D’var Torah for Par’shat Sh’lakh L’kha – The Mussar Institute

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Sivan 5780/June 2020

“Measuring Up”

The core building blocks of *mussar* are the *middot*, the traits by which one “measures” the progress of one’s essential soul toward its perfection. If someone were to ask you where the idea of *middah* appears in the Torah itself, you might direct them to *Par’shat Sh’lakh L’kha*. It would be true, though it would be terribly ironic.

Only a few verses after the Torah tells us in last week’s portion that Moses is an extraordinary exemplar of the *middah* of humility (“Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other person on earth” - Numbers 12:3), our portion begins with Moses optimistically sending twelve renowned tribal leaders to scout out the Land of Israel and bring back an encouraging report. Here his humility may be as much of a limitation as a strength, for he cannot imagine these leaders’ egos obstructing their mission, since he could not envision that failing in himself.

The scouts return from their journey. With great trepidation they report having seen *anshey middot* – “people of great size.” Having measured themselves against these giants they have found themselves to be lowly “grasshoppers.”

One doubts whether the scouts’ use of the term *middot* reflects the profound meaning it has in the practice of *mussar*.

Or does it? After all, the scouts only seem capable of sizing up these Canaanites in comparison to their own timidity. Apparently, they cannot look at other people objectively and learn from their behaviors or actions. For all we know, they see these “giants” as masters of all the many traits we strive to achieve in our *mussar* work: humility, compassion, truthfulness, moderation, calmness, love of God, and so forth.

And because our only knowledge of these “foreigners” is that our own ancestors quake in fear of them, we have no idea whether they in fact embody the “measure” of all we ourselves should be striving toward in our personal work. For among the scouts’ shortcomings is their failure to judge others by the *middah* of *kaf z’khut*, the benefit of the doubt. The scouts’ report may reveal an awareness that transcends their own lack of humility: They may in fact have seen paragons of the very *middot* the Torah wants us to aspire to, and this is the Torah’s ironic way of testing *us* to see if we can glean the hidden lesson that the scouts could not.

The *M’sillat Y’sharim* counsels us extensively on the practice of humility. In chapter 23 of his great guide, he offers this sweeping dismissal of those who have habituated themselves away from modest self-perception:

“At the head of all the detriments to humility is foolishness and lack of true knowledge. You can observe that arrogance is found most prevalently among those who are most foolish.”

In other words, when the scouts describe themselves as “grasshoppers” they mean the opposite: They foolishly think so highly of themselves that they are willing to feign humility in order to assume fearful power over their fellow Israelites and scare them into longing for a return to Egyptian slavery.

The portion ends with what appears to be a non sequitur. It instructs us to wear *tzitzit,* ritual fringes, on the corners of our garments. Rabbi Yekhezkel Taub of Kuzimir (d. 1856) teaches that we recite the blessing for donning the fringes and not the *tallit*, even though it is the beautiful *tallit* we are adorning ourselves with. This, he says, is because the fringes hang low to the ground to teach us humility. “Look at them,” says the Torah, “and remember.” Remember the scouts whose arrogance resulted in Israel’s wandering for forty years in the wilderness when they could have learned to measure themselves against Moses if not the anonymous “giants” whom God sent their way. Remember the power of your own words and deeds to influence others. Remember that if you call yourself a grasshopper, you are probably telling yourself a truth you do not yet have the capacity to understand. Remember that you are a scout on a mission to perfect your soul, and that the mission takes a lifetime of diligent, humble work to complete.

Prompts: How can we ever know when we are being truthful to ourselves as we assess our level of humility?

When should we trust the example of other people’s *middot*, and when should we turn inward to measure ourselves by the standard of our own soul?