

Drash Behaalotcha

By Daveed Mandell

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Shabbat Shalom.

As you listen to this Drash, please keep the soul of Rabbi Stuart Kelman, zichrono livrachah, of blessed memory, in your thoughts and hearts. He possessed many of the positive attributes that I describe. Rabbi Kelman was one of the most brilliant Jewish scholars of our time. He not only expounded on Jewish principles, but he also lived his entire life according to those principles, among them, "anivut", which some people translate as "humility".

As I read and researched this week's Parsha, Parshat Behaalotcha, "when you raise", I discovered two intriguing aspects that have profound relevance in today's chaotic, unpredictable, fragile world. The first has to do with moving from hope to despair. The second is concerned with "anivut", which, as I have already said, some people translate as "humility".

Benei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, were doing fairly well in the desert. After all, they now had Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Commandments, and many other laws. They had built a beautiful Mishkan, Tabernacle, and they were moving steadily toward HaArets HaMuvtachat, the Promised Land. Hope should have filled their hearts. Instead, the Israelites began again to complain bitterly about the food. They said that Mahn, Mana, was bo-ring! They longed for the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic left behind in Egypt. They conveniently forgot that in Egypt they were slaves.

A brief digression: No wonder we Ashkenazi Jews love to "kvetch"! My beloved Eukranian bubbe, grandmother, yeheh zichrah baruch, may her memory be for a blessing, could kvetch with gusto. "Aoye vey ize mire ne"! Oh yes, she could have made the Israelites proud!

Back to the Parsha. "And God was angry, and in Moshe's eyes there was evil." (Bamidbar, Numbers, 11:10).

That's a mild understatement, because Moshe was devastated and suffered a nervous breakdown. He thought he was a failure. Listen to part of his blunt, candid, eloquent, impassioned speech to God:

למה הרעַתָּ לַעֲבָדְךָ? וְלָמָּה לֹא מָצֵאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׁוֹם אֶת מִשָּׁא פֶל הַעָם הַזֶּה עָלַי? הֲאֵנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת פֶּל הַעָם הַזֶּה...5 לֹא אוֹכֵל אֲנֹכִי לִבְדִּי לְשִׂאת אֶת פֶּל הַעָם הַזֶּה, כִּי כִבֵּד מִמֶּנִּי. וְאִם כִּכָּה אֶתְּ עֹשֶׂה לִּי, הֲרֹגֵנִי בְּאֵ הָרֶג, אִם מְצֵאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ, וְאֵל אֲרָאָה בְּרַעְיִתִּי."

"Why have You brought this evil on Your servant? Why have I failed to find favour in Your eyes, that You have placed the

burden of this whole people on me? Did I conceive this whole people?... I cannot carry this whole people on my own. It is too heavy for me. If this is what You are doing to me, then, if I have found favour in Your eyes, kill me now, and let me not look upon this my evil." (Bamidbar, Numbers, 11:11-15.)

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, zichrono livrachah, of blessed memory, points out that Moshe was not a failure. He just hadn't yet succeeded. In fact, says Rabbi Sacks, Moshe was an extremely competent leader. He took risks. He sought to make a difference, to change lives for the better, to heal some of the wounds in that fractured world. Moshe wanted to help the Israelites create a society that would liberate, rather than oppress; dignify, not ruthlessly enslave. Yet, the Israelites resisted his efforts. Needless to say, however, God didn't let Moshe down. God told Moshe to gather seventy elders and assemble a leadership team, so he would no longer have to carry the heavy leader's burden on his shoulders alone.

From that time on, Moshe is a changed man. He adopts an extremely calm demeanor. This brings us to the second aspect of the Parsha that I want to discuss, namely, "anivut", which some people translate as "humility".

דמו עניו משה ישא"י

hadm ויאמ dmח יח-וע שרג

"And the man Moshe was the most humble above all the men that were upon the face of the earth." (Bamidbar, Numbers, 12:3.)

Anivut, humility, is often defined as lacking inner worth, amounting to very little. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luuzatto, the author of the 18th century work Mesilat Yesharim, Path of the Upright, defines anivut as shiflut, inner lowliness and inferiority. According to this definition, the Torah wants us to recognize that all achievements are very trivial, attainments mere boastfulness, prestige a silly exaggeration.

The Talmud (Sota 49a), tells us that when Rav Yehuda HaNasi, Rabbi Judah the Prince, died, the quality of anivut disappeared with him. But Rav Yosef disagreed. He said, "How can you say that when Rav Yehuda died, anivut vanished? Do you not know that I am still here?"

If anivut really means humility, this doesn't make sense. After all, how could Rav Yosef boast of his humility and still remain humble?

The 19th century head of the Yeshiva of Volozhin, Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, also known as Reb Hirsch Leib Berlin, and popularly known as the Netziv, offers us an alternate definition of anivut, which perhaps could be translated as meekness, kindness, gentleness or softness. According to the Netziv, anivut means a lack of both arrogance and insistence upon kavod, honor. Anivut means not to demand that people bow and scrape before you because of your talents, abilities and achievements. Anivut means to recognize your gifts as just that, gifts granted to you by a merciful God, and which, possibly, you did not deserve. Anivut means not to assume that because you have more competence, or greater endowments, than others, you thereby become a more precious human being.

The late head of Yeshiva University, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, zichrono livrachah, of blessed memory, elaborates: Anivut means a soft answer to a harsh challenge; silence in the face of abuse; graciousness when receiving honor; dignity in response to humiliation; restraint in the presence of provocation; forbearance and a quiet calm when confronted with calumny and carping criticism.

Moshe is indeed an anav. He shows no feelings of hurt, of injured kavod, honor; no pride, arrogance, harshness, hypersensitivity. When Moshe's brother and sister, Aharon and Miriam, criticize him behind his back, he remains calm, even when God is angry and punishes them. Moshe does not react

to the remarks of his brother and sister. Instead, Moshe prays to God to heal Miriam: "al na rfa na lh."
"Please, God, heal her." (Bamidbar, Numbers, 12:13.)

This, then, I believe, is true anivut.

May we, in the United States of America, and in Israel, continue to work for change, keep hope alive and not give in to despair. May God heal these broken communities and countries and this broken world. May we, at last, be granted leaders who are kind, meek, gentle, soft, sincere and blessed with the precious gift of anivut.

Shabbat Shalom.