

Rosh Hashanah Day 1
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Humility

Shana tova.

Welcome to a new year. We are delighted that you have chosen to welcome in the New Year here at ICCJ.

Jimmy Fallon, the irreverent host of the Tonight Show, was in the hospital this summer for a rare type of finger injury called ring avulsion, requiring a ten day stay at Bellevue hospital. "I started losing it halfway through," he told the crowd on his first night back on the air. "I started reading books about the meaning of life."

And which book did he show the audience? *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Viktor Frankl was a Jewish Austrian psychologist who survived the Holocaust. In his book he describes how finding meaning in life allowed some people to survive the horror. Frankl felt that a higher meaning gave people something to stay alive for.

Not known for being the most serious person on television, Fallon talked about reading the book and highlighting it on his Kindle. He said, "This is the meaning of my life. I belong on TV. ..I'm here to make you laugh. I'm here to make you have a good time ... That's my job. That's why I'm here. I want to spread the love."

I am glad that Jimmy Fallon knows his current role on the planet and I am thrilled that he brought Viktor Frankl's writing to the masses, but Fallon did something else that was profound that evening. He thanked people. He thanked his doctors by name. He thanked the nurses, his wife and family and his comedian friends who reached out to him with what I can only assume was comic relief.

In Jimmy Fallon's own search for meaning during a challenging time in his life, he exhibited the attribute of humility. "*True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.*" wrote C.S. Lewis. Jimmy Fallon, who usually laughs at his own jokes, took the time that particular evening to contract his sense of self, in order to acknowledge the strengths of others.

The human trait of humility is connected to many of our greatest leaders. Abraham protests before God: "Here I venture to speak to my Lord. I, who am but dust and ashes." At the end of the Torah we read that no one was ever as humble as Moses. The rabbis in the Talmud write that one shall strive to be as humble as Hillel. And, when Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, the master organizer of the Mishnah died, his contemporaries

believed that nobody could be humble like he was. As the Talmud put it, "**When Rebbe died, humility disappeared.**"

The importance of humility has been woven into the thinking of our greatest theologians and philosophers. In the tenth century, Rabbeinu Baachya wrote, "It follows that all virtues are secondary to humility, which is the head and front of them all." According to Louis Jacobs, "greatness and humility, in Hebraic tradition, are not incompatible. They complement each other. The greater the person, the more humble he is expected to be and is likely to be."

Conversely, humility is not in vogue in twenty-first century America. David Brooks, near the beginning of his book *The Road to Character*, writes that there has been a *shift in culture, a shift from a culture of self-effacement that says "Nobody's better than me, but I'm no better than anyone else," to a culture of self-promotion that says "Recognize my accomplishments, I'm pretty special."*

Humility is one of those words that we often use but rarely define. Borrowing language from the business world community, humility requires a shift from an **ego system** awareness that cares about the well being of oneself to an **eco system** awareness that cares about the wellbeing of **all**, including oneself. When operating with **ego** system awareness, we are driven by the concerns and intentions of our small ego self. When operating with **eco** system awareness, we are driven by the concerns and intentions of our emerging or essential self- that is, by a concern that is informed by the well being of the whole.ⁱ When we use this eco system awareness we care about everyone, not just ourselves. We are not first. We are **not** the center of the universe.

Not all humble people stay home quietly. Instead, many humble people are... confident and competent in themselves so much that, as a result, they seek to self-actualize by helping others. Humble people are still self-efficacious; they just don't feel the impetus to boast about themselves. Instead, their actions are a reflection of their ideals.ⁱⁱ

Last year, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of England, shared two stories of individuals who made a great impression upon him. He wrote that as Chief Rabbi, he and his wife were expected to hold dinner parties, and not just for members of the Jewish community. There was one guest who not only thanked the hosts but also asked to be allowed to go into the kitchen to thank those who made the meal. The person who did it was John Major, then British Prime Minister. He called that an example of humility.

The second story he shared was about Prince Charles visiting a synagogue on its 300th anniversary. What impressed Rabbi Sacks is that this man, the next in line to the throne, spent as much time talking to the young men and women who were doing security duty as he did to the guests. According to Rabbi Sacks, Prince Charles made

them feel as important as anyone else on that special occasion. Again, another example of humility.

Many of you in this room remember a time when there was a stronger social sanction against blowing your own trumpet, getting above yourself, being too big for your britches.ⁱⁱⁱ People did not use to shout out to the world LOOK AT ME. There has been a shift from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.^{iv} Big Me and championing our individualism and talents does not correspond well with the wisdom of our tradition.

We Jews are asked to emulate God and to approach life as best we can in the divine image. Even while God was creating the heavens and earth, and refereeing the people inhabiting this planet, Rabbi Yochanan teaches us that God was humble. In a passage in the Talmud (Megillah 31a) we find: *Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility.*

In the tenth century, Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Paquda dedicated an entire section of his book Duties of the Heart to the explanation of the multifaceted obligation to have humility before God.

Pride over spiritual attainments can be of two types, one disgraceful and the other - praiseworthy...the praiseworthy type is when a person is proud of his wisdom or the righteous man of his deeds, and considers them a great favor of the Creator for which to be thankful and joyous. This causes him to try to add on to them, to be humble with his near ones and enjoy his friends, and to be considerate of their honor, to conceal their folly and to speak their praise... This pride assists humility, and adds to it, as it is written, "humility brings about fear of God."

For Rabbeinu Bachya there are two ways of being proud: one of them is antithetical to humility, but the other, not only does not conflict with humility, but it actually assists and strengthens it. Positive pride assists humility.

There is too much arrogance, too much Big Me, too much negative pride in our world today. Humility can offer self understanding. When we acknowledge that we make mistakes, and feel the gravity of our limitations, we find ourselves challenged and stretched with a serious foe to overcome and transcend.^v **Let us all enter this New Year, aspiring to be humble like Abraham and Moses, and the prophet Samuel, whose birth we read about in the Haftorah. Let us renew ourselves to recall our place in the world.** And here is a hint: it is not sitting atop of the world.

The Rosh Hashanah liturgy reminds us over and over again to take a step back, and distance ourselves from the Big Me mentality. When we recite the Musaf Amidah, we

will say "oz byadcha, u'gvura b'yeminecha, For we know that true sovereignty is Yours, power and strength are in Your hands, and your name is to be revered beyond any creations. Humans caught up in the rat race need to do tzimzum, to contract, and remember we are but dust and ashes. As wonderful as we think we are, we never can be as great or awesome as God.

In Unetane Tokef we first describe God as the Judge and Prosecutor, Expert and Witness. We then say "Scripture compares human beings to a broken shard, a withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, and a vanishing dream." That is a far cry from posting your latest accomplishment on Facebook, Instagram or tweeting it. In fact, the entire Malchuyot section of the Musaf Amidah provides us with reminders, through various verses, that God is majestic and will reign forever.

When one is humble and content away from the center of the stage, one can assess one's own mistakes and imperfections accurately. One who possesses the attribute of humility can be open to influence from others, and put the needs of the group ahead of one's personal needs.^{vi} Are we willing to do that with our families, our communities and the various networks to which we are connected this year?

As we begin the Ten Days of Repentance, let us focus our hearts on the words of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav: Teshuvah, repentance, essentially depends on humility. Let us recommit to living life infused with humility not just during these Days of Awe, but for the rest of 5776, and the rest of our lives as well.
Shana tova

ⁱ Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego System to Ec System Economics, Otto Scharmer and Ktrin Kaufer.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffboss/2015/03/01/13-habits-of-humble-people/>

ⁱⁱⁱ the Road to Character, p. 5

^{iv} the Road to Character, p. 6

^v the Road to Character, p. 269

^{vi} Character Strengths Matter, page 74