


# *Pinchas*

## *Humility, Challenges, and Potentiality*

ne of the prime religious values that is stressed over and over again in our tradition is humility. We speak about Moshe Rabbeinu as being a very humble man, but what does it mean to be humble? So many people have the wrong idea as to what it means to be humble. Some people think that to be humble means that when people compliment you on a good job that you have done, you should say, "No, no, no. It was not a good job." That is not being humble. That is being a liar. We are commanded in the *Torah* not to lie even about ourselves. If we have done a good job and everybody acknowledges that we have done a good job, then we should just say thank you and let it go at that. We should not make ourselves out to be a nothing, and we should most certainly not lie about our own achievements.

Other people think that being humble means that when people ask you to take upon yourself a job, you should say, "No, no, I cannot do that. I do not know if I have the ability or knowledge or strength to do such a thing." This, too, is not being humble. This usually just means that you feel inferior, that you do not feel up to the challenge. Sometimes it is true that you may not have the knowledge or ability to attack a particular job. If you cannot carry a tune, you most certainly must not accept a job as the lead tenor in an opera, but most of the time when people say that they are not up to a job, it is because they feel inferior. This feeling of inferiority inevitably leads to depression and can lead to other very serious psychological problems. Being humble does not mean that you should think that you are not worthy to take up the challenges that ordinary people have to take upon themselves every day. Failure to take upon yourself these challenges usually means that you are suffering from either depression or feelings of inferiority.

When we talk about humbleness, we are not talking about past achievements. We are talking about our potential. An arrogant, vain person, the opposite of a humble person, is one who is so proud of his past achievements that he wants constantly to be honored and praised for what he has accomplished in the past without any recognition that even he could have done better in the past and that he most certainly can do better in the

future. None of us has ever reached our full potential. A humble person acknowledges that he has done good things in the past, but he knows that he could have even done better in the past and that he can most certainly do greater things in the future. He acknowledges that he has not lived up to his potential. An arrogant person wants to rest on his laurels and be treated as someone different and special because he has accomplished so much in the past and can probably maintain his current level of achievement in the future. A humble person is thankful to G-d because He has given him the abilities he has and acknowledges that he has done good things in the past, but he knows that he could have done so much more. He never shirks from a challenge, even though this may mean that he may fail, and he recognizes that, based upon his potential, he has not hardly done enough, that in the future he can do so much more.

During the past few weeks, we have all been caught up with Rocket mania. Nobody ever thought that the Houston Rockets would make it to the NBA basketball finals. After all, they finished sixth in the west. One of their major players was injured; another left the team. They captured the imagination of the whole city. Their game rose to a new level and, of course, their star player, Hakeem Olajuwon, scored over 40 points in many games. However, it should be noted that he missed half his shots, and that he missed quite a few of his foul shots from the free throw line, also. It is true he is a great player, but even he has not lived up to all his potential. Perhaps if he worked harder, he could make 60% or 70% or even 80% of his shots. This is similar to Babe Ruth. In the same year that he set his record for the most homeruns which stood for many years, he also struck out more times than any other player had up to then.

Being humble does not mean that you do not acknowledge your past successes. It just means that you recognize that *vis a vis* your potential you have not accomplished everything you could have. It also means that you do not shirk from challenges by saying that this job is too much for you. In almost every instance you do have the potential to rise to the challenges, but if you do not meet a particular challenge, it does not mean that you should not try again. It means the exact opposite, that you should try again. After all, Hakeem Olajuwon makes only about 50% of his shots.

This same idea is stressed in the *Torah* portion *Pinchas*. In the *Torah*

portion *Pinchas* we learn how the Jewish people are counted right before they enter into the land of Israel. They have just suffered a devastating plague in the aftermath of a rebellion against G-d and Moshe led by Zimri Ben Saluh, who was the head of a subclan of the Tribe of Shon. He publicly took a Midianite princess, Kozbi, the daughter of Tzur, and performed a sexual licentious act of worship to Baal Peor in front of the whole people. Zimri felt that since they were about to enter into the land of Canaan, they should act as all the nations in that region. Perhaps they could maintain a few Jewish ideas but, basically, in order not to have friction with the nations around Israel, the Jewish people had to adapt the ways of the nations around Israel; otherwise, there would be constant warfare. He, of course, was wrong. The Jewish people are supposed to be a unique and special people. If we are to be just like everyone else, then why should we exist? We should just meld and assimilate into all the other peoples. Many Jews made a terrible mistake. They followed Zimri Ben Saluh. G-d got angry and sent a plague, and twenty-four thousand people died in this plague. Immediately after the plague, a census was ordered of the Jewish people. Moshe and Eliezer are commanded to lift up the heads of all the congregation of Israel.

This is the first time a census has been held among the Jewish people for almost 39 years. When the Jewish people left Egypt, they were counted three times in the first 13 months, and then they were not counted again for almost 39 years. Why should this be so? What's more, a strange word is used for counting. We do not use the normal word *Manah* or *Pokad*, but the word "*Seuh*," "lift up." Also, we know that all the tribes were counted from 20 years and up except for the Levites who were counted from one month up. When Moshe was first commanded to count the Levites from one month up in the *Torah* portion *Bamidbar* (when the Jewish people were counted for the third time in 13 months from their exodus from Egypt), Moshe, according to Rashi, complained to G-d. He said, "How can I count the Levites from one month up? After all, it is not modest for me to enter into their homes. The women may be nursing their little babies at that time." G-d told Moshe not to worry. All he had to do was to stand outside the Levites' homes and G-d would tell him how many people were inside. If this was so, why did Moshe have to bother to count the people at all?

G-d could have just told Moshe how many people were in each tribe. G-d obviously knew.

The purpose, though, in the counting was not just to know how many Jews there were. The purpose of the counting was to lift up the heads of the people, to convince the people that they had potential. The Jewish people had been counted immediately after they left Egypt to convince them that they were worthy, that they had potential to live as free people and to fulfill G-d's mission for them to be a model of moral living to the rest of the world. One of the hardest things to convince a slave people is that they are not inferior. I remember here even in the United States when segregation lifted, what a hard time people had convincing their maids to sit in the front seat of the car or to eat with them. These maids felt inferior, and it took quite a while for them to get used to the fact that they were as good as everyone else. The second time the Jewish people were counted was after the sin of the golden calf. The Jewish people had made a major mistake. G-d wanted to assure them that He still loved them and cared for them and that, in spite of this terrible mistake, they still had potential and should go on trying. They should not feel that the task was too hard for them. The third time that G-d counted the Jewish people was after the Temple had been in operation for a month. The Jewish people now were conversant with the Temple services and what it required. They knew that they could make many mistakes. They felt, so to speak, humbled by the experience. They did not know whether they could do it day in and day out. Also, the first anniversary of the giving of the *Torah* to them was coming up in a month, and they were not sure that they could continue to keep the laws of the *Torah*. G-d assured them that they had the potential. They should not feel inferior. They should not have a false sense of humility and feel that they were not equal to the challenge.

In our *Torah* portion, too, the Jewish people had just committed a major mistake, but G-d immediately counts them to let them know that, in spite of their mistake, they should continue. We should never feel that because we may have made mistakes, even major ones, that we should not continue to meet the challenges of life, especially our Jewish challenges. Yes, we may make mistakes in the future, too, but this should not cause us to feel inferior or cause us to withdraw from life or become depressed.

This is false humility, not true humility. True humility means that I am going to persevere and try to do better even if I have made mistakes in the past. True humility means that even if I have had great successes in the past, I cannot rest on my laurels, but instead, it means that I must look to the future and realize that I have not fulfilled all my potential. I cannot become arrogant or complacent. There is still so much to be done. I may have achieved many of my goals and even have received many awards, but there is so much more I could do.

A truly religious person has to be a humble person because he knows that he could always do better. None of us should ever shirk from the challenges at hand. We should always realize that, even if we make mistakes, we should never stop trying to live up to our potential. None of us should ever withdraw from life because we are afraid to make mistakes or withdraw from life because we think we have done enough, but, instead, we should continue to strive to fulfill our potential. We have been assured that if we will do so, we will truly be able to create a better world so that the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.