

Can being humble actually be a source of strength? What does it mean to be “like the earth?” How can I let go of needing the recognition of others, and if I support the advancement of others, can it lead to my own growth as well? What does it mean to bend?

In this episode of *Jewish Food For Thought*, Hanan and his father dig into the topic of humility. Daddy shows Hanan that humility is about letting go of our insistence on trying to control everything around us, and recognizing that we’re human; this includes limiting how much credit we take when things go well, while also curbing how much we punish ourselves when things go badly. Being humble actually helps us maximize our learning and our growth, while at the same time helps to facilitate the growth of those around us. And, humility ultimately offers us the chance to be part of something bigger than ourselves. As you have undoubtedly heard before, in Jewish tradition humility is so honored we are taught that Moses, our most elevated teacher, was also the most humble.

Hanan’s father focuses on the seemingly paradoxical nature of being humble. Hanan worries that being humble makes a person weak. His father, however, shows him that precisely the opposite is true.

At the end of the *Amidah*, a core prayer in daily and *Shabbat* liturgy, a petition written by Mar son of Rabina (a 4th century Babylonian teacher) asks for the following:

Let my soul be like dust.

Why would we pray to be like the dust, like the earth? It seems like a strange thing to pray for, but by using the essence of teachings by a teacher of mysticism, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772 – 1810, Ukraine), Daddy explains that being like the earth actually has many advantages.

① The Power of the Earth

Rabbi Nachman teaches that humility, just like the earth, has a gravitational pull. People do not want to be around someone who needs to be above or superior to them all the time. By being humble, people around you are given the space to feel their uniqueness, and they don’t feel the need to fight for their place, which ultimately draws them to you.

Note: In his description, Rabbi Nachman uses the term “*Tzaddik*.” In Jewish mystical terms the *Tzaddik* is someone who is completely righteous, the role model for behavior.

All things and all creatures stand on the earth all the time. The only way anything can leave the earth is if some countervailing force overcomes the pull of gravity, distancing the object from the earth in accordance with the strength of the countervailing force. As soon as the countervailing force ceases, the object returns to earth.

Thus when a person throws an object upwards, the force that he applies distances it from the earth: the greater his strength, the higher he can throw it. Afterwards, however, when the countervailing force is spent, the object falls back down to the ground because of the gravitational pull of the earth, which draws everything to it. Were it not for this, nothing would stay on earth, because the earth is a round ball and everyone in the world stands on its surface. It is because of the earth’s gravitational pull that a thrown object falls back down to earth as soon as the countervailing force ceases.

The *Tzaddik* is the “earth,” for “the *Tzaddik* is the foundation of the world” (*Proverbs 10:25*) and everything rests upon him. **The *Tzaddik* has a gravitational power of attraction that draws everything to him,** for the true *Tzaddik* is the foundation of the world and everything derives from him. All the other *Tzaddikim* are only branches of the true *Tzaddik*, each according to his level: one may be a branch while another may be a branch of a branch. For this unique *Tzaddik* is humble and lowly and makes himself like dust: for “I am dust and ashes” (*Genesis 18:27*). **He is the foundation of the world precisely because he is “dust” and thus he supports everything.**

Likutey Moharan I, 70

When Hanan’s father talks about being like the earth, he says:

DADDY: If you insist on being above everyone, everyone feels so little around you, no one can grow around you, they will run away from you, but if you consider being below, it has the opposite effect.

1. Let’s start with a hard question to answer. What are examples of times you felt you needed to be above others? Why did you feel it was necessary? In hindsight, do you still think it was? Could you have responded by being more humble?
2. In what ways do you bring yourself below others? Do you feel that you do it genuinely, like a *Tzaddik*, or is it less natural? How hard is it to do?

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3. How does it feel when you are “below?” Do you feel diminished, or strong? Something in between?
4. Who are the people in your life who make you feel elevated, as though they give you space to grow? For whom have you done that?

② The Nourishing Earth

Considering that in modern society we are constantly being told to look out for ourselves, it is hard to change our frame of reference around humility. Being humble asks us to remember that allowing someone else to grow, even more so, facilitating someone else’s growth, doesn’t take away from our own growth. In fact, it offers both us and others the chance to learn and be a part of creation. It doesn’t need to be a zero-sum game where one loses when the other gains. In reality, neither needs to lose.

Hanan is initially resistant to the idea of nourishing others, and thinks that by helping others grow, he may be sacrificing or “missing out” himself.

Daddy responds:

DADDY: You don’t become less because others become more. It’s actually the opposite: the earth expands as the plant grows, like a mother’s womb. By being like the earth, you actually become a partner in creation.

While the Rabbi Nachman quote used above in Section One encompasses the idea of humility having a gravitational pull, it includes Daddy’s idea as well:

...for the true *Tzaddik* is the foundation of the world and **everything derives from him**. All the other *Tzaddikim* are only **branches** of the true *Tzaddik*, each according to his level: **one may be a branch while another may be a branch of a branch**. For this unique *Tzaddik* is humble and lowly and makes himself like dust: for “I am dust and ashes” (*Genesis 18:27*). He is the foundation of the world precisely because he is “dust” and **thus he supports everything**.

Likutey Moharan I, 70

1. How does the idea of growing together strike you? To what extent do you feel that when you allow others to grow, you grow as well? Does one of you gain more than the other? Does it matter? In what ways does this teaching align with the idea of the branches in the Rabbi Nachman quote?
2. Think of a time when you have helped someone to grow, or learn, or succeed. Did you feel lessened by the experience, or did you feel that you grew as well?

3. What steps would Hanan need to take to shift from his perspective to his father’s? How many of those steps would you be able to take? How many do you think you *need* to take?

Hanan’s father includes the powerful statement that when you grow together, you become a partner in creation.

4. What do you think Hanan’s father means when he talks about being a “partner in creation?” The Torah and later rabbinic text teach that God needs our help in order to finish creation. How do we do that? Does helping other people grow feel like a beginning to that process? How does it make you feel when you think about being a part of something as infinite as creation?

③ Making Yourself Low Like the Earth Allows You to Learn

Hanan’s father adds a third benefit of humility, continuing Rabbi Nachman’s analogy of the earth. While it may seem counterintuitive, Daddy reassures Hanan that there is actually a benefit to being humble. It isn’t only about helping others grow and learn, it is also about gaining something for yourself.

DADDY: ...by making yourself low, like the earth, you yourself gain the capacity to receive and to grow and learn.

There is a discussion about humility in the Talmud (the Jewish code of law codified around the year 500 C.E.), as it relates to the meaning of a phrase in the Torah describing the Israelites’ travels.

Here is the Torah text:

And from the wilderness to Mattanah...

And here is what the Talmud says it means:

If a person makes himself like the wilderness which everyone treads upon (i.e. he is humble) then he will retain his studies, but, if no, he will not retain his studies.

The Talmud later continues:

Then the Torah is given to him as a gift.

Eruvin 54a

The rabbis create a beautiful wordplay with Mattanah, which is both the name of a place and the Hebrew word for “gift.” If you act with the humility of the wilderness, you will learn more and receive a *mattanah*. They go so far as to say that when you are humble, the studies you retain, or the gift, is Torah – the most important gift in their worldview.

1. What do you think this teaching means? In your opinion, does humility have anything to do with one’s capacity to learn? Have you ever had the experience of learning more as a result of being more humble?
2. Have you ever felt that your capacity to learn was impeded by a lack of humility? If so, what was it specifically that prevented you from being able to learn?
3. What distinguishes learning that happens through humility versus learning in “non-humble” ways? Is there a difference? Does learning through humility feel like a gift to you, as the rabbi’s describe?

Daddy adds that by making yourself low, like the earth, you gain the unique space and perspective to be able to receive and learn in a way that you can’t when you’re busy fighting for control or focused on getting other people’s recognition.

DADDY: Can you really learn, Hanan, when you are busy trying to show everyone how much you know?

4. Have you ever focused so much on how other people think of you that you’ve missed out on a learning opportunity? Why do you think people care about what other people think of them?

④ Bend

Along with Rabbi Nachman’s teachings about the earth, Hanan’s father points out that humility can reveal inner strength. In response to Hanan saying it is against his nature to “be like the earth,” Daddy pointedly responds:

DADDY: That’s actually the deepest meaning of humility. To make the choice to go against your nature. To have flexibility, to bend.

Daddy continues:

DADDY: It’s not a sacrifice. On the contrary. It’s uncovering your hidden flexibility and power. You discover new possibilities within yourself, it’s recognizing we are not as limited as we thought, and at the same time discovering your role as a part of something larger.

Daddy says that by bending, by moving out of your comfort zone or “giving in,” you are forced to find new solutions. In addition to being empowering, you can gain a new perspective in which you, and your insistence on control, are not at the center. This in turn allows you to connect to, and participate in, something much bigger and greater than yourself.

1. Why does giving up control seem so hard? What happens when you find out you can do it?
2. Do you think people who are flexible are “giving in,” or are they able to bend in a way that allows for new ideas? Can you think of a time when you were flexible and it allowed you to see a scenario in a new way?
3. How do you think being flexible allows you to learn more?
4. How difficult is it for you to let go of control? Is it the same in your professional life as in your personal life? What kinds of situations are the most challenging?
5. Tying many of his teachings together, Daddy challenges Hanan to think of something he believes he can’t live without and to give it up. What would you choose? How would this exercise compel you to be more humble and what might the benefit be?