YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

Shiur # 11: Humility and Wisdom

Our Rabbis taught: "A person should always be humble like Hillel and not impatient like Shammai." There was a story in which two people made a wager, saying: He who goes and makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred zuz. Said one: "I will go and incense him." That day was Friday afternoon, and Hillel was washing his head. He went, passed by the door of his house, and called out: "Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?" Thereupon he robed and went out to him, saying: "My son, what do you require?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son," he prompted. Thereupon he asked: "Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?" He responded: "My son, you have asked a great question. It is because they do not have skillful midwives. He departed, tarried a while, returned, and called out: "Is Hillel here; is Hillel here?" He robed and went out to him, saying: "My son, what do you require?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son," he prompted. Thereupon he asked: "Why are the eyes of the Tadmurians bleared?" He replied: "My son, you have asked a great question. It is because they live in sandy places." He departed, tarried a while, returned, and called out: "Is Hillel here; is Hillel here?" He robed and went out to him, saying: "My son, what do you require?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son," he prompted. He asked: "Why are the feet of the Africans wide?" He said: "My son, you have asked a great question. It is because they live in watery marshes." He said: "I have many questions to ask but fear that you may become angry." Thereupon he robed, sat before him and said: "Ask all the questions you have to ask." "Are you the Hillel who is called the *nasi* of Israel?" "Yes," he replied. He retorted: "If that is you, may there not be many like you in Israel." "Why, my son?" he asked. "Because I have lost four hundred zuz through you," he answered. "Be careful of your moods," he answered. "Hillel is worth it that you should lose four hundred zuz and yet another four hundred zuz through him, yet Hillel shall not lose his temper." (*Shabbat* 30b-31a, based on Soncino)

This famous story has been a long time favorite of Jewish youth, as it celebrates the sterling character of Hillel, who knew how to not lose his temper even when bombarded with a series of silly questions at the most inconvenient time possible. The opening line indicates that humility represents the secret for becoming like Hillel. Apparently, a healthy sense of one's own limitations helps one deal with such trying situations with equanimity. A look at some commentaries reveals further insight into the humble personality.

 Rav Kook points out that Hillel is "*nitatef,*" (he robes himself) before greeting the questioner. I had always thought that this conveys greater cause for frustration as Hillel keeps getting back into the bath, only to have to dress again in response to each knock on the door. Rav Kook (*Ein Ayah*) understands this verb as referring to clothing oneself in a garment of honor. Indeed, the gemara (*Shabbat* 119a) employs the same verb to refer to R. Chanina's robing himself to go out and greet the Sabbath queen. If so, this element of the tale conveys that humility and the need to dress in a dignified fashion need not be at odds with each other.

Humility necessitates an accurate evaluation of oneself, both of one's bad and good characteristics. Most people have difficulty admitting their faults, but the humble person sees those faults clearly, even as he or she notes the more positive traits as well. Hillel, who admits his own shortcomings, also realizes that he merits dignified clothing. Furthermore, if humility involves complete self-abnegation, it becomes impossible for the humble individual to honor others- what honor can come from total nullity? Therefore, Hillel robes in honorable garb as he goes out to meet the questioner. In addition to the points raised by Rav Kook, I would add that Hillel represents an important institution, the patriarchite. Humble individuals in a communal leadership role must both truly understand their faults and yet be able to represent their office with dignity.

 Hillel also manifests humility in his ability to answer the questions. Rav Kook points out that arrogance can get in the way of intellectual pursuits in numerous ways. The arrogant individual is quick to dismiss a question as nonsense. Furthermore, the haughty person will eschew more simple explanations in the pursuit of a complex solution that befits that person's self-image as a great thinker. However, some seemingly foolish questions contain a bit of wisdom, and sometimes the simplest answer is the correct one. Hillel's humility enables him to think seriously about these three questions and to find an answer that is both simple and worth knowing.

 This brings us to the question of just what Hillel answers. R. Zvi Hirsch Chayes, in his commentary printed in the back of the Vilna *shas*, understands the answer in scientific terms. Whether it be through Lamarckian adaptation or a Darwinian survival of the fittest, the people of a given environment have adapted or evolved to best survive in that environment. If so, Hillel takes the question seriously and offers a scientific answer.

 Alternatively, Rav Kook suggests that Hillel is referring to Divine providence. Hashem has arranged the world to enable people of different locations to thrive in their respective areas. While the intellectual puffed up with self-pride would find the three questions beneath him, or only worthy if the answer involves a long and drawn out theory, Hillel's humility leads him to think seriously about the questions and to offer an answer that is simple, elegant and educational.

 In this context, it is worth noting that several commentators wonder why it is that Hillel bothers answering foolish questions. The *Sefat Emet* (in his commentary on *Shabbat*) answers that the questioner truly though he was asking nonsense questions, in the hope that this would anger Hillel. To the questioner's chagrin, however, Hillel found real substance to the questions. In Rav Kook's view, this ironic twist emerges as the result of Hillel's humility.

Finally, Rav Kook sees one more aspect of the truly humble in this tale. As the *ba'alei mussar* were well aware, the humble individual always has one last test. Will he or she become arrogant about their humility? We can easily imagine people usually humble and self- effacing, but overly proud of their ability to face their own faults squarely. The person attempting to get Hillel angry understood this temptation and tried to utilize it against Hillel. When he said: "I have many questions to ask you but fear you will get angry," he was implicitly challenging Hillel's humble patience. He thought that such a challenge might finally raise the ire of Hillel. Hillel's calm response revealed that this great sage had overcome this final temptation of the humble as well.

If so, this story serves as a paradigm for the ideal humility. It is not self-abnegation, but rather the quite difficult endeavor of seeing oneself accurately, warts and all. When performed correctly, such humility enables more sympathetic interaction with others, as well as the ability to analyze ideas more successfully.