No more than my place, no less than my space." Mussar is a centuries' old practice of introspection that focuses on the individual soul curriculum as it relates to various traits such as gratitude, patience, equanimity, generosity, trust, and others. If you

are intrigued by Mussar, by the way, consider registering for our fall class, “Seeking Everyday Holiness.”

As I understand humility from a Mussar perspective, humility means that we should be sensitive to those around us and make sure that each person receives the appropriate measure of attention and focus in a group situation. Do you know someone who seems to take over a room when they enter? Who dominates the conversation? Who can’t seem to listen to others and who always has a personal anecdote in every situation? That is not the way of humility, of anavah. When a mountain biker passes me at breakneck speed, in my mind they are taking up more than their place. Arrogance, not humility.

No less than my space. Humility does not equal low self-esteem. It is important to be conscious of our own strengths. We will need them in order to overcome our weaknesses! Lack of awareness of our capabilities leads to inaction and missed opportunities. We each have something to contribute to the common good, we each have the capability of growing. That’s what these High Holy Days are all about.

Humility DOES mean recognizing that our talents are gifts from God. As Alan Morinis, founding director of the Mussar Institute, expresses it, “. . .being

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

Humility means seeing our gifts as blessings and using them in service to others. Moses was known as the most humble man who ever lived. How can that be? The man we know as the greatest leader and prophet of all time? Moses' closeness to God ensured that he was constantly aware of his own limitations, as we should be, especially at this High Holiday season. We read in the *Orchot Tzaddikim*, The Ways of the Righteous, that "All of the good things I do are but a drop in the ocean in comparison to what I ought to do."

Humility means recognizing others for their strengths and talents. Bachya ibn Pakuda famously taught that he never met a person in whom he didn't find at least one quality in which that person was superior. "If he was wiser than I was, I would say, 'Because of his superior wisdom, he must revere God more than I do.' And if he was inferior to me in wisdom, I would say, 'On the Day of Judgment, he will be held less accountable than I will, because my transgressions were committed with knowledge and intent, while his were committed unwittingly.' If he was older than I was, I would say, 'His merits must exceed mine, since he came into the world before me.' If he was younger, I would say, 'His demerits are fewer than mine.'"

Take a moment now to think about any negative feelings about others that you might be about to carry into the new year. Imagine that individual standing in front of you? Pirke Avot teaches us that the wise person is the one who learns from everyone. What can you learn from this person, as challenging as they may be?

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin quotes the question of an 18th century rabbi, who wonders--if humility is so important, why isn't it one of the 613 commandments? Good question, right? Well - try to imagine someone saying a blessing along the lines of, "Behold, I am about to fulfill the mitzvah of being humble." It's like a catch 22. Rabbi Telushkin's grandfather was a rabbi who observed a prominent person in the congregation who would intentionally take a humble seat in the rear of the synagogue and then furtively look around to see if others noticed his humility. Rabbi Telushkin's grandfather approached this prominent person as follows, "It would be better for you to sit in the front of the synagogue and think you should be sitting in the back, than to sit in the back of the synagogue and think you should be sitting in the front."

Humility is especially important for those in leadership roles. Thus, the cantor entered this evening's service with the Hineni prayer, confessing his unworthiness and asking God's help as he prepares to lead the congregation.

“Here I am. So poor in deeds I tremble in fear, overwhelmed and apprehensive. . .

Although unworthy, I rise to pray and seek Your favor for Your people Israel.”¹

So many obstacles on the mountain biking trail - deep sand that causes our wheels to sink in place, impeding any forward movement. Precarious turns where we think we are moving in one direction and suddenly have to shift. Will I have enough water and what if there is a mechanical problem? Can I let go and trust the equipment to carry me safely home? Sometimes the only thing to do is come to a complete halt - like when there is a rattlesnake lounging across the path in front of you. Perhaps the High Holidays are the time when we come to a complete halt and give ourselves the luxury of a period of time to contemplate where we are and where we are going.

And then, there are the glorious moments! The weather is perfect, the trail is smooth and glides over rolling hills, the views are spectacular and the desert is alive in all its glory. As we enter the year 5778, I wish you all of these blessings, and the humility to keep pedaling even when life is less than perfect. May those times be few and far between.

¹ Mishkan Hanefesh, NY: CCAR Press, 2015, p. 17