

## **Torah and Humility**

**based on a lecture by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l**

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**A**

We, the harbingers of Torah Judaism to the non-Torah Jewish community, are under strict scrutiny from a moral point of view. Precisely because we place the study of Torah at the center of our existence, the topic of humility is very relevant, as the explosion of knowledge in the modern world can and does result in human arrogance.

The WORD plays a unique role in the world-outlook of the Torah. Through the word, the boundless cosmos was created. Through the word, God revealed Himself to man in His role as a spiritual being and charged him with a singular task and assignment. God spoke to Avraham and then to Moshe, and urged them to establish a covenantal community, and later addressed himself to that community and exhorted it to achieve the exalted heights of a "kingdom of priests and a holy people." First, order was imposed on the cosmos - this word is the source of truth, inalterability, identical with natural law. This was the order of Bereishit. When directed to man, the word imposes another order, not that of necessity and causality, but that of freedom and human dignity. When addressed to covenantal man, the word is the fountainhead of kedusha, sanctity. In short, the word creates three orders: necessity, the cosmic order; freedom, the human order; and kedusha, the covenantal order.

That the fountainhead of kedusha is the word of God is expressed in Halakha through the distinction between objects that are "gufan kadosh" (intrinsic, inherent and substantive holiness) and "tashmishei kedusha" (peripheral, incidental holiness, defined by the relationship with a sacred object). [A Torah scroll is gufan kadosh; the Torah covering is tashmishei kedusha.] The holiness of something which is gufan kadosh is an integral part of the object, whereas for tashmishei kedusha it is an external part of its relation, not part and parcel of its existence. The gemara states that the tefillin straps, no matter how indispensable they are, are only tashmishei kedusha; however the battim, the boxes in which the sacred texts are placed, are gufan kadosh. The reason is because "Shin shel tefillin halakha leMoshe miSinai" (the letter "shin" embossed on the box is a law given to Moshe at Sinai). We see that the criterion of gufan kadosh is the presence of the word. The geometric configuration is somehow the source of kedusha. What this means is that the source of all kedusha is the Torah, the word of God. Wherever a letter appears, the Torah appears, and we find inherent sanctity. Where there is no letter, there is no intrinsic sanctity.

We have a written Torah and an oral Torah. The written Torah has its kedusha crystallized in the tangible, physical written word. What about the oral Torah? There the

word is not objectified in a scryptical form. God, in His infinite wisdom, wanted the word to be interwoven in an abstract thought system, and not in a sign system alone, as in the written Torah. Can Torah she-be'al peh, the oral Torah, pass on kedusha? How does the unwritten word hallow, in the sense that Torah she-bikhtav sanctifies tefillin, mezuzah, the Torah parchment, etc.? It would be folly to conclude that Torah she-be'al peh is inferior in this respect. The answer is that the oral Torah operates in a more subtle manner, transmitting sanctity through study and its relation to the mind of the student. Apparently, Torah study, aside from being an intellectual, educational endeavor, enlightening the student and providing him with the information needed to observe the law, is a redemptive cathartic process - it sanctifies the personality. It purges the mind of unworthy desires and irreverent thoughts, uncouth emotions and vulgar drives. The parchment of talmud Torah is the human mind, the human heart and personality. Indeed, a new dimension is added to human experience through the study of Torah: sanctity.

We have now discovered a new understanding of the term "writing" - it means not only the physical performance of drawing letters, but also the process of soul-arousal and heart-sensitizing. A scribe writes the Torah on parchment; the rebbe, the great teacher, writes the Torah she-be'al peh on the living mind, on the sensitive human heart. The old halakhic equation that every Jew is a sefer Torah is, in this light, fully understandable. The living Jew is a sefer Torah of the Torah she-be'al peh. The gemara in Sota (13b) states: "R. Eliezer HaGadol said: Over twelve square miles, the area of the camp of Israel (in the desert), a heavenly voice proclaimed: Moshe, the great scribe of Israel, has died." Although Moshe did indeed write a sefer Torah, the word "scribe" here does not refer to the mechanical art of writing. If it did, what would be the meaning of the adjective "great?" How would this phrase, "the great scribe of Israel," do justice to the greatness of Moshe Rabbeinu? Did Moshe have a beautiful handwriting? R. Eliezer the Great was referring to a different kind of script, to the art of writing God's living word on the passionate vibrant human heart, and impressing God's image on the receptive and questing human personality. Moshe was a scribe in the same way that Sefer Yetzira calls God a scribe: "The world was created through three things: sofer, sefer, sippur (scribe, book, and a story)." We have arrived at the equation: writing = creation = education. The teacher is God's collaborator in ma'aseh bereishit, in the creation of the world.

Kedusha is generated only by closeness to God. Who is holy? Whoever is touched by the Holy One, by God's hand. But, the question arises, how can man exist in the proximity of God? The gemara (Ketubot 111b) asks, "Is it possible for Man to cleave to the Holy Presence? Is it not a 'fire devouring fire?'" The gemara answers that we should associate with talmidei chachamim, with Torah scholars. How can one feel the hand of God resting on one's shoulder, feel the breath of eternity on his face? - through the Torah! Halakha does not favor mystical union, in which one's identity is negated. How can one get close to God and yet preserve the full sense of personality, of encounter? The answer is through knowledge, the study of Torah.

How does the study of Torah unite man with God, the human being with his Maker? How can it bring together finitude and infinity, temporal transience and eternity? The Rambam develops the idea of "achdut hamaskil ve-hamuskal" (the unity of knower and known, the

subject and the object of knowledge). This is not only found in the Moreh Nevuchim, but in the Yad Hachazaka as well (Hilkhos Yesodei Hatorah, and, by implication, in Hilkhos Teshuva). The Sefer HaTanya writes about this doctrine of the Rambam that "all the sages of the Kabbala have agreed with him." I will not go into the philosophical explanation of this principle now, but we may immediately draw one conclusion. If the knower and the object known are merged into one, then two knowers whose minds are concentrated on the same object are also united. If  $a=c$ , and  $b=c$ , then  $a=b$ . People with common thoughts cannot long remain strangers, indifferent to each other. Wherever there is unity of thought, purpose and commitment, there is also personalistic unity. The Rambam (Commentary to Avot) concludes that the highest form of friendship is the unity of knowledge - "chaver ledei'a." In a like manner, when man becomes completely absorbed in God's thought, in His revealed WORD, then he is indeed united with God, there is friendship between man and God. The Tanya writes, "When a man understands with his intellect, and comprehends and digests the infinite and inscrutable will of the Almighty, there is the most marvelous union between God and man." The link between man and God is thought. God is the originator of thought, man embraces it. This is the great bond uniting man and God, finitude with infinity.

But now there is a dilemma. Knowledge, all knowledge, is essentially esoteric; it is not equally available to all. What about the dull people, the sluggish people, the intellectually slow; are they to be denied the companionship of God? Religion cannot be esoteric. The experience of God, to hear His whisper, is a basic elementary right of every human being. Without religion there is no salvation, without faith there is no redemption, and everyone is entitled to salvation. But if the link between God and man is the intellectual Torah gesture, how can the experience of God's companionship be achieved by all?

There is another doctrine of unity - achdut ha-ohev ve- ha-ahuv (the unity of the lover and the beloved). To love means to share an identity, one common destiny. Now if the lover and the beloved are united, then two persons who are in love with a third thing are also united. The love between a husband and wife is strengthened and deepened with the birth of a child. In fact, love in common is a stronger bond than thought in common; the link of hearts is stronger than that of minds. On the verse, "He shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh" (Bereishit 2,24), Rashi explains that the "one flesh", the unity, is realized by the creation of a child. The love of the couple, originally an erotic, selfish drive, changes into a more spiritual, exalted love through a shared creation, a common goal. Unqualified love of a child unites the parents, brings them closer to each other. Their love becomes more truthful, more intimate and sincere. Two people, father and mother, are welded together into one, all their concerns and aspirations concentrated on a new center, which becomes the emotional bond linking both of them; indeed, it becomes the existential focus of their lives, about which everything revolves. Depressed by the absence of love from her husband, Leah responds to the birth of her first child by saying, "Now, my husband will love me." She hopes that a missing element in her relationship will be filled by the little baby.

God loves His word, crystallized in the Torah, as though it were His daughter. In Mishlei (the Book of Proverbs), the Torah is called the darling child with which God plays daily.

"I shall be for Him a disciple, and I shall be an amusement every day, playing before Him all the time" (Mishlei 8,30). Man too can embrace Torah. Mishlei (2,3) calls Torah the mother of man - "Call understanding your mother" (Mishlei 2,3). We find the expression "baneha shel Torah" (children of Torah) which does not refer only to scholars. The relationship between us and Torah is that between a child and his mother. We identify with Torah, we cherish her, we are committed to her, like a little child who identifies with his mother and cannot distinguish between his own identity and hers. In this way, a bond is created between God and man, not only man who studies, but all those who love Torah and feel awed by her.

The Bach explains that the berakha we recite in the morning, "la'asok be-divrei Torah" (to engage in the words of the Torah), is more embracing than "lilmod Torah" (to learn Torah). The berakha, recited by all, including the great scholar, is not for the esoteric intellectual experience of Torah, but rather for the exoteric love of Torah and for the kedusha that results. The entire Jewish community is a Torah community, and hence a holy one, including both the aristocrat of mind and spirit, and the simple anonymous individual. "Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha kehillat Yaakov." The Torah is the inheritance of the entire community of Israel.

## **B**

Knowledge does not naturally contribute to humility. Normally, the greater the intellectual achievement, the greater the sense of arrogance. But Chazal demand that the acquisition of Torah be associated with humility - pride and Torah are mutually exclusive. The transition from Torah to humility is effected by the idea of kedusha. Kedusha logically should be associated with pride; it is rooted in human greatness, the potential for man to come close to the Almighty. How does the experience of being close to God lead to the experience of humility and human abnegation, which is man's remoteness from God? What is the bridge between these two contradictory states of mind? The bridge is defeat, which inevitably must accompany kedusha.

Kedusha is ceaseless in its motion, in its spreading, searching over the vastness, yearning for the infinite. There can be no final fulfillment in the quest for kedusha, because perfect union is not possible; it can never be realized. Man wants to be more, not for the sake of his own honor, but in order to reach out further, to understand more. The unique character of the "masmid" is based on this ideal - the incessant pursuit of an unattainable goal, of a fugitive vision, which springs not from intellectual curiosity but from the kedusha imbedded in the human personality. The yearning for God can never be satisfied. Tehillim (24,3) asks, "Who shall climb on the mountain of God?" (not "who shall climb to the top of the mountain" - "mi ya'aleh le-har HaShem"; but "mi ya'aleh BE-har HaShem") - man is engaged in climbing the mountain but never reaches the peak. This interminable quest for kedusha is portrayed in Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs), a never-ending search for "that which my soul loves," searching and not finding. Kedusha is a hierarchy, a pyramid, which many can enter at the base, but whose apex no one can reach.

The drive is never terminated until man is finally defeated. Every man, no matter how great and powerful, must experience frustration, even - no, especially - in the battle he most wants to win. Even Moshe had his most ardent desire denied him. The Sages explain that had Moshe entered the Land of Israel, it would never have fallen to its enemies, the Temple would never have been destroyed. In other words, Moshe's crossing of the Jordan would have ushered in the messianic era, and Moshe would have been the mashiach. He would have succeeded in climbing to the apex of kedusha, combining the crowns of Torah, kingship, and priesthood (keter Torah, malkhut, kehuna) in their fullest expression, with nothing left to achieve. But that can never be. Moshe had to be defeated. God told him, No. You must stop. You will remain the greatest leader of Israel, the standard of Torah scholarship, but you will not be crowned with the crown of the messiah. You are human, you must lose. You must be defeated.

Now we understand how kedusha and humility merge into one. In the very movement where kedusha exults, "I am near God, I am a great being," it decrees its defeat. Being close to God awakens in me the desire to be closer yet, and that itself informs me that complete fulfillment of my desire is impossible, because I am but a small being. I am near God because I am great; I am not as near as I would want to be, because I am small.

## C

The awareness of defeat, the path to humility, has five steps. The first is the feeling of dependence. A ben-Torah must realize he is dependent on the advice, guidance, and instruction of someone who has come a few inches closer to the summit of the mountain. The more one knows, the greater the perplexity; the closer one is to one's Creator, the clearer the awareness of one's inadequacy and failure. Someone else will know more than I. Sometimes it will be a great scholar, sometimes even a small child or a pupil. If you ask me, "Who may lay claim to kedusha?", I will answer, "One who feels the need for a teacher, one who says, Make for yourself a teacher and acquire a companion" - and a teacher can be even a little child. When Korach said, "For the entire people is holy, and God is in their midst" (Bemidbar 16:3), he was correct. But when he continued, "So why do you (Moshe and Aharon) elevate yourselves above the people of God", he committed a fatal error. He thought that since everyone was sanctified, endowed with kedusha, there was no need for Moshe, for a teacher. Actually, the precise opposite is true. Because they are endowed with kedusha, that is why there is need for a teacher, for a master guide.

The awareness of dependence is expressed through gratitude and loyalty. Judaism believes that man is never self-sufficient; he always needs help, not only from God, but from his fellow man. Tanakh gives us the figure of Naval HaCarmeli (Shmuel I, 23). When Naval denied David's request, he said, "Shall I give MY bread, and MY water, MY slaughter that I have slaughtered from MY flocks, and give to men whom I know not?" He is expressing the mentality of a man who thinks everything is his by virtue of his own unaided efforts, the self-made man. He felt he owes nothing to anyone. The Torah begins the story of Avraham, in contrast, when he is seventy-five. We want to know more about Avraham, how he discovered the eternal truths, why he was chosen. Instead, the Torah tells us about his kinsman Lot. Why is the story of Lot narrated in such detail? It is not

because he was a history-making or destiny-shaping individual. The story of Lot tells us that Avraham's main virtue was loyalty and gratitude. When Avraham told the Egyptians that Sarah was his sister, the Sages point out that Lot did not betray him. Avraham is committed to Lot, going to save him even after Lot turned his back on Avraham, because Avraham's central virtues were loyalty and gratitude. The humble man is indebted to his fellow. To whom should we give loyalty? To many - firstly to parents. Secondly, to teachers. My students owe me loyalty, though I can get along without it. A student should not close the door after the final exam and walk out. Loyalty to teachers, gratitude, is an essential part of Torah, because it is the basis of humility. Thirdly, we owe loyalty to the countless generations of Torah scholars, to the chain of thinkers and dreamers who formulated the methodology, analyzed the ideas, interpreted the difficult tracts, and communicated all this in a living personal way to us. You owe loyalty to Jewish history, to those who sacrificed temporal things to the eternal masora (tradition).

The second step is intellectual circumspection and caution. A talmid chacham is careful in the rendering of halakha. Only ignorant and arrogant people think that all questions are answerable. The humble talmid chacham does not proclaim high-sounding theories, sweeping statements about ethics and philosophy. The humble person will not boast that Judaism is commodious enough to embrace any theory, any trend in modern culture. A new idea, a new problem, must be treated with circumspection, carefully, and with trepidation.

The third step is ethical modesty. There is not only intellectual dependence, but moral inadequacy as well. Moral complacency, so repugnant in a proper framework of kedusha, is all too prevalent in the Orthodox community, both in the diaspora and in Israel. A talmid chacham is very wary of such "pious" people, who condemn and judge mortal man from a position of assumed moral supremacy. Here too, the endowment with kedusha must be accompanied by a sense of inadequacy and modesty, a readiness to admit errors and understand the view of others, rather than one of self-satisfaction.

The fourth step is called "tzimtzum." The humble man must know how to recoil, to retreat; he must know the art of self-contraction, even when not required by the letter of the law. This is true first of all in the physiological sphere - the Rambam describes in *Hilkhot De'ot* (ch. 5) the necessity for a wise man to control his appetite, to forego many common pleasures, even though they are not strictly forbidden. Indulgence in luxury manifests pride and vanity. This continues in the social arena as well; he does not attract attention to himself. The attribute of Tzimtzum belongs, according to the Kabbala, to God Himself. Here too, we are commanded to imitate God, about whom it is written, "Truly You are a God who hides" (*Yeshayahu* 45,15). This is expressed in dress and public behavior. It applies to his emotions as well - when he succeeds, the talmid chacham praises God, but does not boast or brag to others. The more one succeeds in the realm of kedusha, the less the outside world will know of it. If he is in distress, he will pray to God, but not cry out loud hysterically. The greater the wise man, the more he controls, limits, his emotions. Torah, thought, must be spread to others; emotions are not meant for others. Here, retreat is called for. My father, Rav Moshe zt"l, referring to the verse, "The covering shall separate the Holy from the Holy of Holies", explained that man's intellect

is his Holy, but the emotional life, his love, pity, compassion, anguish, exultation, joy and sadness, is his Holy of Holies, and no one is allowed in to the inner sanctum. Emotional life should remain the secret of the Torah personality.

The fifth and final step is "chesed", generosity. We are interdependent. The same way I expect and depend on others to help me, I must extend help to others. I must open myself up to embrace the other. When man steps out of his egocentric solitude, chesed is realized. Kedusha cannot be expressed only by acquisition. To give to others is the necessary counterpoint to the receiving of love. Chesed is an overflow of kindness, love, enthusiasm, which cannot be contained within, like a river which overflows its banks and inundates the environs.

A father's desire for a child is usually based on his fear of death; it is a desire for continuation, for immortality. A mother wishes to have a child out of a desire to love, to give love. Chana, childless, goes to pray to God. The verse says she was "middaberet al liba" (lit., speaking ON her heart). Chazal explain the phrase to mean, "about matters of the heart." She wanted someone on whom she could center and focus her love, her capacity to care and give. Prophecy too, is described as bursting forth to others, incapable of remaining in the mind of the prophet. Yirmiyahu says, "The word of God was a fire within my bones." The wise man must not only turn to those who are above him, but to those who are below who require his teaching. He has no choice; he is overflowing. It is a condition of learning that we give a hand to those below even as we climb higher ourselves. It is just as dignified to teach aleph-bet as to teach Talmud. Chazal says that children who die before they have begun to receive an education are taught by God. Here too, we must imitate God.

Kedushat HaTorah is based on the certainty that all the congregation of God is holy, that all can achieve sanctity. The Rambam writes that the Torah guarantees that the Jews will repent and come closer to God. The humble, generous ben-Torah must have confidence and faith in klal Yisrael, the Jewish community as a whole. He cannot belong to a sect, concerned only with itself. Every Jew has the capacity for kedusha and a desire for sanctity, even if he is unaware of it, and none shall be expelled. We shall never give up on a single Jew, we have faith in "the lost in the land of Edom and the oppressed in the land of Egypt," the assimilated and the downtrodden, even as we believe in the words of the prophet, "Peace, peace, says God, to the far and the near, and I shall heal them."