

## Parshas Beha'aloscha 5771

### IS A HUMBLE MAN LESS OF A PERSON?

#### AN APPARENT PARADOX

Last week, we explored the stature of Moshe Rabbeinu, who attained the highest prophetic level of all time. It was established that his unprecedented ability to communicate with Hashem was directly connected to his other well-known quality, as described towards the end of this week's *parshah*: "And the man, Moshe, was extremely humble, more than any other man on the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar 12:3*). As R' Chaim Volozhiner explained, the trait of pride serves as a barrier to Divine communication; since Moshe was the quintessential *anav* (humble man), his prophetic ability was supreme.

To develop this notion to its fuller sense, let us turn to another nagging question on this issue: how, indeed, is it possible for these two ideas to exist simultaneously? That is, at the same time that Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest prophet of all time – having achieved the sharpest measure of closeness to Hashem Himself – he not only retained a sense of humility, but is considered the paradigm in this area as well! How could a human being attain the loftiest of positions and yet not a scintilla of pride penetrates his being?

According to R' Ya'akov Neiman (*Darkei Mussar, parshas Beha'aloscha*), it's automatic. Every person is imbued with a *neshamah* (soul), which – if you will – is a "piece" of the Divine. As such, a *neshamah* is completely sacred and pristine, free from any impurities of character. Pride and other negative character traits are products of the *physical* aspect of the person; the more in touch he is with his soul – the closer a connection he maintains with his spiritual side – the further away he will be from the imperfections of a base

character. Moshe, who exemplified spiritual perfection, had so minimized his attachment to earthly pursuits that his soul became the overwhelmingly dominant factor in his existence. With his *neshamah* firmly in control, the pristine nature of the soul rose to the surface, with the result that Moshe was arrogance-free.

This idea is alluded to in the following Talmudic passage:

#### TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Perhaps one of the most intriguing of Talmudic disputes is the one recorded in *Eruvin* (13b):

For two and a half years, Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel disputed the following issue: One claimed that for man *not* to have been created is a preferable alternative to having been created; the other held that it was preferable that man *had* been created than had he not been created. The vote was taken, and the conclusion was reached: It would actually have been more preferable for man *not* to have been created; but now that he has been created, he should examine his deeds.

The profound meaning and ramifications of this perplexing debate deserve more careful and thorough treatment than can be provided here; the *Maharsha (Makkos 24a)*, for example, provides an elaborate dissertation on the subject. What follows is an admittedly truncated and oversimplified version of his explanation.

The issue seems to revolve around the fact that we were given commandments – numerous commandments. As the well known Mishnah (*Makkos 3:16*) puts it:

רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר, כצד הקדוש ברוד הוא לצכות את ישראל, לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות.

"R' Chananya ben Akashya says: The Holy One, Blessed

נדפס לזכות ר' אברהם יצחק נ"י בן פיגא ריזא ע"ה  
ברכה והצלחה ברוחניות ובגשמיות

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives  
to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

is He, desired to make Yisrael meritorious; therefore, he granted them multiple Torah commandments.”

To be precise, there are 613 Torah commandments; of these, there are 365 *negative* commandments (prohibitions one must avoid, such as eating pork, speaking slander, etc.), and 248 *positive* commandments (actions one must actively engage in, such as taking a *lulav*, learning Torah, etc.) (*Makkos 23b*). Rather than a purely philosophical exercise of pondering the existence of man, the Maharsha explains the dispute in practical terms, as a form of cost/profit-analysis.

As far as man is concerned, his creation entails somewhat of a risk. Once he has sprung into existence, man faces a challenge he would have avoided had he remained “uncreated”: namely, the danger of violating the negative commandments. If he wasn’t around, he surely would not violate them; now that he’s here, he may falter when faced with the temptation, thus incurring punishment. In other words, his creation introduces the option of retribution.

On the other hand, he also faces the prospect now of performing positive mitzvos – through which he will garner reward – which likewise would not have been available if he didn’t exist.

In other words, had he not been created, he would have been safe from retribution, but unable to earn reward. Having been created, he now stands to earn reward, but may also end up worse off if he violates the prohibitions.

Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel’s debate centered around this point: in the final analysis, which is the better option? To remain “neutral” – i.e., guaranteed free from punishment, but with no opportunity for reward (by *not* being created), or to be thrust into a situation (by being created) where opportunity abounds for positive gain, at the risk of possibly entering into negative territory through the accumulation of punishment? In the final analysis, it was decided that the possibility of punishment is too weighty a prospect (especially in light of the greater number of prohibitions as compared to positive mitzvos); but now that man is created, he should seize the opportunity to perform as many “deeds” (positive mitzvos) as possible, so as to come out ahead.

As it relates to the discussion above, R’ Neiman gleanes an essential element from this passage. Whatever the exact meaning and profundity of the statement, the conclusion was reached that it would have been preferable had man *not* been created. In practical terms, this means that even now, it is in an individual’s best interest to minimize, as much as possible, his investment in his physical tendencies – to lessen, if you will, his physical existence. The less of a “body” he becomes, the better for his ultimate spiritual welfare. Such is the lesson of Moshe Rabbeinu’s achievement: he de-emphasized material gain, thus freeing his soul from the constraining shackles of his physical tendencies and their attendant character failings. In doing so, he attained the zenith in spiritual wealth.

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