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By
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When I was a boy, I and so many others of my generation were avid fans of Mickey Mantle of the New York Yankees. We admired him not just because he was a great batter, base runner, and outfielder. We admired him because he was so amazingly natural and graceful. (We knew about his baseball playing; we didn't know about his private life!)

Mantle seemed to have an instinct; as soon as a batter connected with a baseball, Mantle was already running into position to catch the fly ball. He was able to make catches look easy, where other players would have had to make leaping catches, or would have missed altogether.

Mantle made difficult plays look relatively routine.

All really great players are spontaneous and natural. Lesser players seem to try too hard.

This is true not only of baseball but of all areas of human endeavor. The really great and exceptional people are the ones who do amazing things in a natural, inconspicuous way.
Those who are constantly striving to show how good they are—those are the ones who invariably are not of the first rank. They play to the grandstands, they seek popular adulation; but they lack the inner poise and serenity that comes with real greatness.

This is true also when it comes to religion. Alan Watts, who wrote many books on Eastern religion, made an important observation relevant to all religions: "The most spiritual people are the most human. They are natural and easy in manner; they give themselves no airs; they interest themselves in ordinary everyday matters, and are not forever talking and thinking about religion. For them there is no difference between spirituality and usual life…" (The Supreme Identity, NY, 1972, p. 128).

Jewish law frowns on "yuhara"—pretentious religious behavior. It sees such behavior not as expressions of true religiosity, but of egotism or misguided piety. Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his Pele Yoetz, wrote: "If you wish to adopt a practice which the law does not require, observe it privately. This is especially true of a person who is not stringent in all his activities….God knows a person's heart. If one acts

piously in secret, God will judge him favorably. Even a person known to be pious should not perform acts of excessive piety which the leaders of the generation do not do. People will say, ‘This person, who acts more strictly than our sages and saints, is pretentious!’”

Religious observance today sometimes gives the impression of trying too hard, of seeking to make a public impression. There is an emphasis on external dress, and a stress on adopting extra stringencies. Instead of being natural, graceful and unpretentious in their religiosity, some adopt behavior patterns that strive to catch people’s attention. They want to be known as being extremely pious; but by doing so, they slip into the vice of “yuhara,” pretentiousness. A real tsaddik lives religion in a natural, graceful and unpretentious manner.

In parashat Nitsavim, we are reminded that the mitzvoth of the Torah are not difficult or out of reach. “But the word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (Devarim 30:14). Our challenge is to live our lives according to the teachings of the Torah, realizing that these teachings are natural to us, very close to us, in our mouths and hearts.

“Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.”

Angel for Shabbat
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