

The Secret to a Healthy Self-Image¹

Here's an experiment for you: Count how many times today you sent yourself negative self-messages.

Each and every self-directed criticism telling you that you "are not good enough" counts as one click on the negativity meter. For example, count how many times you berate yourself for not acting like a better parent/friend/spouse (—why did I yell?), or for not being more creative at work (—why didn't I come up with that idea?), or for not choosing healthier food selections(—did I really need to devour that entire chocolate bar?).

If you're like most of us, you'll reach a pretty high number, which can have very unhealthy consequences. As a result of all our continual selfdoubt, many of us feel unworthy and inadequate. It can even lead to depression, concluding that, no matter what we do, we will never measure up.

On the other hand, I've met more than a few individuals who have acted as if they were the greatest gift to mankind. Just as some people never stop criticizing themselves, these egoists never start—no matter how much they could benefit from a good, hard look in the mirror. They don't see any of their inadequacies, and therefore see no need to work to be better, kinder, more understanding individuals. They are perfect just as they are.

How can we achieve a healthy and realistic self-image while maintaining a proactive desire to improve? How do we properly assess our accomplishments and our shortcomings, avoiding both grandiosity and lowself-esteem?

This week's Torah reading, the first portion of the third book of the Torah, is called Vayikra, which means "He called." It begins with G-d calling to Moses from the Sanctuary to teach him the laws that he would transmit to the Jewish people.

There is an interesting anomaly in how the word *vayikra* is written in the Torah scroll. The last letter of the word, the letter *aleph*, is written in a small, undersized script. In contrast, the first letter of the opening word of the Book of Chronicles, "Adam"—also an *aleph*—is written with a large, oversized script.

What is the message of the small and large *alephs*? And do they perhaps hold a lesson for us in gaining a positive and productive self-image?

The Chasidic masters explain that Adam was formed by G-d Himself, fashioned in the "divine image" Aware of his superior qualities as "G-d's handiwork" and the crowning glory of creation, he became somewhat proud. **The large aleph in Adam's name indicates his self-importance, which led to his downfall in the sin of the Tree of Knowledge.**

In contrast, Moses was also aware of his superior qualities as the greatest prophet to ever live, through whom the Torah was communicated to this world for perpetuity. But, rather than making him conceited, this awareness brought him humility. Moses recognized that his impressive capabilities were granted to him as a gift from G-d. Accordingly, he felt no arrogance, but a pressing sense of responsibility. Thus, when Moses recorded in the Torah that G-d called to him, he wrote the word *vayikra* with a small *aleph*. The commentaries note that the small *aleph* in the word *vayikra*, starting off this week's Torah portion, hints to us that **Moses was the most humble person who ever walked this earth.**

Adam and Moses were both great men, aware of their greatness. But in Adam this sense of self-worth caused his disgrace, whereas in Moses it evoked humility and led to further greatness.

Did Moses not realize his exceptional qualities? Why didn't he feel even a touch of arrogance?

Because true humility—as well as a truly positive self-image—does not come from denying or exaggerating our talents, but rather from acknowledging that all our abilities are a present from G-d. If G-d had given another person the same qualities, he may have surpassed my own accomplishments. But G-d has provided me with these channels to accomplish His will in the best manner possible—as only I can.

The lesson of the *aleph* is: Realize your greatness. Understand your infinite potential, your vast talents and your special capabilities.

But at the same time, understand that these gifts are endowed to you by G-d, Who desires that you utilize your unique talents to better our world—in a way that you, and only you, can.

Experience your greatness, but at the same time, feel your smallness. Humility as well as a healthy sense of self (—and maybe even that chocolate bar!) can coincide. We just need to bring G-d into the picture.

1. *There is an interesting anomaly in how the word *vayikra* is written in the Torah scroll. The last letter of the word, the letter *aleph*, is written in a small, undersized script.*

ויקרא אל-משה וידבר יהוה אליו ...

And the LORD called to Moses and spoke to him ...

¹ Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/BaMidbar/Devarim*, (Chabad.org), pp. 3-6



In contrast, the first letter of the opening word of the Book of Chronicles, "Adam"—also an aleph—is written with a large, oversized script.

אדם שת אנוש ...

Adam, Shet, Enosh ...

2. *Moses was the most humble person who ever walked this earth.*

a. Numbers 12:1-8

¹Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. ²"Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this. ³(Now **Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.**) ⁴At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." So the three of them went out. ⁵Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, ⁶he said, "Listen to my words: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. ⁷But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. ⁸**With him I speak face to face**, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

3. *True humility—as well as a truly positive self-image—does not come from denying or exaggerating our talents, but rather from acknowledging that all our abilities are a present from G-d.*

a. אָנָו (anav)—poor, humble, afflicted, meek, needy, lowly.

It does NOT mean evidencing little spirit or courage, being overly submissive or compliant, or being anxious to conform one's opinion's to that of others.

b. Avot 4:4

Rabbi Levitas² of Yavneh says: **Be exceedingly humble in spirit**, for

the anticipated end of mortal man is worms.

1) The sages adjuration has been viewed as a challenge to those of his contemporaries who took what he evidently considered excessive pride in their knowledge of Greek science and thought. Seen from this perspective, **the sage is admonishing them against hubris and not to forget that they ultimately will have to give account of their behavior.** Accordingly, his advice ... is, even at the moment when a person seems to have the world in his grasp, he should recognize the fleeting nature of success and wealth and that the same end awaits all. The statement appears to be based on or cited from the teaching of Ben Sira, "Humble yourself to the uttermost, for the doom of the impious is fire and worms" (Ben Sira 7:17).³

c. Avot 5:19

MISHNAH 19. WHOEVER POSSESSES THESE THREE THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER; AND [WHOEVER POSSESSES] THREE OTHER THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF BALAAM, THE WICKED.⁽¹¹³⁾ **THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER, [POSSESS] A GOOD EYE,⁽¹¹⁴⁾ AN HUMBLE SPIRIT⁽¹¹⁵⁾ AND A LOWLY SOUL.⁽¹¹⁶⁾** THE DISCIPLES OF BALAAM, THE WICKED, [POSSESS] AN EVIL EYE,⁽¹¹⁷⁾ A HAUGHTY SPIRIT⁽¹¹⁸⁾ AND AN OVER-AMBITIOUS SOUL.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

(113) So designated in Jewish literature, as his wickedness is proved by his own willingness, even eagerness, to go with Balak's messengers, and his 'apologies' for not being able to curse Israel; it is he, too, who is said to have counselled the seduction of the Israelites by the Moabite women.

(114) V. supra II, 9. **Abraham demonstrated his generous and ungrudging nature in his dealings with the King of Sodom (Gen. XIV, 22f.) and with Ephron the Hittite (Gen. XXIII).**

(115) Abraham's humility is evident from his words: ... I ... 'who am but dust and ashes (Gen. XVIII, 27).

(116) נָפֶשׁ (soul) is used here of 'desire,' 'appetite,' a meaning which it has already in Biblical Hebrew. שָׁפֵלָה would thus mean 'kept low,' 'subdued.' Cf. Abraham's dealing with Lot, Gen. XIII. The three above qualities are among those sought for when appointing judges. v. J. Sanh. I, 4.

(117) Balaam's avarice is clear from his own words; v. Num. XXII, 18; XXIV, 13.

(118) A reference to Balaam's claim that he was one that knoweth the knowledge of the Most High (Num. XXIV, 16).

(119) Balaam's 'handling' of Balak, and his attempts at 'outwitting' God, reveal an insatiable desire for power.

² Rabbi Levitas was a 3rd-generation Tanna and one of the most prominent members of the Academy at Yavneh (*Midrash Shmuel*), but little is known about him and this teaching is the only one in the Mishnah attributed to him.

³ Martin Sicker, *The Moral Maxims of the Sages of Israel, Pirkei Avot*, (iUniverse, Inc.), p. 208.

d. Matthew 5:3

³"Blessed (or happy) are the **poor (*anav*) in spirit** (i.e., humble) for **theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.**"

1) The idiom "poor in Spirit" means "humble" (See Isa 66:2 below).

2) "for theirs is the kingdom ..." is a poor translation, because it implies ownership. How can one own the Kingdom? It is impossible—better: **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they make up the Kingdom of Heaven."** They are citizens of the Kingdom. They have accepted the King's rule.

3) Isaiah 66:1-2

¹This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? ²Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD. **"These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit (lit., "poor and broken in spirit"), and who tremble at my word.**

e. Matthew 11:29-30

²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for **I am gentle and humble in heart**, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

KJV—for I am meek and lowly in heart ...

f. Luke 12:15-21

¹⁵Then (Yeshua) said to them ... "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

¹⁶And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' ¹⁸"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" ²⁰"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' ²¹"**This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.**"

g. Luke 14:7-24

⁷When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, (Yeshua) told them this parable: ⁸"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least im-

portant place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹For **all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**"

h. Ephesians 4:2-3

²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, **bearing with one another in love.** ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

i. Philippians 2:3-8

³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests **but each of you to the interests of the others.**

4. *Experience your greatness, but at the same time, feel your smallness.*

a. Romans 12:3, 16

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: **Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought**, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you ...

¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

b. 1Peter 4:7-11

⁷The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. ⁸Above all, **love each other deeply**, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰**Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others**, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹**If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides**, so that in all things God may be praised through Yeshua the Messiah. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

c. Proverbs 16:18

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

d. Proverbs 16:19

Better to be **lowly (or poor) in spirit** along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.

e. Matthew 7:1-5

¹"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³"**Why do you look at the speck of saw-**

dust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

f. Romans 2:1

¹You, therefore, have no excuse, **you who pass judgment on someone else**, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, **because you who pass judgment do the same things**.