

Panim Yafot on Humility:

The following passage is from *PanimYafot*, by R. PinchashaLevi Horowitz of Frankfort (1750-1815). He was one of the great students of the Magid of Mezritch, along with his brother R. Shmuel Shmelke of Nickolsburg. While clearly immersed in the Hasidic world, his traditional scholarship was also widely recognized, and he was called to serve as the rabbi of Frankfort. Among his students was R. Moshe Sofer, the *Chatam Sofer*.

In this passage, the *Panim Yafot* unpacks the opening verse of one of the final readings in the Torah, from Deut. 29:9. There Moses addresses all of the people of Israel arranged before him, from the greatest to the lowest. Our teacher picks up on this to offer a teaching on humility: do not think yourself greater than anyone else, because compared to God all are equal; do not see yourself lesser than any others, as that will prevent you from bringing your full self into divine service of engagement in the world

Following this text are a few reflection questions which may help you to open this teaching up and find application in your own life.

ספר פנים יפות על דברים פרק כט פסוק ט

עוד אמר בילקוט [תתק"מ] "ראשיכם שבטיכם": אע"פ שמניתי לכם ראשים ושופטים ושוטרים, כולכם שווין לפני, שנאמר "כל איש ישראל". נראה דדייק דהל"ל "ראשי שבטיכם" או "ראשים לשבטיכם" כפירש"י. אלא הענין הוא כי הש"י משה קטן וגדול והכל כאין נגדו. כי בדבר הארוך, שיש לו תכלית, ימצא בו חלקים מחצה או שלישי ורביעי וכיוצא בו. אבל הש"י, שאין סוף ותכלית למציאותו, אין חילוק בין קטן וגדול כי הכל כאין לנגדו. וז"ש "אל מי תדמיוני ואשועה" [ישעיה מ, כה] שכל מי שרוצה לדמותו, הכל שוה, בין קטן ובין גדול כאין נגדו.

ואל יאמר אדם השפל בדעתו "מי אנכי להודות ולהלל לפני הש"י, אשר משרתיו קדושים עליונים". כי המלאך הגדול כאין נגדו כמוני. ופירשנו בזה מ"ש הילל [סוכה נג]. "אם אני כאן הכל כאן, ואם אין אני כאן מי כאן". ענינו, כי הילל היה בענוה גדולה יותר מכל אדם. ואמר בהיותו בבהמ"ק בשמחת בית השואבה שלא יבוש אדם לשמוח לפני ה' כיון "שאני כאן, כ"ש שיכולין הכל להיות כאן, כי אני שפל מכולם". וא"ת "מי יימר כי נכון הדבר ממך", ע"ז אמר "אם אין אני כאן, מי כאן": שאפילו הגדול שבגדולים כאין הוא נגד הש"י, כי הוא שוה ומשה קטן כגדול.

וז"ש כיון "שאתם נצבים לפני ה' אלהיכם" אין הפרש בין ראשיכם לשבטיכם, כי הנביא והפחות שבשבט שווין נגדו. וכן "זקניכם ושוטריכם" כי הראש שבזקנים שבסנהדרין גדולה שוה לשוטר המשמש הדיינים. וזהו "כל איש ישראל":

“You stand this day, all of you, before YHVH your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the people of Israel” (Deut.29:9).”

We find this in the midrash (*YalkutShim'oni* #540): the Holy One said, “Even though I have appointed for you heads, judges and magistrates, you are all equal before Me, as it says, ‘**all the people of Israel.**’” It appears that the midrash is reading the verse precisely, for it should have said either “the heads of your tribes (*rashei shivteikhem*)” or “heads for your tribes (*rashim leshivteikhem*)” [whereas it reads literally as “your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officials], as Rashi noted. But, the matter is that the Holy One equates the least with the greatest, as all are like nothing before Him. Something measurable is also limited, and can be broken up into parts – in half, or thirds or fourths or the like. But the Holy One is *Ayn Sof*, and there is no end or limit to God’s being. It makes no difference then whether great or small, all are as nothing before God. This is as Scripture says “**“To whom, then, can you liken Me, to whom can I be compared?” says the Holy One**” (Is. 40:25). Anyone who wishes to liken himself to God will ultimately find he is equal to everyone else: both great and small are as nothing before God.

If you think lowly of yourself, do not say, “Who am I to offer thanksgiving and praises before the Holy One Whose own servants are so holy and exalted?” After all, [you could just as easily say,] “even the most exalted angel is still like nothing before Him, just like me.” This is what Hillel meant when he said (*Sukkah* 53a): “If I am here, then everyone is here. If I am not here, then who is here?” Hillel was exceedingly humble, more than anyone. He taught at the water drawing celebration that no one should be ashamed to celebrate before God: “Since I am here, and I am the lowliest of all, then everyone else certainly can be here.” And, should you say, “Can anyone deny that it is I who make things right [because I am here]?” Hillel said, “But if I am not here, who is here?” For, even the greatest of the greatest [like Hillel, for example] is like nothing before God, for God levels all and then equates the least with the greatest.

This what our verse means. Since “**You stand this day, all of you, before YHVH your God**”, there is no difference between “**your heads**” or “**your tribes**”, and a prophet and the least of the least of your tribes are equal before God. So, too, “**your elders and your officials**”: as the head of the great Sanhedrin is equal to the least magistrate serving the judges. This, ultimately, is the nature of “**all the people of Israel**”.

For Further Thought:

What a wonderful text about balance. There is no one less than I, and there is no one greater. There is no one more deserving of honor than I, yet there is no one less deserving. Before God all are one, so any time we get a swelled head, perhaps we should let out some steam.

1. That which is infinite is incomparable, while finitude invites comparison and division. How might holding the awareness of each person's infinite value change your relationship to them?
2. What is your reaction to thinking about yourself as "nothing" in light of God's reality? Does this inspire awe and a positive sense of humility? dejection and impassivity? objection and resistance?
3. When, if ever, have you played both sides of Hillel's teaching? What do you do to include everyone, no matter whom, no matter what? What do you do to make clear that you are in charge, that you hold authority?