

RH Eve 5773 (2012): The Serious Lessons of the Jester

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

There was once a king who ruled his kingdom with wisdom and compassion. As he approached the end of his days, everyone in the kingdom wondered who would be the next ruler. Would it be one of his children? An adviser? A general? To keep the contenders from fighting over the throne, the king put his instructions in a letter, which was to be opened only on the day of his death.

When that day arrived, the kingdom mourned its wise and caring leader. And then all eyes turned to the king's letter to see who would rule in his place. Whom had the king chosen? Not one of his children, nor an adviser, nor a general. The king had chosen instead -- the jester.

The jester? Everyone in the kingdom thought this must be a joke. How could a fool be king? But such were the king's instructions. And so the jester was brought before the royal court. Royal retainers removed his jester costume and cloaked him in the robes of the king. They removed his jester hat and placed the crown on his head. And they sat him on the royal throne.

At first the situation was awkward - for the new king as well as his kingdom. But over time it turned out to have been a brilliant choice. The jester was every bit as wise, as compassionate, and as insightful as the old king had been. He listened to everyone with care - advisers, generals, even the commoners of the realm. He treated everyone who came before him with respect and with kindness. He used his powers to bring peace and prosperity to his kingdom. To the amazement of all in the royal court, the jester came to be a superb ruler. And everyone in the royal court indeed, everyone in the kingdom, came to love him.

There was a mystery surrounding the jester-king, however. Every so often he would retreat to a distant room in the palace, a room to which only he had the key. For a few hours he would lock himself in that room. And then he would return to the throne and resume his duties. Most members of the royal court assumed he went to the room to think, to meditate, or perhaps to pray. They accepted the mystery as part of their beloved king's life.

Once an ambassador came from a far-off land. The ambassador spent many hours with the king. He grew to appreciate the king's wisdom and his kindness. It was **rare**, he thought, for a king to listen as carefully as this king listened. It was **unusual** for a king to seek advice from everyone who appeared before him. It was **remarkable** for a king to care as deeply and to work as hard for the good of his subjects as this king did.

When the ambassador noticed that the king occasionally disappeared into his distant room, he wondered, "What does the king do in that locked room? Why does he go there?" The ambassador just couldn't let go of the mystery. So one day when the king retreated to his room, the ambassador secretly followed behind. When the king closed the door, the ambassador crouched down and peered through the keyhole. There he took in the king's great secret.

In the privacy of the room, the king took off his crown and his royal robes and put on -- the costume of a jester. Around and around the room he danced the jester's dance, making funny faces and singing the silly songs of a jester. Then he stood before a great mirror and recited to himself: "Never forget who you are. You may look and sound and act like the king, but you are only the jester. You are only the jester pretending to be the king. Never forget who you are."

Now the ambassador understood it all. He understood the source of the king's deep wisdom. He understood that the king's kindness and greatness emanated - from his **humility**. And now he knew the secret of the king's humility. This knowledge made the ambassador love the king even more deeply. He vowed his everlasting loyalty to the king. And he vowed to keep the king's secret.

Over the years the king and the ambassador grew close. One day when they were alone, the ambassador confessed what he had done and what he had seen. "I promise you on my life that I will never reveal your secret," he declared. "But there is one thing I have never been able to figure out: Of all the people in the royal court whom the old king could have chosen to succeed him, why did he choose you? Why **did** he choose the jester?"

The king smiled at his friend and slowly replied, "And who do you think **he was** before he became king?"

A wonderful story to begin Rosh Hashanah, which ushers in the season of penitence. For now is a time of self-reflection, when we attempt to look at ourselves through the mirror of truth; when we attempt to see ourselves through the lens of the soul, from the perspective of the eternal. And from these points of view we ask ourselves, who are we? In what robes do we clothe ourselves? What is our true purpose?

This is a story about humility. It is a reminder, that wisdom, power and success are ultimately anchored in our regard for the worth and sacredness of each other. As the jester-king teaches us, greatness is not measured by what we control, or whether we appear to have all of the answers, but by our respect for: the world God created, our fellow human beings, and the impact our choices will have on both. As Reb Zoma states in *Pirkei Avot*, "Who is wise? One who **learns** from **all**

people. Who is respected? One who **honors all** people.” The Jester ruled with wisdom because he sought the counsel of others. He was beloved and respected because he cared for the welfare of those he served. And he was successful, because he remembered who he was at all times – on the one hand, the jester, a flawed human being like everyone else. And on the other hand, the king, charged with a sacred responsibility which needed to be fulfilled with care and love.

At one point or another almost every child is asked: what do you want to be when you grow up? The response is usually some sort of profession: astronaut, dancer - or **super hero** in the case of **my** son. As Rabbi Ed Feinstein wrote, “the Jester teaches us that there is a better answer. I want to be me – the most authentic honest person I can be. Whatever *work* I do, I never want to forget who I really am”. A creation of God with the potential, and obligation, to be a blessing to the world.

As you can see, humility clearly does not translate into being meek, as often people assume. One who is humble is **not** one who refrains from exercising power or influence in the world. As our great commentator, the Netziv said, “True humility is not a negation of our power. It simply requires a true understanding of what and who we are and what and who we are not. Not in the sense of comparison to others. Rather it is about being aware of, and at home with, our abilities, personal traits and our role in the universe”.

Take our great teacher, Moses, as an example. Moses, described by the Torah as the most humble man to have ever lived, was also the man who defied Pharaoh, who led the troublesome Israelites out of Egypt, who split the Red Sea, who ascended Mount Sinai, and who argued with God, God’s self. Moses was hardly meek. He knew how to stand up for himself and for others when necessary;

and yet he also had the ability to *live* for others and to be aware of his God-given talents without being overly impressed with them, or himself. To be humble then is to honestly recognize one's place in the world, one's strengths and weaknesses, and still be able to appreciate one's shared humanity. As C.S. Lewis put it, "Humility is not thinking less **of yourself** but thinking of yourself, **less**."

Yet, how can we accomplish this? How do we seek to be humble without being arrogant about our humility? One way is to link humility to mortality, as Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh did in another teaching in *Pirkei Avot*. He wrote: "Be exceedingly humble, for a mortal's hope is but the worm!" Perhaps a bit morbid, but his point is well taken. Compared to history, our time on this earth is short and our accomplishments minute. We can and should attempt to accomplish as much as we are able, but before we become too smug, perhaps we should take the long view. Or maybe he was simply trying to remind us of the equality of death, to make the point that we are all human and come in to the world and leave it in a similar fashion.

Regardless, it seems that the crass formulation here is deliberate. To paraphrase Rabbi John Rosove, "Humility begins in our base recognition of the yawning chasm between our mortal limited selves and God's exalted Divinity". It is an awareness not meant to cripple but to keep us in balance on the path of holiness. As the Hasidic Rabbi Simcha Bunam wrote, in one pocket we carry the note which reads, "The world has been created for our sake". In the other we must always carry the message, "We are but dust and ashes". Humility, as the Jester teaches, is the ability for an individual to act with purpose yet, at the same time, sincerely value the purpose of every other creature as well.

Perhaps another way to understand humility, and how to acquire it, can be learned from the Talmud in Tractate Eruvin. It states: “Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel: For three years there was a dispute between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel, the one asserting, “The law is according to *our* views,” and the other asserting the same. Then a divine voice came forth and said, “The utterances of the one **and** of the other **are both the words of the living God, but** the law is according to Hillel.” The Talmud then asks, since both are the words of the living God, why is the law according to Hillel? Answer: Because the students of Hillel were kindly and **humble**, and taught both their own rulings **and those** of the school of Shammai. Indeed, they taught the rulings of Beit Shammai **before** their own. This should prove to you that the man who humbles himself, the Holy One exalts; and the man who exalts himself, the Holy One humbles.” In other words, the law was declared to follow the students of Beit Hillel because they respected and honored the views of Beit Shammai. Despite their firm and forthright assertion that they were correct, they were not afraid to honor Beit Shammai’s opinions as a valid alternative. Therefore, it was their humility in the face of their opponents, and not the correctness of their opinion, which made them worthy of honor. The students of Beit Shammai were no less correct but apparently were less humble about their position. Thus the law went with Beit Hillel.

It seems that in a religious system, according to a Jewish philosophy, arrogance has no place. Humility, as defined earlier, is a bedrock value. This is illustrated very visually on Passover, for example. Symbolically *hametz*, which we are commanded to expel from our house, is equated with arrogance, while *matzah*, which is central, is equated with humility. *Hametz*, our typical bread, is puffed up, and becomes filled with air as it rises, increasing its outward stature and grandeur. The *matzah* however, remains flat and humble. It is content to appear as it is and

makes no attempt to draw more notice to itself. Thus, according to this symbolic dichotomy, leavening represents arrogance -- the element inside a human being that prods us to raise ourselves above others and present ourselves as greater than we truly are. *Matzah*, which has no leaven, becomes the ideal self that is content to be who he is, equal in value to those around him.

That is why, according to this interpretation, in Leviticus it tells us that in addition to the Passover prohibition, no *hametz*, no arrogance, can be part of any offering to God. In the moment when you come before the Almighty a sense of humility is implicitly expected. Whether it be when our ancient ancestors brought a sacrifice to worship God or whether it be when we gather in synagogue to pray like tonight, these spiritual acts should be accompanied by an awareness that we, as individuals, like everyone else, are flesh and blood: valuable and unique, yet no greater or more important than anyone around us.

On Rosh Hashanah, let us begin the New Year in humility. Let us look inside, re-discover our true selves: attributes and faults. Let us value our worth while recognizing our limits. And let this awareness lead us to our understanding of the value of all others so that we may follow the lesson of the jester-king and live our lives doing our best to contribute to the world in partnership with others who are seeking to do the same.

Shanah Tovah!