

# Pride That Runs Deeper Than Self



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## The Inner Message of Our Sages' Debate

We find the following difference of opinion recorded by the *Talmud*:<sup>1</sup>

Rav Chiyya bar Ashi states in the name of Rav: "A Torah scholar should have 1/64 part [of pride], [so that the lightheaded will not act arrogantly towards him, and so that his words will be accepted by them (*Rashi*).]"

Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshua says: "[This small measure of pride] adorns him as the bristle adorns the ear of grain."

Rava declares: "Whoever possesses [pride] deserves to be placed under a ban of ostracism. [Conversely,] whoever lacks [this quality] *entirely* deserves to be placed under a ban. [If he does not possess a small degree of pride, his townsmen will not be in awe of him, and he will not have the power to rebuke them (*Rashi*).]"

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak states: "Neither it [pride] nor any part of it. Is it a small matter, what is written:<sup>2</sup> 'All those who are proud of heart are an abomination unto G-d' "?

What is the rationale for the prooftext cited by Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak? Pride comes from an appreciation sometimes realistic and sometimes not of one's deeds and potentials. When a person feels proud of his achievements, even when his pride is justified, he denies G-d's providence to some degree. For by taking pride, the person is ascribing his success to his own efforts. If he would realize the truth that all his success is a gift from G-d, and it is He who grants him the potential to succeed he would not be proud.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he would thankfully acknowledge the working of G-d's hand.

This is not to minimize the importance of a person's endeavors. It is written:<sup>4</sup> "And G-d will bless you in all you do," which implies that a person's efforts are necessary. Without them, he is lacking the medium through which G-d's blessings are to be channeled. But his efforts are no more than a medium; the source of success remains G-d's blessings. And when success comes from G-d's blessings, there is no reason for an individual to feel personal pride.

## Tapping a Deeper Potential

Nevertheless, as indicated by the other Sages mentioned above, there is an advantage to having a small amount of pride, for unless a person asserts himself with confidence, his words will not be heeded. And without a fair measure of self-assurance, the person himself will not be able to persevere in the face of challenge. Moreover, feelings of satisfaction and pride encourage joy, which is a fundamental component of Divine service.<sup>5</sup>

One can, however, reap the advantages of pride without its drawbacks. For there is a deeper source of pride than one's own self, one's abilities, or one's achievements. G-d has "made us holy through [His] commandments, and... drawn us near to [His] service,"<sup>6</sup> endowing us with a bond of closeness with Him, and a mission to elevate and refine the world at large. Consciousness of this bond and identification with this mission generates inner pride, satisfaction, and fulfillment.

## Synthesis, Not Conflict

This approach allows humility and pride to be seen as complementary qualities. Developing selfless humility encourages a person to heighten his connection to G-d and His service. This in turn provides him with deeper resources of pride and esteem.

Indeed, this kind of pride is more powerful than that generated by an appreciation of one's virtues. Self-centered pride is limited, and can be dampened by a formidable opponent or challenge. The personal strength derived from a commitment to fulfilling G-d's will, by contrast, reflects the infinite nature of its objective. No obstacle is able to stand in its way.

Our Sages alluded to this concept in their statement:<sup>7</sup> "The servant of a king is like the king himself." A servant is not considered a separate entity from his master; it is as if he is an extension of his master's person.<sup>8</sup> Therefore the self-assurance manifested by the servant is not his own, but his master's, and conveys all the power of his master's position.

A person who is totally committed to G-d's service thus uncovers far more powerful resources of inner strength than he possesses by virtue of his self alone. He radiates drive and energy, and displays the mature control necessary to channel these energies into productive endeavors.

## Principles Personified

This type of self-assurance was exemplified by Moshe our teacher. He himself told the Jewish people:<sup>9</sup> "It is I who stand between G-d and you," and it was he who wrote the verse:<sup>10</sup> "And there never arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe." Nevertheless, he was "more humble than all the men on the face of the earth."<sup>11</sup>

Moshe did not see pride and humility as conflicting tendencies. Although he knew the greatness of the mission he had been given, and realized that he had been granted unique personal traits to enable him to fulfill this mission, the knowledge did not lead to ego-conscious pride. On the contrary, he realized that he had been endowed with these potentials by G-d; they were not the fruit of his own efforts. Moreover, he believed that if these gifts had been given to another, that person might have achieved even more than he.<sup>12</sup>

Precisely because of this humility, Moshe was able to make full use of the potentials he had been granted.

## The Symbolism of Sinai

The above concepts are reflected in the name of this week's Torah reading: *Behar*. *Behar* means "on the mountain." More particularly, as the verse continues,<sup>13</sup> it refers to Mount Sinai, on which the Torah was given.

Mount Sinai represents the synthesis of the two potentials mentioned above. For on one hand, it is "the lowest of all the mountains," a symbol of humility,<sup>14</sup> and yet it *is* a mountain, exemplifying pride and power. It is the fusion of these two opposites which made Sinai, "the mountain of G-d,"<sup>15</sup> the place which G-d chose to manifest His presence and convey His teachings.<sup>16</sup>

There is, however, a slight difficulty. The Torah reading is not named *Behar Sinai*, "On Mount Sinai"; it is called *Behar*, "on the mountain." The qualities of pride and fortitude are emphasized, but not the modulating influence of the humility of Sinai, "the lowest of all the mountains."

In resolution, it can be explained that the phrase *Behar Sinai*, "On Mount Sinai," refers to a person who reminds himself of the need to subdue his self-importance. The very fact that these efforts are necessary indicates that his humility does not entirely encompass his being.

When, by contrast, a person has totally sublimated his identity to the mission with which G-d has entrusted him, he does not need to remind himself of the need to be humble; self-concern is of no importance to him. This is the intent of the name *Behar*, "on the mountain" that a servant of G-d stands proud, firmly rooted in the power endowed by the strength of his purpose.

This strength of purpose will enable our people to overcome all the challenges confronting us during these last moments of exile, and go on to greet Mashiach. May this take place in the immediate future.

### FOOTNOTES

1. *Sotah* 5a.

2. *Proverbs* 16:5.

3. See *Deuteronomy* 8:17-18.

4. *Deuteronomy* 16:18.

5. See the conclusion of *Hilchos Shofar, Sukkah, ViLulav* in the *Rambam's Mishneh Torah*.

6. Festival liturgy, *Siddur Tehillat HaShem*, p. 252.

7. *Shavuos* 47b; *Sifri* and *Rashi* commenting on *Deuteronomy* 1:7.

8. See *Rashba, Kiddushin* 23a.

9. *Deuteronomy* 5:5.

10. *Deuteronomy* 34:10.

11. *Numbers* 12:3. Significantly, Moshe also wrote this verse in the Torah. Just as his appreciation of his other virtues did not lead to pride, so too, he was able to remain humble despite his awareness of his own humility. See also the conclusion of the tractate of *Sotah*, which relates that Rav Yosef described himself as the epitome of humility.

12. *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5689, p. 217ff.

13. *Leviticus* 25:1.

14. *Midrash Tehillim* on *Psalms* 68:17. Indeed, the very name Sinai is derived from the Hebrew word *sneh* (“bramble”, *Ramban* commentary to *Deuteronomy* 1:6), which is “more humble than all the trees in the world” (*Shmos Rabbah* 2:5).
15. *Exodus* 3:1, 18:5, *et al.*
16. See the essay entitled “The Revelation at Mt. Sinai,” which develops these concepts [*Timeless Patterns in Time*, Vol. II, p. 109ff (Kehot, N.Y., 1994)].

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