



Assistant Rabbi Lisa Berney

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“No More than My Place, No Less than My Space: The Quest for Humility”

For many of us, sitting on an airplane isn't a particularly enjoyable experience. It's even less enjoyable if you're sitting in what today's airplane manufacturers call "coach." Regardless of your disposition, as soon as you board, the bulkheads and cramped aisles make you keenly aware of your space – the space taken up by our bodies... the space taken up by our luggage... the space taken up by others... in fact, the entire plane experience can be condensed into a careful negotiation of space.

While I dare not complain about long legs, on a plane, let me just say that they become less desirable. Scrunched up as the person in front of me bruises my knees when they innocently lean their chair back, I feel very aware of the space I take up. And yet, what gets to me is not the person in front of me reclining to take a nap, nor even the airplane manufacturers trying to maximize profits by packing as many people as possible into coach...no, what gets to me is the guy sitting in the next chair (sorry gentlemen, I have yet to see this happen with a woman) who seems fully content to spread his legs as wide as humanly possible, with his arms comfortably resting on both arm rests, just really getting cozy, as if he is sitting on his couch at home, with what seems like no regard for the long-legged human next to him. This, I would identify as taking up too much space.

Our tendency to seize not only our own space, but that of others, has become so widespread that it has earned its own nickname on social media – “manspreading.” Despite the name, we are all equally capable of occupying more than our fair share of space, men and women alike. But this challenging behavior becomes especially problematic for commercial and public transportation systems. In fact, in 2014, the New York MTA commissioned a sign for its trains stating, “Dude, stop the spread, please. It's a space issue.”

As it turns out, Judaism, too, is concerned with how we occupy space – and not just in coach, but in life. Our sages understood our quest to find and occupy our rightful space, as... humility, a cornerstone of Jewish tradition.

Our rabbis taught that, “A small deed done in humility is a thousand times more acceptable to God than a great deed done in pride.”¹ Similarly, the Torah praises the greatest leader of our tradition, Moses, not for his gift of speech, not for his military prowess, not even for his bravery or his leadership...but, rather, for his humility.

Even God demonstrates the import of humility by performing what the mystics call *tzimtzum*, a conscious contraction of God’s own self in order to make room for the creation of the world. Though God could easily occupy all of space and time, God chooses to make room for us by withdrawing God’s self, setting an example of humility for all humans to follow.

But, in Judaism, humility is not the opposite of conceit. Or, as C.S. Lewis wisely wrote, “humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” Holding our egos gently, humility asks us neither to indulge nor malnourish them.

Our teachers of Mussar, a Jewish ethical practice, explain that, in life, we must, “Occupy a rightful space, neither too much nor too little. Focus neither on our own virtues nor on the faults of others.” In all parts of life, from the physical to the emotional to the spiritual, we are called to cultivate an honest awareness of ourselves and the space we ought to take up, as well as an awareness of others and the space that they need.

In other words, we shouldn’t make ourselves so small that we refrain from kindly and politely asking the person next to us on the plane to share the armrest... or to limit their legs to their seat....or to shift their bags to make room for ours in the overhead. However, we also shouldn’t overextend ourselves, occupying the space needed by others in order to make ourselves more comfortable... or rushing to the overhead bins to store personal items we could easily fit underneath our chairs.

To address this tension, the Chasidic master, Rabbi Bunim used to instruct his students to carry two slips of paper in their pockets. On one would be written: “I am but dust and ashes,” and on the other: “The world was created for me.” By correctly applying these two very different statements to the manner in which we understand our self-worth, our importance, and our awareness, we, like the disciples of Rabbi Bunim, can learn to walk the humble path.

Our scholar-in-residence two years ago and the leading contemporary teacher of Judaism’s Mussar practice, Alan Morinis, shared a beautiful story about his struggle with self-worth. He had just finished speaking at a local congregation, when an older woman approached him and began to say, “You have a wonderful, wonderful...” Her words faltered, giving him plenty of time to guess what word would come next. “Voice,” he finished her sentence in his mind, since he had just addressed the group. No, he thought, maybe she was about to say “way with words,” as his speech was received well that evening. And right after that, he upped the ante and thought, perhaps it’s “presence.”

¹ *Orchot Tzadikim, The Ways of the Righteous*

But, before he could speculate further, she concluded her slowly winding sentence with the word "...wife," and a warm smile.²

Even an expert in the field of character development knows what it means to feel an instinctive craving for affirmation and praise. It is only human to want to be seen and recognized, just as it is only human to want to be free from blame and ridicule. But when we allow our hunger for praise or our fear of criticism to dictate our sense of worth... when we cling too tightly to the approval of others or recoil too far from the potential for scorn... we can easily find ourselves taking up too much space... or too little.

Indeed, though there are many times when we need to contract to make room for others, there are also moments in all of our lives when we are urgently called to insert ourselves... to use our influence or power because we have a unique opportunity to matter.

Not because the situation is really about us, but because we are uniquely poised to make a difference. Many of us in this room have received that call, participating on boards of groundbreaking organizations or committees working on important causes.

Cultivating humility is not about rejecting praise or criticism. In fact it's actually about receiving it with a full and open heart. *We should* take pride in our achievements and successes. *We should* feel good about that beautiful note someone sent us or the kind words they shared about us. *We should* feel free to take a moment and celebrate the positive comments and reactions we receive on Facebook about the joys and challenges we share about our lives.

Similarly, we *should* look for the truths in honest criticism. *We should* feel sorry when someone shares that we have failed them or let them down. *We should* seek feedback and embrace opportunities for improvement.

But our assessment of ourselves and the space we choose to occupy must be rooted in something greater than praise or scorn. For if we rely on others as the dominant barometer of our self-worth, the insatiable ego will always want more, never feeling whole.

Finding our rightful place *also* relies upon our ability to navigate our own sense of importance. Whether it happens at the airport, at the grocery store, on the computer, or at Temple... we all have moments when we grapple with the difference between how important *the world* seems to think we are and how important *we* think we are.

For many of us, this struggle occurs most acutely in the car. After all, Los Angeles traffic possesses the power to transform even mild-mannered, gentle souls into beacons of rage and loathing. When we're already late for an

² Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 45.

appointment, or we're hurrying to pick up a child or grandchild at school, it doesn't take much to alter our carefully crafted schedule.

Unsettled and perhaps unhinged, we curse at the drivers who *dare* to share the road with us or at the sub-par transportation system our city officials *still* haven't fixed. Oh, wouldn't it be nice to have a train...

For others, the struggle takes place at a restaurant. When we're paying for the convenience of a prepared meal, even the smallest nuisances can make us simmer with resentment. Whether our table wasn't ready when we arrived or our waiter bungled our order, we may call the manager incompetent or even disparage the restaurant on Yelp.

Still, for others, the struggle occurs during a book club meeting or class as we sit empty-handed even though we paid extra for expedited shipping for our book from Amazon, and even though they guaranteed it would arrive two days earlier. No matter how accurate Waze is, or how fast Amazon Prime claims to deliver, or how meticulously we plan, the world often has infuriating ways of letting us know that it does not run according to our schedules.

We all feel impatience at numerous moments in our lives, but the common factor in all of these situations is the focus upon ourselves. "The traffic is delaying *me*. The restaurant is inconveniencing *me*. Something is interfering with *my* plan or standing in the way of *my* needs."

As Morinis teaches, "Sometimes the only inner voice I can hear is my ego, loudly promoting all its important needs and plans, drowning out any other voice that might whisper within."³

We are the lead characters in the drama of our lives, and that's not a bad thing. But in this leading role, we can sometimes forget that "we are neither so central nor independent as all that... that we are actually wired into all kinds of larger circuits and systems, from the molecular to the social, and we don't control many of the factors that have a role in shaping our lives."⁴

Admitting to our lack of control, when it comes to the really important things in our lives, is not something that comes easily to any of us. But that doesn't make it less true.

Though counter-cultural, in a world of humility, we are called upon to fight the urge to believe that we are always supposed to get what we want exactly when we want it.

On the other hand, this doesn't mean that we need to constantly inconvenience ourselves for the benefit of others or to always operate on their calendar. We need not simply accept when we don't get what we paid for

³ Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p.61.

⁴ *ibid*

at a restaurant or store, nor should we settle for unfulfilling jobs or relationships—that would be taking up too little space. But we can learn to admit that the world does not exist on our schedule... nor should it.

But learning to navigate our own sense of importance is not all we need to truly find our rightful place. We also must also learn to navigate our own sense of awareness.

Many of us have preconceived notions about others and the world, whether we're taking on a new task or even sharing well-intentioned advice with family and friends. But a practice of humility calls on us to relinquish the assumption that we know everything. Far too often, we deem ourselves experts—in a particular field, on a particular person or situation, about a particular stage in life. And sometimes, we are quite learned in a specific area of scholarship or praxis. Yet, humility demands that we cultivate a curious mind, no matter how much Nietzsche or Mozart we know, and to be constantly open to the ideas and people around us.

A concept borrowed from Zen Buddhism, “beginner’s mind” represents a core aspect of humility. Beginner’s mind refers to having an attitude of openness and eagerness. It is seeing each experience we encounter and each person we meet as a teacher. In beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind, there are few.⁵

Developing a beginner’s mind requires us to be persistently curious about ourselves and the world. In this way, our minds remain in a constant state of readiness—ready for anything, open to everything, dedicated to a life of learning...aware that we are never experts in the human endeavor, and conscious that, at any age, we have more to learn. From the person we meet in the grocery store, to our colleagues at work, to our family members, everyone we encounter is a teacher who has something to offer.

I want to be clear, beginner’s mind need not deflate us. Admitting that we don’t know everything is not the same as assuming we know nothing. We do have knowledge to contribute, and our opinions do matter. Suggesting otherwise would artificially limit our contributions to the world. But we also cannot grow so confident that we blind ourselves to the boundless world we don’t yet know.

Two of the most famous sages in Jewish history, Hillel and Shammai, disagreed on almost every facet of Jewish law.

But while the school of Hillel became the reigning voice in Jewish learning, the disciples of Hillel always studied the teachings of Shammai and even referenced them in their own work. The Talmud suggests that while “both the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel are ‘words of the living God,’ the law agrees with the rulings of the school of Hillel because the followers of Hillel were kind and humble. They not only

⁵ *Shunryu Suzuki, Beginner’s Mind*

studied the rulings of the school of Shammai, they even mentioned these rulings before their own... teaching that whoever humbles oneself, God raises up, and whoever exalts oneself, God humbles.”⁶

The School of Hillel never assumed they knew everything. They remained opened to the opinions and ideas of others, even their greatest opponent, because they understood the value of looking at the world with a beginner’s mind, echoing the sentiments of Rabbi Hanninya, who thoughtfully taught, “I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and the most from my students.”⁷

By successfully navigating our sense of self-worth, our sense of importance, and our sense of awareness, we can begin to explore the path to humility.

And in this age of endless posturing, shameless self-promotion, and pervasive manspreading, the need for humility is abundantly clear. The frequency with which we readily seize the space needed *by* others or concede the space we need *to* others has created a world rife with inequity – between men and women, between whites and blacks, between rich and poor, between strong and weak. Now, more than ever, our *society* needs us to learn how to occupy no more than our place, and no less than our space.

But... as much as our society needs humility, *we* need it far more. For, without humility, we have no hope of becoming our best selves and cultivating the unique gifts only we can give to the world. On the road to fulfillment and self-actualization, we are like travelers groping in the dark, desperate for a light to illumine our path. Humility lights our way by giving us an unvarnished and honest assessment of who we are.

When we take up too much space... we lose sight of ourselves, becoming so over-inflated with arrogance that we cannot hope to acknowledge our shortcomings. Consumed by our own importance, we unwittingly trample upon the needs of others, ignorant to the damage we inflict upon them and upon ourselves.

Meanwhile, when we take up too little space... we also lose sight of ourselves, becoming so deflated by self-disparagement that we lose faith in our abilities to grow. Blinded by doubt, we withhold the vital contributions only *we* can offer the world, afraid we may never be cherished or acknowledged.

Now, more than ever, our *souls* need us to learn how to occupy no more than our place, and no less than our space.

On Yom Kippur, we face the ultimate test of our humility. Cloaked in white, forgoing the pleasures of food and drink, stripped of our material trappings—we remind ourselves how we entered this world, and, ultimately, how we must depart it. Regardless of our accolades, our prominence, or even our knowledge, we all pass before God

⁶ Eruvin 13b

⁷ Taanit 7a

as equals on the Day of Judgment, as God beckons us to acknowledge and occupy our rightful space beside one another... to become the value-driven people we were always meant to be. But we need not wait for Yom Kippur to begin this journey....

Each day, as we conclude our central prayer, the *Amidah*, we traditionally recite a silent prayer of humility known as Elohai Netzor, asking God to accompany us on our journey forth from prayer into deed:

“My God: Guard my tongue from doing harm, and my lips from lies and deceit. Before those who wrong me with words, may silence be my practice. **Before all human beings, let humility be my stance.** Open my heart to Your Torah, that I may follow its sacred path of duty.”

As we turn from deed to prayer on this Day of Judgment, we once again beseech God to accompany us, and to guide our hearts gently and lovingly between the perils of extremes that litter the path to humility... by stymying our pursuit of affirmation, as well as our flight from criticism... by tuning us to the world’s clock, as well as our own... and by awakening us to the world of knowledge outside ourselves, as well as the gifts we have to offer.

Before a world laden with inequity, may humility enable us to become our best selves. Before all human beings, may our humble offerings advance the causes of justice, equality, and peace. Open our hearts to Your Torah that we may finally find and occupy our rightful space, with plenty of legroom for all.