



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

THE ME IN THE MIRROR AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-WORTH IN THE TORAH

MODULE II

SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



Most People in this world walk around with low self-esteem. We need to remind ourselves on a daily basis, that we are all children of G-d and have enormous potential. G-d returns our souls every morning, testifying to His faith in us, on a daily basis. This truth is the bedrock of healthy self-esteem, and we must refer to it and reinforce it constantly.

Yet, there is another component to our self-esteem beyond our G-d given intrinsic worth, that we need to develop, and that is self-respect. This is a knowledge born not from who we are, but from what we undertake to do with our lives.

SELF-RESPECT IN THE TORAH

Dennis Prager, Syndicated talk radio host, surveyed teenagers and asked them “what do your parents want most for you in order of priority”:

1. To be good.
2. To be successful
3. To be smart/do well in school.

Overwhelmingly the majority of kids felt that their parents wanted them to become successful, then smart and lastly, good. And Prager surmised from the attitude of the kids, that had there been a few more choices, being good would have slipped even further down the list.

Parents were shocked to find out that their kids thought being good meant so little to them, and dismayed to realize they hadn’t transmitted that value to them.

For sure there is nothing wrong with being successful or making a lot of money, however **it’s very easy to confuse being a successful person with being a good or great person.**

Q: Why are Jews so driven to be successful? What do you think? Does it have anything to do with our desire to be good?

People pursue financial success not only for the money, but because they are really looking for self-respect. They want to wake up in the morning and be able to say “I am somebody!” While they may not feel “genuine self-respect” they are often given respect by **others**.

SOURCE 1: Hebrew Kavod and Kavade

In Hebrew the word respect is **kavod**, and it comes from the root **kavade**, which means heavy, substantive.

Q: Do you think the concept of heaviness has anything to do with the concept of respect?

A person who is “heavy” and has genuine self-respect never has to advertise or publicize his accomplishments: they speak for themselves. It’s real; Just like weight.

In Ethics of Our Fathers the rabbis make the following comment about respect and honor:

SOURCE 2: *Ethics of Our Fathers Chapter 4, Mishna 1*

Who is the honored person?...(Pirke Avos 4:1)

You would think the answer is fairly obvious; Those that people give honor to, or in our terms, the one who is famous. Yet the Mishna continues:

SOURCE 3: *Ethics of Our Fathers Cont.*

Who is the honored person? The one who honors others. (Pirke Avos 4:1)

Q: One would think the “honored person” is the one whom others respect? Why do you think the Mishna takes the opposite approach?

Though counterintuitive, the Mishna’s statement encapsulates the view that if your focus is upon others and what you can do for them, you will gain genuine self-respect. **Simply put, the goal is really being good, not looking good!** If you are good, you will look good. It’s a guarantee. If you are a good, wife, mother, friend, child, colleague, you will have genuine self-respect.

However, if one runs after honor, which a lot of people do, guess what? As the Talmud says:

SOURCE 4: *Talmud Eruvin 130:b*

“Honor runs away from those who pursue it, and runs after those who run away from it. (Tractate Eruvin, 130b)

Q: Why do you think this is an iron-clad rule in life, at least over the long haul?

LOOKING GOOD VS. BEING GOOD

It’s not cool in our society to be good; looking good maybe, but being good? Good seems nerdy, boring and certainly flies under the radar, while being successful and looking good has an immediate allure. Success doesn’t necessarily translate into self-respect though, because it’s not always based upon achievements that have any enduring value.

In other words, if you focus on doing things because they are right, good and true and build up others, you will become a respected person. **It’s a pity that people spend so much time chasing, external measures of success longing for self-respect while often compromising the very areas of their lives which will generate the most real self-respect.**

A WORD ABOUT TRYING TO BECOMING BETTER

Many people feel a sense of despair when it comes to the prospects of change in life. Perhaps they have been following a certain path for a long period of time. Even though they may agree that they would like to improve, it seems very unlikely to happen.

Well, I would like to offer some consolation and encouragement to these people, of which I include myself: First, we have to know what we are responsible for at any given moment, to judge ourselves fairly. Consider the following source:

SOURCE 5: *Talmud Bavli, Berachos 33b What's In Our Hands*

Everything is in the Hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים

Q: It seems that the “fear of Heaven” is in our hands. What does that mean?

The “fear of Heaven” is a euphemism for the “fear of G-d”, commonly understood as the free will that we have to do good or bad.

SOURCE 6: *Rashi, Berachos, 33b – The Range of Man's Free Will*

Everything that is placed on a person is decreed by God. For instance, [whether the person is] tall, short, poor, rich, smart, dull, light, or dark is all decreed by Heaven. **But [whether a person is] righteous or evil is not decreed by Heaven, but is entrusted to the individual's choice.** He has two paths in front of him, and he needs to choose to fear Heaven.

כל הבא על האדם ביד הקדוש ברוך הוא כגון ארוך, קצר, עני, עשיר, חכם, שוטה, לבן, שחור, הכל בידי שמים הוא, אבל צדיק ורשע אינו בא על ידי שמים, את זו מסר בידו של אדם, ונתן לפניו שני דרכים, והוא יבחר לו יראת שמים

Free will is indeed bestowed upon each one of us; But it seems like a daunting burden, given all the obligations that we are required to fulfill.

Let's take a look at a fairly contemporary source (1960's) which offers an authentic perspective on this statement of the Rabbis, that is quite hopeful and encouraging:

SOURCE 7: *Michtav M'Eliyahu, Rabbi Eliahu Dessler. Vol. I., p. 113 Your Point of Free Will*

Decisions of free choice are limited to the meeting ground between the positive and negative forces within an individual. For example, many people might be negligent in speaking derogatorily about others, only because they are accustomed to it and are oblivious to its severity. The very same people however would never consider stealing or murder, because their education has ingrained in them not to do so, to the extent that they have no inclination to do such thing. **While each individual's struggle may be over a different decision,** it is important to note that **each person's struggle is qualitatively the same** – Regardless of a person's level, his struggle to choose **right over wrong, in his own unique circumstances,** is the same. (in that moment, at that point).

The zone of free choice is dynamic. As a result of a good decision, a person raises his moral level, so that those areas which were previously the battleground between his positive and negative inclinations are now incorporated into the zone of his good side and will no longer present a conflict. This is the principle that “One mitzvah leads to another mitzvah” (Pirkei Avot 4:2). The converse is also true.....

Q: How does Rabbi Dessler's understanding of free will even the playing field for all of us?

We are only responsible (at any given moment in time) for the free willed decision that is in front of us, where our positive and negative inclinations are in conflict. For each one of us this point is different. We are truly each running our own race.

Though this very encouraging position doesn't absolve us from our responsibility to one day fulfill all of the Torah's directives, it does remind us that getting close to Hashem is like being on a ladder, and what matters most is that we are all climbing. (though we may be on different rungs at any given point in time).

A second hopeful idea is the proper perspective we must have on the past and the possibility of spiritually rewriting our history through the miracle of "teshuva" – return.

Our tradition is anchored on the concept that we can always change, and that G-d is eagerly awaiting this to happen:

SOURCE 8: *The Prophet Isaiah 44:22*

I have wiped away your willful sins like a cloud
and your errors like a **mist** – so return to Me, for I
have redeemed you.

מְחִיתִי כָעָב פְּשָׁעֶיךָ וְכַעֲנָן חַטֹּאותֶיךָ שׁוּבָה
אֵלַי כִּי גִאֲלִתִּיךָ:

The verse from Isaiah describes G-d's erasing our past mistakes, imploring Israel to come Home. Notice that G-d redeemed us (in past tense) even before we actually return; that's how eager He is to have us do teshuva! The Money is in our bank account, before the check is even cashed.

When you combine G-d's eagerness and support for us to become better people, and His reasonable, limited expectations for us each day, there is reason to be optimistic about truly changing for the better.

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

Each of us is a diamond in the rough. We have a lot of intrinsic self-worth and real value. We have infinite spiritual potential and power within and we are card carrying members of a People that has literally transformed the world in which we live. And we should get out of bed in the morning feeling great about this.

Yet though we are worth so much, we are all still diamonds in the rough; the more we polish the diamond, improve the diamond the more valuable it becomes. The more we care about others and do good, the more the natural beauty of the diamond is able to shine out. We need to walk around feeling we are individually worthy, and part of a special group with a very meaningful calling. And from this healthy place of self-worth, we can begin to build lives that generate true self-respect by focusing on becoming great people – based upon a lifetime of good acts!

EXERCISES

1. If we review the different areas of our lives, how much of our emphasis is on looking good and how much on being good?
2. How much are we focused upon ourselves and how much upon others?
3. Pick a few areas of life. Try to come up with your unique point of free will in each area.