

Elie Wiesel Archive

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In the tractate of *Kiddushin*, which deals with all legal aspects of marriage, we come across an intriguing yet moving tale about the great sage Rabbi Tarfon, known for his learning and modesty, as well as for his profound, all-absorbing love for his mother. We are told that whenever she wanted to get into bed, he would kneel so that she could put her feet on his back. He would do the same when she wished to get out of bed. In case you are wondering about the source of this story, the answer is provided in the text. [00:01:00]

It was he himself, Rabbi Tarfon, who told it. In fact, the text even relays the circumstances of his telling it. One day, he came to the *beit midrash*, the house of study, where a lively discussion was going on about a commandment of *Kibud Av V'Eim* ordering us to honor our parents, when he boasted of his scrupulous way of observing that commandment. But the sages were not impressed. "Oh," they said, "you did not do even half of what the commandment expects you to do." And they added a strange question: "Has your mother ever thrown her handbag into the sea without your making her feel ashamed?" In other words,

has your mother ever [00:02:00] been in a capricious mood in your presence without feeling bad or childish?

If Rabbi Tarfon replied, there is no record of it in Talmudic literature. From what we know of his character, we may surmise, however, that he swallowed his colleagues' ambiguous reaction in silence. Still, there are questions raised by this episode one cannot ignore. One: is it conceivable that the renowned and respected Rabbi Tarfon, a teacher and close friend of the greatest scholars of his time, boasted of something good he had done? Namely, fulfilling one of the 10 commandments given by the almighty God at Sinai? Since when may one take pride from obeying God's will? Two: how is one to explain [00:03:00] the quasi-patronizing attitude of his peers in the house of study? Where is the connection between his words and theirs? Between his infinite respect for his mother and their seemingly supercilious question about her handbag? Where is the logic in all that? And three: why does the Talmud tell us this tale? Just to demonstrate that in its dialogues, one may say anything to anyone? Perhaps to defend rigorous interpretation of the law, or to warn us against it?

We shall return to Rabbi Tarfon, for he is our guest of honor tonight. Is it because he symbolizes the necessity of the son

to behave humbly towards his mother, and towards other scholars? If [00:04:00] humility is a trademark, it is not his alone. It is, one might say, what all sages have in common. Naturally, they all share an irresistible thirst for truth and piety, but this can only blossom in an atmosphere of humility. Let a single trace of pride be added to the quest, and it will lead to self-delusion and hypocrisy. It is about a vain person that God says, "He and I cannot dwell under the same roof." Where vanity appears, the spirit of God, the *Shekhinah*, recedes, leaving frustration and distortion in its wake.

Still, humility is not specifically mentioned in the [00:05:00] 613 commandments in the Torah. There are so many of them, dealing with so many areas of human behavior. Humility doesn't figure in the list. Nowhere is it written that men and women must be humble. The reason for its absence may be that all *mitzvot*, all commandments, are to be fulfilled consciously. One must think of what one does, and why. That is why we say words such as *hineni muchan u'mezuman* or *l'shem yichud*, certain prayers that we are ready to do what we are going to do, before doing certain things, or before uttering certain prayers. When you recite the blessing over wine and bread, you think of its meaning. You are aware of the moment, marked [00:06:00] by your desire to find grace in the eyes of God. Moreover, you try to

deepen your awareness and your commitment by pushing yourself to climb higher and come closer to the source of all beginnings.

Following this logic, one may say that if humility were a mitzvah, I would have to sense His presence in me, be it in order to strengthen its appeal, but then, whoever says, "Ach, look how modest I am. Look how humble I am. How can you compare your humility to mine?" (laughter) Whoever says that, proves the opposite. In other words, when humility is conscious, it is inevitably false. True humility lies in the subconscious.

Surely you have heard about the holy man, who on Yom Kippur eve, comes to the synagogue to do penance. He falls to his knees, [00:07:00] beats his breasts, and pleads with God to forgive him his sins. "Have pity on my soul, oh master of the universe, who am I? A weak and vulnerable creature, I am worth nothing, a nobody." One of the synagogue's dignitaries hears him and decides that what is good for the rabbi is good for him. So he, too, falls to his knees, asks for forgiveness, and cries out, "Forgive my occasional misconduct, oh lord, who am I? A nobody. A nobody, I am telling you." As he is about to leave, he hears the *shamas*, the poor beadle of the congregation, repeating the same litany: "I am nobody, I am nobody." Disdainful, the

dignitary shrugs his shoulders and says, "Look at him. Oykh a gornisht." (laughter) "Look who calls himself a nobody."

(laughter)

But let us take, as an example of true humility, Moses, whose penchant for [00:08:00] and dimension of solitude we explored last week. What does the text say about him? "*V'ha'ish Moshe anav mi'kol adam.*" "And the man Moses was most humble, the most humble of men in the world." And this verse follows the passage in which Miriam and Aaron say some unkind things about their famous brother. They resent his special status with his many privileges. Who does he think he is? Hasn't he married a black woman? God speaks to him, so what? Hasn't God spoken to us as well? It is then, then, that God declares Moses to be the most humble man on earth. But what is the connection? This compliment belongs somewhere, God must say about Moses [00:09:00] something good about him, having punished him so often, having pained him so frequently. He must say that, that *Moses anav mi'kol adam.* But why now? Why here? Only because, because Miriam and Aaron have said nasty things about their brother?

I believe that the connection is there. I believe that Moses' humility has much to do with his brother's and sister's

criticism. I believe that Moses was nearby when his brother and sister gossiped about him. He heard them. His possible reaction? He may have thought to himself, "Well, they may be right. I may be unworthy." Therein lies his humility, [00:10:00] that he thought, "Maybe they were right." Therefore, he is not even angry at them. How could he be, if they told the truth? God is angry at Aaron. God is angry at Miriam. Not Moses. God is especially angry at Aaron and Miriam because of Moses' inner doubts. That is why God pays tribute to his unusual, rare, unique humility. Indeed, Moshe Rabbeinu, our teacher and master, was and is humble. And we are all his pupils.

So tonight, we shall speak about humility in the Talmud, and before doing so, just a small parenthesis. As always, when we discuss the Talmud, this session [00:11:00] is devoted, dedicated, to the memory of *HaRav* Saul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, of blessed memory, one of the greatest scholars of his generation and many others. A man whom I owe all I know. I have studied with him, as I have said it here once, for 17 years, and there wasn't a day that we didn't talk, and if the law in the Talmud says that a disciple should mourn over the death of his teacher as he mourns over the death of his father,

I know what the law means, because that is how a disciple -- that I am -- mourns Rabbeinu Saul Lieberman.

Two, once more I would like you to feel what I feel when we approach Talmudic exegesis. [00:12:00] It is ecstasy. The beauty in the Talmud is something that cannot be surpassed, cannot, because there is so much in it, so much truth and so much fervor, and so much humanity. Whatever we have learned until now in the last 28 or 29 years is *tipa min hayam*, only a drop, that one could lift from the sea. For Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, was our teacher, and when we study either Torah or Talmud, we are his good students, and therefore it is incumbent upon us to follow his example. Our sages urges man to be *hatzna lechet*, *shfal ruach*, and *anavim*, meaning modest and humble, but not timid. [00:13:00] The Talmud wants us to fight timidity. A timid person cannot learn anything. So, in the name of Moses, don't be timid. Those of you who are waiting outside, come in.

(pause)

[00:14:00] Well, we just quoted from the *Pirkei Avot*, from ethics of our fathers, a saying, "*Lo habayshan lamed*," which means, in fact, that timidity can become an obstacle to learning. If I am bashful, I may not dare to ask questions, and

surely not to demand answers. Timidity in Hebrew means *bayshanut*, which derives from the word *busha*, shame. That does not mean that a bashful person should feel ashamed. It means, perhaps, that it is a shame for a person to be bashful.

(laughter)

Timidity is different from humility. The two are not necessarily compatible. One can be humble without being bashful at all. [00:15:00] Let us look at Rabbi Tarfon. Was he humble? Yes. Was he timid? No. You want proof? Listen to another Talmudic tale. When Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, four old men -- that is how sages are described in the Talmud -- a sage means like an old man. So they all came to visit him. Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Tarfon was the first to speak. "You are better than a drop of rain," he said, "for a drop of rain is beneficial in this early world alone, whereas you, your teaching is beneficial in both this world and the world to come." And then the others followed.

Another story. When Rabbi Yishmael lost his children, [00:16:00] four old men came to comfort him. Rabbi Tarfon, Jose HaGelili, the Galilean, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Tarfon was once again the first to speak. This

time, words of comfort, of condolence, of consolation. And a third legend. While studying in Rabbi Tarfon's native town, he was born in Lod -- Lud in the Talmud -- he and other teachers were attempting to answer a simple but urgent question. What is better for human beings, or for man, the generic word man: study or action? Rabbi Tarfon didn't wait. Once again, his answer was heard first: action.

What strikes us in all three cases is Rabbi Tarfon's assertiveness. [00:17:00] Why is he so impatient? He's always the first to take the floor. The first to intervene at the debates. Where, then, is his humility? Did he see himself as a leader or spokesman? He, who was never elected to the presidency of any academy? Did he consider himself more erudite than Rabbi Akiva? More able in Halacha than Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah? More eloquent than Rabbi Jose the Galilean? True, he was probably older than most of them. But was that a valid reason to go to the head of the line on every occasion?

Perhaps to understand him better, it's time to open his file. Rich with legal opinions and biblical interpretations, it is poor in biographical data. We know nothing about his father, but quite a lot about his relationship to [00:18:00] his mother. He had an uncle called Shimshon, but did he have brothers or

sisters? That we don't know. His name, "Tarfon," derives from the Greek word "Tryphon." In those days, it was not uncommon for parents to give their sons Greek or Roman names, like Alexander, Symmachus, Antigonus, Hyrkanos, or Marion. In parentheses, it may be of interest to note that certain Jewish names, biblical names, are not to be found in the Talmud, such as Abraham, or Moshe, or Aaron -- there is no Rabbi Aaron, there is no Rabbi Moshe, in the Talmud. Is it that Jewish parents of that time were too much in awe to use the names of the first believer, the first lawmaker, and the first high priest in Jewish history?

Born approximately 20 years before the destruction of the temple, [00:19:00] Rabbi Tarfon died about 50 years later. Dates in the Talmud often lack precision. What is certain is that he was alive and well while the temple was at the center of Jewish life in Palestine. Equally certain is that he witnessed its destruction. And yet, he rarely, if at all, spoke of it. One cannot help but be intrigued by his silence. Why didn't he ever refer to the destruction that he had witnessed, the tragedy of the Jewish people, the national catastrophe? The victims, the children dying in the street? Was it simply a matter of shyness? Did he feel unable or unworthy to speak about a catastrophe of such magnitude? And the same applies to his

personal tragedies. He says nothing about the death of his wife, and later, [00:20:00] of his children. Is it that he had too much to say? That he lived in the shadow of pain and tragedy is clear from descriptions of certain events in his life. After the death of his wife, he married her sister, and asked her to take care of his children. And they must have died young, because there is no indication of the circumstances. One of his daughters must have been married, since there is a strange legend about a grandson of Rabbi Tarfon. Listen.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the patriarch or president, you know, the editor of the Mishnah, arrived in Rabbi Tarfon's native town. When he was with his local disciples, he inquired whether a son of Rabbi Tarfon lived there, adding that he, Rabbi Tarfon, whom he called *tzadik*, a just man, had brought much harm to his children. [00:21:00] Harm? Well, let's open brackets of a story within a story. Rabbi Tarfon used to swear. And his swearing was, "I swear on the life of my children." To prove that his opinion was correct. His peers didn't appreciate this kind of argument, hence the criticism by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who wanted to know if at least one son had survived the curse. (laughter)

"No," his informers told him, "his sons died. But a son of his daughter lives here," they said. "And," the informers told him -- well, I have to swallow before continuing. Because he said, "All the prostitutes who make two coins per customer give him the double" -- and according to [00:22:00] another version, "twice the double" -- "for his services." Well -- (laughter) Rabbi Yehudah asked to see him, and made him an astonishing offer. He said, "Repent, and I will give you my daughter for a wife." One version tells us that Rabbi Tarfon's grandson accepted the proposal, married Rabbi Yehudah's daughter, then divorced her. The second version claims that he refused to marry her altogether, for he didn't want people to think that it was because of a woman that he repented. (laughter)

Both versions agree that he did repent. Orphaned of his father just as his children were of their mother, Rabbi Tarfon showed great compassion to all orphans. "To bring up an orphan," he would say, "is to fulfill all the time the mitzvah of [00:23:00] *tzedakah*, of charity." Now, we know already how attached he was to his mother, whom he revered more than any other person around him. One Shabbat, he saw one of her sandals fall off as she took a walk outside. Since the law of Shabbat observants forbade him to pick it up, he bent down and spread his hands out

under her feet, so that she could walk on them until she reached her home, and after that, until she climbed up to her bed.

Later, when he became ill, great masters came to pay him a sick call. And the mother said to them, "Please pray for my son Tarfon. Pray for him, for he treats me with extreme care and honor." When asked to elaborate, she told of the incident with the sandal. That she threw her sandal into the sea. [00:24:00] However, here again, the sages were not impressed, and to his mother they said, "Had he done that, what he did, a thousand times, he still wouldn't have fulfilled half the biblical commandment about honoring one's parents." There I go again. I fail to understand Rabbi Tarfon's distinguished colleagues. What do they want from him? (laughter)

What motivated them to diminish Rabbi Tarfon, to put him down? And in the presence of his mother at that? With him being sick? Was it to show that impartiality to a man who was not only learned but also wealthy? For Rabbi Tarfon was wealthy. In fact, he was known also for his considerable wealth. One day, the sages sought to define [00:25:00] the essential attributes of a rich man. Today it's easy. We know who is poor. We don't know who is rich, but it's all right. (laughter)

So the sages had a discussion. One said, "Rich is he whose riches make him happy." Another said, "Rich is he who is satisfied with what he has." But Rabbi Tarfon offered a definition so concrete that it suits Wall Street better than any Talmudic academy. Said he, "Rich is he who possesses a hundred fields, a hundred vineyards, and a hundred employees working in them."

Another example: a discussion was going on in the academy over the quality of oil to be used for Shabbat candles. All said any oil would do, if it gives light. But Rabbi Tarfon insisted on the best quality available. But what about those [00:26:00] poor Jewish families that had to be satisfied with petrol? Was it because of his wealth that Rabbi Tarfon's psychology was that of the affluent? Now, does this apparent insensitivity to less fortunate explain why, at times, one feels that some sages bore him some obscure resentment? In those times, the wealthy scholars were few. Many made their living as cobblers, masons, or physicians. Where, then, did Rabbi Tarfon make his fortune? Probably he inherited it. And since he was not particularly generous with his money, he must have aroused envy and discontent. More than one source emphasizes his avarice, if not his greed. One text mentions unpleasant rumors spread about him. For instance, [00:27:00] that as a priest, he received

terumah, a kind of charity reserved for the priestly caste, each day, even after the destruction of the temple. Was it due to the pressure of public opinion that he announced his decision to distribute among the poor all the special payments he received for *pidyon haben*, from parents who had to redeem their firstborn sons with money given to the priest, to him?

The story goes that Rabbi Akiva felt compelled to use a subterfuge to get some of his money to the needy. Now listen how. One day, Rabbi Akiva offered Rabbi Tarfon a business proposition. Or according to another version, it was Rabbi Tarfon who asked Rabbi Akiva to help him with a business deal. What was the deal? To purchase some real estate, some fields, which sounded like a good investment. [00:28:00] So Rabbi Tarfon gave his friend 4,000 golden coins with which to conclude the transaction. After a while, Rabbi Tarfon asked his new agent, "Where is my property?" "Come, Rabbi," Rabbi Akiva answered. "Come with me." And he took him to a *beit midrash*, where pupils studied psalms, especially works about great wealth being distributed among the poor. "This is your property," said Rabbi Akiva, showing, pointing at the disciples. Was Rabbi Tarfon a good loser, or did he have a good sense of humor? He kissed his friend on his forehead and said, "Rabbi *Alufi*, my teacher in wisdom and my master in *Derech Eretz*, in good

manners, in respect for the other." And right there, he gave him more money to give away as *tzedakah*.

The Talmud which relays this episode does not conceal the astonishment. If this is so, [00:29:00] why, then, do people reproach Rabbi Tarfon his lack of generosity? Doesn't he give enough? And the Talmud answers. "He gives a lot, but not enough for a man of his means." Apparently, as we shall see, the sage had his favorite charities, just like the rest of us. One day, while Rabbi Tarfon and his disciple were engaged in study, he noticed a bride passing by. Was she alone?

Distressed? Without hesitating, he asked his wife and his daughters to take her inside, wash her, perfume her, dress her in beautiful clothes, give her precious jewels, and dance before her, as is the law according to the school of Hillel, and accompany her to her husband.

In general, he felt compassion for victims of society, and despair. Once, the young son of a certain Guranus [00:30:00] ran away from school, and, feeling his father's anger, he threw himself into a well, and died. The case was brought before Rabbi Tarfon: what was one to do with his body? The strict law is harsh for suicides. It forbids burial within the cemetery proper, and the family is not allowed to mourn. Here, Rabbi

Tarfon showed his kindness. The victim was young, he said, so young he was not in his right mind, and so he was entitled to the rituals due someone who died of natural causes.

Like Rabbi Akiva, on occasion, he too knew how to use his cleverness to help others overcome sadness. Listen to what he did during a period of famine. He married, fictitiously of course, 300 women. So, as the [00:31:00] wives of a priest, they were entitled to receive their share of charity. In a more topical vein, here is one more item. A fierce humanist, he opposed capital punishment. Like Rabbi Akiva, he said, "If I were a member of the Sanhedrin, no man would be executed, ever." And this drew bitter commentary from the academy president, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who said, "With this kind of moderation, one encourages bloodshed."

Many of his legal opinions are related to priestly duties and privileges. He himself was a priest, not only on his father's side, but also on his mother's. Often he would evoke his origins to support his wives. But also his views. With Rabbi Akiva, apparently his favorite debater, he argued one day that the law requiring [00:32:00] priests performing services in the temple to be without any physical blemish. Rabbi Tarfon's position was more lenient than Rabbi Akiva's. "I remember," he

said, "seeing my lame uncle blow the shofar in the temple courtyard." Unconvinced, Rabbi Akiva explained that it must have been during an assembly, not a sacrificial ritual. There is a difference. When sacrifice is involved, the slightest physical imperfection is enough to keep the priest away. At that point, Rabbi Tarfon exclaimed with admiration and affection, "I was there," he said. "I was there. I saw, I heard everything. And you weren't even present. All you have is your power of interpretation, and yet you know more than I. Akiva, Akiva," he said. "Whoever leaves you is as if he left life itself." [00:33:00]

This, I suggest, is true humility. How many scholars are willing to give up their ideas in the heat of debate? Rabbi Tarfon easily admitted the validity of his opponent's views. Actually, more often than not, his positions rarely gain acceptance in the academy. It doesn't matter to him. He's neither offended nor angry. And yet, his spiritual and intellectual qualities are duly recognized and recorded. Rabbi Tarfon once stated that in matters of man-woman relations, one is never careful and strict enough. "Hence," he said, "one must not even stay alone with his own mother-in-law." He added that this applied to himself as well. The rigidity of the statement made one student smile in disbelief, [00:34:00] and soon after,

for succumbing to desire, and committing a sin with his mother-in-law, he was punished. The student, not Rabbi Tarfon.

Another time, an adversarial student asked Rabbi Tarfon a question knowing he would be unable to answer it. An angry Rabbi Akiva reprimanded the student, "I can see how happy you are to have embarrassed your teacher. I would not be surprised to learn that your time is now limited." That exchange took place around Passover. When Shavuot arrived seven weeks later, the student was no longer among the living. Note that it was Rabbi Akiva, not Rabbi Tarfon, who predicted the punishment. I insist, "predicted," not caused, nor willed. Having both proclaimed a strong opposition to death sentences, [00:35:00] but Rabbi Akiva knew that to hurt a sage is to offend the honor of Torah. When sages protected one another, it was the Torah they sought to shield.

You have the image of that academy, you have the image of those who participated in the study in that academy, or in those academies. The solidarity of scholars, in spite of their differences -- and they had many, between *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel*, they all had arguments, and the arguments contradicted the other arguments. But there was marvelous solidarity because they were united by a passion, an irresistible passion, a

passion for learning. Rabbi Tarfon's allegiance to Torah was total. In Talmudic literature, he is called "*Avihen Shel Kol Yisrael*," the father [00:36:00] of the entire people of Israel, or "*Rabban Shel Kol Yisrael*," the master, the teacher, of the entire people of Israel. Both titles point to his profound love for his people. For his people then, and, now. Its welfare mattered to him.

Was he, like his friend and disciple Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, on the side of the young, glorious, and tragic general bar Kokhba, who 60-odd years after the fall of Jerusalem led an insurrection against Rome? Rabbi Akiva almost crowned the heroic commander "Messiah." Still, many sages refused to go along with bar Kokhba. One even admonished Rabbi Akiva, saying, "Akiva, Akiva, grass will grow out of your jaw, which means you will long be in your grave and the son of David will still not be around."

And Rabbi Tarfon. Did he support the insurrection? I don't think he did because the insurrection proper occurred later -- 60 years later -- but the preparations [00:37:00] lasted long and he could have, but no mention is made about his support. What is known is that he was against Rome. Like most sages, probably more than most.

In the tractate of *Gittin*, involving all divorce-related issues, we find his decisions stating that even, quote, "Even if and when the laws of Gentile courts are similar to those of Jewish ones, one must not have recourse to them in matters of litigation." He was especially harsh towards the new Christians, whose books he wanted burned, even though they contained the name of God. Did he have contact with them? Some sources suggest that he did engage in theological disputations with them, though from the image he projects, this does not sound credible. He was not exactly what we would [00:38:00] call today an ecumenist.

Still, some believe he took part in a long dialogue with the Christian apologist of the second century called Iustinus, the martyr. Born in Nablus, where he was known for his missionary activities, Iustinus wrote a book called "Dialogue between Saint Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, and the Jew Tryphon." In it, they talk about Greek philosophers, God, and the conflict separating Jews and Christians. Iustinus tries to convince the Jew, who in turn, tries to prevail upon the Christian to repent, and return to their common faith, which is the faith of Israel, and both failed.

This Jew Tryphon is a man I like, but I am not alone in thinking that he is not our Rabbi Tarfon, who rather than argue with outsiders preferred to interact with the Torah and its commentators. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi compares him to a pack of walnuts, or pebbles. [00:39:00] If one is removed, all begin shifting around. That also happens when a disciple comes to Rabbi Tarfon for an explanation of a rabbinic decision or saying. The erudite master will immediately quote from scripture, *Mishnah*, *midrash*, using examples from *halacha* and *aggadah*, a simple question was enough for him to touch on every aspect of Jewish learning. And the young visitor will leave him with the feeling of fulfillment and happiness. The praise for his pedagogical method is well-deserved. Today, one would call it Socratic. He began by raising questions, and asking his pupils to deepen and broaden them before formulating their own. Often, he would ask them to permit him to ask the question. He would say, "esh'al, May I ask you a question?" And thus, thus he would inspire them [00:40:00] to ask questions in return. At times he would freely admit that he did not know the answer. Isn't that true humility? How can one who loves questions more than answers, therefore, not love him at least for that? I do.

But then, why was he, so humble, so often the first to voice opinions in the presence of his illustrious colleagues?

Wouldn't it be more proper, more respectful, and surely more humble for him to defer to the others, and listen to them?

Let's go back, shall we, to our analyses of humility as a central concept in the Talmudic and rabbinic universe.

Ordinarily we are told that it is incumbent upon man to be humble in the [00:41:00] presence of God. How can he or she not be? Facing the king of kings, the judge of all the living, the almighty creator of all that exists and will exist, how could one not feel small and insignificant, more useless than a pebble and weaker than a leaf, trembling before a storm? Facing the Eternal God who is one, and whose name is one, in whom all beings, all words, all memories are united and justified, how could a human being who is by definition mortal and defenseless not feel the weight of his or her own humility?

In other words, for us humans, humility seems so natural, so obvious, that we wonder why our sages insist on its importance.

But they, in their wisdom, teach us the meaning of humility [00:42:00] in another context as well. First, they speak marvelous *midrash* about the two lights, the luminaries: the sun and the moon. Why the moon has become smaller. Why it remains small. And the answer there, really, is about humility.

Because the moon wanted to protest, wasn't humble, wanted to be

the like the sun, therefore God said, "No, you are small. Be humble."

In our relationship to each other, we are told in Talmud, the humility of man and woman is important. To be humble before God is easy. To be humble before another person is not. Isn't it in man's nature to feel nearest to himself? Hence, the insistence in the Talmud to teach us, [00:43:00] to warn us, against self-indulgence, and above all, self-adoration. Self-adoration, or as we call it, *gaavah*, is, according to Talmud, idolatry, *Avodah Zarah*, is idolatry. Who today is audacious or blind enough to claim that because of ethnic or religious reasons, he or she is better or worthier than another? Who can find sufficient arrogance in himself or herself to claim possession of the only key to all the gates in heaven? Quite the contrary. True humility is to judge oneself with extreme severity, and to judge others with limitless understanding. For a humble person, anyone, even the most obstinate sinner, deserves respect, for we do not know the truth, the essential truth, about another person. Such is the mystery of the human condition, that it makes it impossible [00:44:00] to transcend our own being, and actually become another person.

It is therefore impossible to judge another. Under whose authority would I have the right to do that? Each person is a priori owed respect for being both so close and so distant from our common source. Truth, in its totality, is known to God alone. And He desires to be humble, in going down to the level of His creatures, and joining His people into exile. And from this we learn, though it's not included in the *taryag mitzvot*, that humility is implicit in them, for it is written, "*v'halachta b'drachav or imitation Dei*, men must follow in God's ways. Just as He is humble, we must be." And more so.

Another realm of humility exists in our relationship to the Torah. In its presence, [00:45:00] one can yield neither to pride, nor to vanity. The commandment against idolatry, "*lo yihiye l'cha elohim acherim*, thou shall have no other gods," means, you yourself shall not be a god. The self, the I, is not only hateful, according to Pascal, it is also sacrilegious. God alone may say I. Whoever glorifies his or her own self will end up in opposition to himself and to God. "How can man say 'I am,'" asks the *midrash*, "when he may be gone tomorrow? To say 'I am' means 'I am here, somewhere, in a place.' Tomorrow, where are you? Woe to vanity," says the *midrash*. "Woe to vanity, that pushes its servants to the grave." "Vanity is dangerous," states the Talmud. Listen to its consequences. "If

the vain man is a sage, his wisdom will [00:46:00] be taken from him. If he is a prophet, he will lose his prophetic powers." Countless masters, teachers, and moralists have throughout the centuries warned against the sin of pride. "What is its fruit?" asked Rabbi Shlomo ibn Gabirol. And the answer is the fruit of pride is hatred. And Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda said, "Which is the worst of all sins? Vanity."

Listen to a strange legend: God said to the wicked king Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who symbolizes all that is evil in the history of Jewish royalty, God said to him, "Repent, and I, you, and the son of David will walk together in paradise." And the wicked king says, "Who will walk first?" (laughter) And God said, "The son of David." And therefore, Jeroboam refused, and the moral [00:47:00] of the story is it was by his own vanity that the wicked king was doomed.

Similarly, many Talmudic aphorisms misplace humility as one of God's virtues. Hasn't He abundant, high mountains to give the Torah at Sinai, which is the lowest? Didn't He neglect tall trees, and spoke to Moses from a bush? In other words, it is in humility the Torah is preserved. Even if you are perfect in all things, says the Talmud, if you lack humility, you have nothing. And the *midrash* declares, "These are the seven rewards given to

the humble man or woman. They will have their share in the world to come. Their teaching will be remembered. The *Shekhinah* will rest on them. They will be spared all punishment. Nothing evil will happen to them. The whole world will feel sorry for them. And best of all, listen and do not be angry: the humble man will not have to live with the [00:48:00] wicked woman." (laughter)

Also in the Talmud, even if the whole world tells you that you are a *tzadik*, a just man, say to yourself that you are a wicked, a *rasha*. In other words, the true *tzadik* is he who thinks he is not. The *midrash* recalls a useful advice Rabbi Akiva gave Shimon ben Azzai: "Remove yourself from the seat that is meant to be used in the academy. Go back a few rows, until people start telling you to go closer and higher. And even then, do not go. For it is better that people tell you to go up to a higher seat, than when they shout for you to go back."

(laughter)

But even humility requires carefulness, prudence. It depends how you deal with it. Speaking of humility, the great Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa said, "Every man, every person, should have a piece of paper in each of his two pockets. On one he should write, [00:49:00] 'The whole world,'" according to the Talmud --

it's a Talmudic sentence -- "'The whole world was created for my sake alone.' But on the other he should write, 'Who am I? I am nothing but dust and ashes.'" And Rabbi Bunim said, "What is important is, do not confuse the pockets." (laughter)

Humility can be dangerous. Listen to an anecdote. Due to a vacancy in the rabbinate of a large congregation, its leadership came to plead with a renowned scholar to accept the prestigious post. But the master refused, saying, "I am not the man you need. I lack knowledge and experience. I am not learned enough, nor am I pious enough." Brokenhearted, deeply taken by his humility, the leadership then turned to another possible candidate, and this one had heard about the conversation with the first scholar, and saw how impressed the leaders were with his modesty, so he spoke in the same manner. "I am not the spiritual leader [00:50:00] you need. I lack so many things." At that point, a friend of his, who was present, whispered in his ear, "Stop. It's bad for you to continue in this way. You, they'll believe." (laughter)

That the Torah demands humility from those who study it, is illustrated by the secret it harbors. This secret cannot be pierced, for it deepens as one comes closer to its gate. Let's call it a secret of secret. Whomever pretends to know it has

much to learn. Inexhaustible are the riches of a Torah. But then the question arises: how can one learn without being demanding? How can one be demanding without offending the Torah? Where does one find the audacity to question a sacred text which bears the seal of God? The *Amoraim* of later generations never refuted decisions of [00:51:00] earlier *Tannaim*. If they didn't, how can we? Isn't an attempt to master the content and style of Torah a way of showing disrespect? The Sadducees thought so. But the majority of rabbinic scholars did not. For them and for us, it's important to know that though the law was given by the Almighty, the interpretation of the law belongs to us.

Within the letters of the Torah, it's given to us to search and find a thousand ways of interpreting the primary meaning. And this explains the duality, better yet, a plurality, of opinions we meet in the Talmudic tradition. "*Eileh v'eileh divrei Elokim chaim,*" states a heavenly voice, "Both schools, that of *Shammai* and that of *Hillel* express God's words." And yet, they never agreed on anything except for 18 cases. But if that is the case, why are we [00:52:00] to follow the *Hillelites*? And the Talmud says, "Because they were humble and respectful towards their adversaries, whose opinions they always quoted first."

Rabbi Tarfon's way was a bit different. He, too, was polite, courteous, respectful, although he was overruled. He never held a grudge against anyone. When he's agreed with the majority and lost, and went on acting against its ruling, he paid for it in silence. A story: the disciples of *Shammai* and those of *Hillel* were arguing, as always. But this time, it was about the practical implementation of the commandment involving the credo *Shema Yisrael*, which according to scripture, one must recite *b'shivticha b'veitecha, uv'lechticha vaderech uv'shochbicha uv'kumecha.*" Sitting at home, or walking on the road, or lying in bed in the evening and getting up in the morning. Well, for the disciples of *Shammai*, it was simple. One must [00:53:00] lie down in bed and recite the *Shema*, and stand up in the morning.

For the disciples of *Hillel*, the interpretation is more flexible. What is important to them is to recite the prayer. As always, the *Hillel* students won the argument. But once Rabbi Tarfon wanted to experiment with *Shammai's* method. He laid down at night, probably not at home, and was attacked by robbers. Some sages said that was his punishment for going against the majority. (laughter) But Rabbi Tarfon did not complain.

Another time, he did complain. One night, he happened to be in his own garden when he was beaten up by the guard, who thought he was an intruder. In fact, the beating was so brutal that Rabbi Tarfon began shouting, "Go tell my people that Tarfon is being murdered." That saved him. Later, he felt remorse for having used his rabbinic position, thus his link to Torah, to save himself. [00:54:00] Actually, says one version, he could have paid off the guard. But we know of his special attachment to money. (laughter)

Just as we know how humble he was when learning or teaching Torah. But then once again, how are we to answer a question that has been haunting us all evening? If he was so humble, why did he always speak up first? Well, at the risk of surprising you, I will suggest the following. It is because he was humble that he went ahead of others, and made himself heard. (pause)

Not convinced? I can try again. (laughs) The academic custom then was that when there was a discussion, it was always the youngest, the least influential, the least erudite, who spoke first, [00:55:00] so as not to be influenced by the greater scholars' opinions. Therefore, if Rabbi Tarfon spoke first, it was because he believed that he was, quote, the youngest, unquote, meaning, that he was the least learned person present.

In that case, who was the humble man in the academy? Rabbi Tarfon.

I owe you one more explanation. It concerns Rabbi Tarfon's boasting in the *beit midrash* and his colleagues mentioning something about his mother's handbag. My feeling is that he was not boasting. He was just trying to show that a pure *mitzvah* of *kibud eim*, of honoring one's mother, is unlimited, because much depends not on the son, but on the mother. It is up to her to say when enough is enough. But his colleagues disagreed, and [00:56:00] maintained that exaggeration is never healthy.

And now, before we conclude, allow me to add one more biographical item. There are texts that place him in the category of the *Aseret Harugei Malchut*, the Ten Martyrs of the faith. Tortured and murdered for having studied and taught Torah and having observed its commandments. Somehow, it does not seem probable. Although the circumstances of his death remain shrouded in mystery, unlike he who used to be present when his teachers or colleagues passed away, others apparently failed to be with him when his hour came. Perhaps I am unfair. Perhaps they did come. But if so, we don't know.

And now, just this: I love Rabbi Tarfon. Some of you may know that each time we try to bring [00:57:00] into focus a Talmudic master or a Hasidic *rebbe* I always said I love. I love everyone I spoke about. Maybe one day I'll speak about you, and then it's going to be -- (laughter) I love Rabbi Tarfon. I love him although I do not always understand him. I fail to understand why the defeat of Judaea, the tragedy of destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, played almost no role in his teaching. Was it a lesson he sought to communicate, that silence too can be a response to extreme suffering? And that some secrets protected by silence must remain inviolate?

A story: In order to strengthen his teachings concerning a law dealing with the priestly service in the temple, Rabbi Tarfon relates that he was together with his uncle Shimshon on Yom Kippur, when he managed to hear the high priest just as he uttered the ineffable name. [00:58:00] Composed of twelve letters, that name was known to the high priest alone, and to some of his discreet and reliable assistants, standbys who could have been called upon to serve if anything happened to him. If an unworthy person heard it by accident, heard the name, the ineffable name by accident, he miraculously forgot it instantly.

And thus, thanks to Rabbi Tarfon we realize that forgetfulness is always possible. In other words, to know the secret is not enough. One must learn how to safeguard it. It's not easy, so what. Who says that it is easy to carry the Torah, although it is she who carries us. When we conclude one of the five books of the *Chumash*, we raise our voice and we say to the man who was honored with the last *Aliyah*, "*Hazak, Hazak, V'Nitzhazek.*"

[00:59:00] "Be strong." Why? Because, says the Talmud, *haTorah machrisha.*" "The study of Torah demands such an effort that it weakens us." And so, we need encouragement. And so, having finished, the man needs "*Hazak,*" to be strong. But let us end with two of Rabbi Tarfon's beautiful and profound aphorisms. He said, "*Hayom katzar,*" the day is short, "*V'hamlacha meruba,*" and there is so much to do, "*v'hapoalim atzeilim,*" and the workers are so lazy. (laughter)

He also said, "*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor,*" no one is asking you to complete your task, "*v'lo atah ven chorin l'hibatel mimena,*" but you are not free to desist. In other words, you are not free, not to begin, and so, we are beginning and [01:00:00] beginning again and again.

M:

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