



ענוה ומשמעותה The Meaning of Humility

■ Strength and Humility

The following question often arises regarding our prayers: Why must we begin with words of praise for the Creator? What does He possibly gain from our praise?

For instance, we prominently begin the recitation of the Amidah, the Sh'moneh Esreh, with these words: האֱלֹהִים הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא, **the great, mighty, and awesome G-d**. Are we trying to “bribe” G-d with sweet talk?

Let us note that this phrase originally comes from Moshe Rabbeinu's parting words to Israel before his death, on the eve of their entry into Eretz Yisrael. As we read in the weekly Torah portion of Ekev:

כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנִים
הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד.

*For the Lord our G-d is the G-d of gods and the Lord of lords,
the great, mighty and awesome G-d,
Who will not give unfair consideration
nor accept bribes.* (D'varim 10,17)

From the context, we can see that this phrase is not meant as mere flattery or as a way to appease G-d. For the same verse says straight out that He will “*not accept bribes*,” including verbal bribery in the form of compliments. It is thus clear that the reason we say these words of praise is *not* to attempt to sway His decisions.



What then is the message of these words, and why do we begin our prayers with them? The riddle is solved in the Talmud by R. Yochanan, who says:

Wherever you find G-d's greatness and strength, there you will also find His humility. This is written in the Torah, and again in the Prophets, and again in the Writings. (Megillah 31a)

R. Yochanan is pointing out a fascinating concept: The Bible never notes G-d's greatness and superiority alone, simply to acclaim and praise Him. Such a description is always accompanied by a mention of the Divine ethic, coming to teach us the traits of humility and modesty. What we see is that humility comes specifically where there is greatness! Mere "lack of ability" is not modesty; humility is significant only when there is something to be proud of.

Accordingly, every time G-d's greatness is mentioned, it is only to emphasize that despite His awesomeness and might, He always acts with humility and softness.

We can now understand that the reason we begin our Amidah prayer with these words of praise – ***"the great, mighty and awesome G-d"*** – is to emphasize the words that then follow: ***"He bestows acts of kindness... and remembers the kindnesses of our Patriarchs..."*** Despite His being high and exalted, with no need to provide an accounting or explanation to anyone, He still considers Himself obligated to the concepts of ethics and justice.

Not only that, but we continue the prayer with *koneh hakol*, ***"G-d is the owner of all."*** An important aspect of ownership is taught by Avraham, as he says when he raises his hands in an oath to the King of S'dom:

הִרְמַתִּי יָדַי אֶל ה' אֵל-לְעֵלְיוֹן קִנְיָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ,
אִם מִחוּט וְעַד שָׁרוּף נֶעַל ...

*"I raise my hand to the Lord, the Most High G-d,
owner of heaven and earth:*

Neither from a thread to a shoe strap will I take..." (B'reshit 14,22-23)

Avraham is emphasizing that though Hashem (known here by the *Havayah* Name of Being) brought about and created the world, judges it, and leads it (*e-l elyon*, the Supreme Lord) – with all this, He still has no interest in forcing His rule over us without our consent. He wishes rather that we accept His kingship of our own free choice. The bottom line is that just



as an owner acquires something only with the mutual consent of both the seller and the buyer, G-d wishes our partnership. It was this that Avraham declared so dramatically in the words quoted above – and it is with this that we begin the Sh'moneh Esreh prayer.

We then continue by saying that He **“remembers the kindnesses of our Forefathers.”** Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov performed the requested kindness with the Master of the Universe by granting their consent to His kingship.

■ The Three Examples

As we saw, R. Yochanan stated in the Gemara that the juxtaposition of G-d's greatness and humility appears three times in the Bible: in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The example from the Torah is from the verse we quoted above:

כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא...
*For the Lord our G-d is the G-d of gods... the great,
 mighty and awesome G-d... (D'varim 10,17)*

This statement of His greatness is followed by a reference to G-d's “humble” side:

עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוּם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאָהֵב גֵּר לָתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה.
*He brings justice to the orphan and widow,
 and loves the foreigner, giving him bread and clothing.*

The example from the Prophets is from the Book of Isaiah (57,15):

כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה וְנִשְׂאָ שֵׁכֶן עַד וְקָדוֹשׁ שְׂמוֹ...
*So said the high and raised above,
 He Who inhabits eternity and His name is holy...*

Here, too, “greatness” is followed by “modesty:”

לְהַחְיֹת רוּחַ שְׂפָלִים וּלְהַחְיֹת לֵב נִדְבָאִים.
*to revive the spirit of the humble,
 and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

And finally, in the Writings (Ketuvim) section of the Bible, we find this example of G-d's greatness (Psalms 68,5-6):

סִלּוֹ לְרִכְבּ בְּעָרְבוֹת...
Sing praises for He Who rides the clouds...



followed in the next verse by:

אָבִי יְתוּמִים וְדִין אֶלְמָנוֹת...
...אָבִי יְתוּמִים וְדִין אֶלְמָנוֹת...

The father of orphans and judge of widows...

These, then, are perfect models of how we begin the main section of our prayers, the Amidah: Bold words of praise - **“the great, valiant, and awesome G-d”** – which come in order to emphasize the very next words of the prayer: **“performs great acts of kindness... remembering the good deeds of our forefathers.”**

■ Over-Praising

The story is told in the Talmud (B'rachot 33b) of a prayer-leader who recited an entire series of praises of G-d: **“The great, mighty, awesome, tremendous, mighty, awed, strong, courageous...”** (This was before the text of the prayers was totally institutionalized.) The Gemara says that R. Chanina waited until he finished giving all his accolades, and then asked him, “Is that it? Have you exhausted all of G-d’s praises?”

R. Chanina was trying to explain that we can actually never list all of G-d’s praises. He added that the only reason we say **“great, mighty, and awesome”** is because Moshe Rabbeinu himself said them: “Had Moshe not said them in the Torah, and had the Sages of the Great Assembly not enacted them in our prayers, we never would dare to say them. But if you add even more praises, it is like seeing a king who has thousands upon thousands of gold coins - and yet you praise him for his silver! G-d’s praises are infinite; to give Him a few more words of tribute is actually an insult.”

R. Chanina thus notes the paradox inherent in praising G-d: Every word of praise we say, actually accentuates that which we don’t say! If we say G-d is “strong,” the question is immediately asked, “What, is He merely strong but not mighty?” In light of G-d’s total superiority over all the worlds He created, any praise we say will actually be nothing more than a diminishing of His true greatness!

Why did R. Chanina wait until the prayer-leader finished before interrupting him? At first glance it would seem that rather than simply tell him not to add extra praises, R. Chanina wished to educate him. He was saying, “OK, I’m with you in all these praises. But let’s see how far you can go. Once you stop, will you really be able to finally say that you have given G-d every accolade there is? After all, every addition is actually a detraction, in implying that whatever praises were *not* said, do not apply.”



■ Hashem's Humbleness

However, let us now look at this story from a different angle.

The reason R. Chanina waited until the man finished his praises was because he assumed the man would ultimately reach the *true* praise, namely, G-d's modesty and humility, as we learned from R. Yochanan above. But when he saw that the prayer-leader stopped his praise without including G-d's humility, R. Chanina said to him, "Is that it? Have you completed all of G-d's praises? You have left out the main thing – His humbleness!"

Actually, what does it mean when we say that "G-d is humble"? It means that He allows us to feel that we are partners with Him in building the world and developing life. This is the honor that He gives us, with such grace and kindness. This sensation of partnership that G-d grants us begins with the story of Creation, in which He states:

נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ...

*Let us make man in our image,
after our likeness...* (B'reshit 1,26)

The words *Let us make* give us a hint of G-d's partnership with every pair of parents in the creation of a new human being. It's as if G-d is saying to us, "You and I together will make man." As the Jerusalem Talmud teaches (B'rachot 9,1):

R. Simlai was asked, What does the verse mean when it says *Let us make man in our image*?

He answered: "In the past, Adam was created from the earth, and Eve was created from Adam. From then on, however, a man cannot procreate without a woman, nor can a woman without a man - and both of them together cannot do so without the Divine Presence."

This partnership sensation is precisely what Eve was referring to when she gave birth to her first-born son, Cain. In giving the baby his name, she said "*kaniti ish, I have acquired a man of the Lord*" – i.e., a new human being in partnership with Hashem.

The Medrash Rabba goes further and explains Eve's words: "I have acquired [*kaniti*] anew the trust of my husband [*ish*] together with G-d's trust in me. I lost my husband's trust after I led him to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and I lost G-d's trust after disobeying His command – but now I have won back their trust, as evidenced by the new-born son to whose formation we have all been partners."



■ The Prophet's Special Traits

Let us expand upon the meaning of the term “humility.” R. Yochanan, who said that G-d’s greatness goes hand-in-hand with His modesty, says something similar about G-d’s Prophets, defining the special qualities that render them able to accept G-d’s word:

G-d grants His presence only upon one who is courageous, wealthy, wise, and modest - and all of these traits are learned from Moshe Rabbeinu. (Nedarim 38a)

That the traits of wisdom and modesty are fundamental characteristics for a prophet, we can understand easily. But courage and richness – why are they important?

The task of the prophet is to stand up when necessary and rebuke the people, and to be their spiritual guide. The four traits mentioned above are necessary so that he can carry out this mission. Let us review them one by one.

Wisdom enables him to understand G-d’s message, and *wealth* allows him to be independent of others. He requires *courageous might* so that he can stand up to the nation when necessary and tell them that which they might not enjoy hearing, to shake them up. But the fourth trait, *modesty*, which enables him to see what G-d is showing him and not just what he wants to see himself, stands out starkly among the others.

For just as white is most clearly seen on a black background, modesty is most recognizable in one who is strong, rich and wise. It is this special trait of humility that enables the Prophet to absorb G-d’s word in its totality. It is also that which facilitates his true bonds with the people, who realize that he is truly a partner in their destiny and only wishes what is truly good for them.

An arrogant leader relies on the nation’s fear of him, and a haughty army general leans on his great abilities of command. But a truly humble leader knows he can count on the people’s love for him, and a modest commander can rely on his underlings’ admiration of him.

■ Awe and Love

Moshe Rabbeinu, in his long parting speech to the Nation of Israel that comprises most of the Book of D’varim, states the two fundamentals on



which our relationship with G-d must be built: Awe and fear of G-d, and Love of G-d. The first is reflected (negatively) in this verse:

אם לא תשמר לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת...
 ליראה את השם הנכבד והנורא הזה, את ה' אלהיך.
*...if you do not take care to fulfill all the words of this Torah...
 to fear this great and awesome name,
 Hashem your G-d. (D'varim 28,58)*

Of the second fundamental we read here:

ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה איתה וזרעה,
 לאהבה את ה' אלהיך לשמע בקלו ולדבקה בו כי הוא חייך וארך ימיה...
*You shall choose life, so that you and your descendants will live,
 to love Hashem your G-d,
 to adhere to His voice and to cling to Him,
 for He is your life and the length of your days. (30,19-20)*

Equipped with these two fundamentals of awe and love of G-d, we can return to the verse from Parashat Ekev from which we started:

כי ה' אלהיכם הוא אלהי האלהים ואדני האדנים
 האל הגדל הגבר והנורא אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד.
*For the Lord our G-d is the G-d of gods and the Lord of lords,
 the great, mighty and awesome G-d,
 Who will not give unfair consideration nor accept bribes. (10,17)*

This point builds up greatly the dimension of “awe and fear” that we feel vis-a-vis Hashem. But the next verse builds up the second dimension – that of love and modesty:

עשה משפט יתום ואלמנה ואהב גר לתת לו לחם ושמלה.
*He brings justice to the orphan and widow,
 and loves the foreigner, giving him bread and clothing. (10,18)*

This combination of awe and love of G-d, which stems from the integration of G-d's might and His modesty, is the perfect recipe by which to connect right and left, and open the Gate of the Tree of Life, which was blocked up following the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden.

