Righteousness and Self-Righteousness: Reflections on the Nature of Genuine Piety

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Religion produces the very best type of people: saintly, humble, compassionate, and genuinely pious. I think we have all come across or read about such individuals, and we are inspired by their goodness and sweetness.

But we cannot help but notice that religion also produces—or at least harbors—the very worst type of people: terrorists, bigoted zealots, and self-righteous egotists. I think we have all come across or read about such individuals, and we are repelled by their ugly and corrupt misuse of religion.

So religion has two faces: one that is righteous and compassionate; and one that is self-righteous and hate-filled. But we may be fairly confident that all (or nearly all) religionists believe that they are serving God in the best possible way. The righteous certainly aspire to walk in God's ways, as manifested in the thirteen Divine attributes of mercy. The zealots, though, also think they act for the glory of God. In their eyes, their extremism for the sake of God is no vice. On the contrary, it is evidence that they alone have the true faith and courage to fight for God against all enemies.

One basic truth about human nature is that we tend to see ourselves as being basically good and upstanding. Yes, we know we commit sins—that is why we have the laws of repentance that is why we have Yom Kippur. We know we have some character flaws and some religious shortcomings. Yet, overall, we think of ourselves as being good people. On the other hand, we can point to others who are *really* bad, non-religious, and even sacrilegious. We walk in God's ways, but *they* don't.

Let us focus on *us*, not on *them.* We want to know honestly and candidly how to evaluate our own religious levels. What are the criteria by which we can determine whether we represent the sweet, gentle and righteous face of religion, or the harsh, self-righteous face of religion? How can we improve ourselves? Essentially, this is a study in *musar*, the development of Jewish ethical qualities.

We will begin by studying a short, insightful text from the Talmud (*Berakhot* 4a):

"A prayer of David…Keep my soul, for I am pious (*ki hasid ani*) [Psalm 86]. Levi and R. Isaac [offer interpretations]. The one says: Thus spoke David before the Holy One blessed be He: 'Master of the universe, am I not pious (*hasid*)? All the kings of the East and West sleep to the third hour [of the day], but I—at midnight I rise to give thanks unto You.'"

This passage appears jarred by a presumptuous statement by King David. David asks God to guard his soul because, David asserts, "I am *hasid*." The word *hasid* connotes genuine piety; it is religion at its best. How could David dare to present himself before God in this manner? How could he be so sure of his blameless piety?

The passage offers an interpretation. David proves that he is genuinely pious by the fact that all other kings sleep late, while he arises in the middle of the night to sing praises to the Almighty. David was a king. He could have behaved like all other kings, pampering himself, sleeping late, focusing on his own honor and glory. But David was not that way. He demonstrated that his commitment to God was his primary concern. He was *hasid* because he was theocentric, not egocentric. This is an essential ingredient in genuine piety.

The Talmudic passage continues: "The other one says: Thus spoke David before the Holy One blessed be He: 'Master of the universe, am I not *hasid*? All the kings of the East and the West sit with all their pomp among their company, whereas my hands are soiled with the blood, with the fetus and the placenta, in order to declare a woman pure for her husband.'"

According to this interpretation, David proves his piety by the fact that all other kings insist on pomp and self-adulation; they like people to surround them and praise them and heed their words. But David is different. He deals with complicated halakhic questions, very technical issues that involve the laws of ritual purity and impurity. David gets his own hands dirty. He takes personal responsibility for others. As a king, David surely could have ordered his underlings to attend to such questions. He could have avoided issuing rulings and kept his own hands clean. But he did not shirk responsibility. He was

hasid because he did not think it was beneath his dignity to serve his people, even in sensitive matters of ritual purity.

The Talmudic passage continues: “And what is more, in all that I do I consult my teacher, Mefiboshet, and I say to him: “my teacher Mefiboshet, is my decision right? Did I correctly convict, correctly acquit, correctly declare pure, correctly declare impure? And I am not ashamed….”

David was a king. He had the right to issue rulings and decrees without asking anyone else for permission or approval. As a king, he might have felt embarrassed submitting his decisions for the approval of others. Yet David was not that way. He was interested in achieving a true judgment, a ruling faithful to the Torah. He was not ashamed to ask Mefiboshet to review his decisions and to correct them. What awesome qualities are displayed here by David: the quality of pursuing truth at any cost, the quality of humility in the presence of one who may know more, the quality of being able to admit error. A king did not have to subject himself to judicial review, but David did! The truth was more important to him than his own honor.

Thus, the Talmud suggests three characteristics of being *hasid*, three qualities necessary for those who would represent religion at its best. First, David was theocentric rather than egocentric, and did not insist on his own comfort and privilege. Second, David was not afraid to take responsibility, to get his hands dirty. He did not try to take the easy way out by letting others make the tough decisions. Third, he was not ashamed to ask for advice, and not ashamed to admit that he had erred. He did not believe in being authoritarian, although—as king—he was certainly invested with great authority.

The Talmudic passage, I believe, is telling us the criteria of genuine piety: love of God, humility, the assumption of personal responsibility and commitment to truth, willingness to learn from others. Our egos must not get in the way of our service to God. We must never feel that we have everything right; rather, we must be honest enough to admit failings. We must strive to be authoritative, without being authoritarian.

Even though we acknowledge these criteria of being *hasid*, it is still fairly easy and fairly common to assume that we, in fact, do fulfill these qualities. And although all of us, no doubt, do see these virtues in ourselves, we must always be wary of being complacent in our levels of religiosity. We all have room for improvement and personal spiritual growth. None of us has yet reached the level of King David!

One of the problems in religious development is embodied in a concept known in rabbinic literature as *yuhara*, presumptuousness. Is our behavior genuinely religious, or are we simply acting as though we are religious? Is our motive in fulfilling Torah the pure desire to serve God, or is our motive tainted by egotistic considerations? For some people, religion is a framework for spiritual growth; for others, religion is a place to hide. It is not uncommon for people with bad character traits to try to pass themselves off as servants of the Lord. They delude themselves. What they find in religion is not humble devotion to God, but a framework for self-aggrandizement, influence over others, an outlet for aggression. They use religion to build themselves up. Our rabbis may have had such individuals in mind when they referred to the angel of Esau as being dressed in the garb of a *talmid hakham*, a rabbinic sage.

Yuhara is an important concept for us because it explores the line—often a fine line—between genuine and counterfeit piety. And it deals with the self-deception that may (and probably does) affect all of us.

Let us consider another Talmudic passage (*Bava Kama* 81b). The Talmud records that Joshua, on his entry into the land of Israel, instituted rules to govern the use of private and public property. One of the rules was that it was permitted to turn aside and walk on private sidewalks in order to avoid road-pegs on the public roads. Thus, travelers had the right to walk on private property if the public road was not easily passable; the owners of the private property had no right to stop these travelers. The Talmud tells us the following story:

"As Rabbi [Yehuda haNasi] and Rabbi Hiyya were once walking on the road, they turned aside to the private sidewalks, while Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa went striding along the main road in front of them. Rabbi thereupon said to Rabbi Hiyya: Who is that man who wants to show off in front of us? Rabbi Hiyya replied: He might perhaps be Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa who is my disciple and does all his deeds out of pure piety. When they drew near to him they saw him and Rabbi Hiyya said to him: Had you not been Yeuda be Kenosa, I would have sawed your joints with an iron saw [I,e, excommunicated you]."

In this text, Rabbi and Rabbi Hiyya were following the rule set by Joshua. They moved to the private sidewalks as was allowed. But then they noticed that Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa did not follow Joshua's rule, but rather continued to walk on the main public road in spite of the apparent obstacles. Rabbi took offense at the behavior of Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa, annoyed by the latter's show of public piety. If Rabbi and Rabbi Hiyya—who were both great sages—walked on the private sidewalks

in compliance with Joshua's rule, why did Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa refuse to do so? Did he think himself more pious than the others? In fact, Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa's offense was so great that he deserved to be excommunicated!

Rabbi Hiyya pointed out to Rabbi that Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa was his student and was genuinely a pious person. He was not trying to show off. Everything he did was for the sake of Heaven, without ulterior motives, without egocentric considerations. Hence excommunication was not warranted.

The assumption of this passage is that, while Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa was an exceptional person, everyone else (i.e. all those not as absolutely pious as Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa) would have been worthy of excommunication in that situation. But what would be their sin? They simply chose to walk on the public road rather than to turn off to the private sidewalk. Is that a transgression worthy of excommunication?

Here we come to the issue of *yuhara*. The law allows one to walk on the private sidewalks. Two great sages, indeed, were doing just that. Now comes another person who declines to take advantage of Joshua's ruling. He does not want to follow that "leniency." Yes, he knows that other pious and righteous people follow Joshua's rule; but he wants to take the "stringent" view by staying on the public road.

We must ask: What is this person thinking? What are his inner psychological motives? We are told that Rabbi Yehuda ben Kenosa had pure motives, but implied is that almost everyone else lacks such pure motives. For almost everyone else, such behavior is presumptuous and worthy of excommunication. Why? Because the person is guilty of false piety! He takes upon himself an unnecessary stringency, as though to show that he is more conscientious than everyone else. In so doing, he insults everyone else—including Joshua, who instituted the rule. Moreover, he shows disdain to those sages who rely on Joshua's rule, by presenting himself as being more scrupulous in his religious observance than they are. While the person does not openly say those things, his behavior implies a certain arrogance and presumptuousness. In subtle ways, the person sees himself as better, more pious than others. This attitude, though, is a sure sign of counterfeit religion. It reflects contentment with oneself and a desire to show off one's piety, rather than a humble, self-effacing religiosity. This is the danger of *yuhara*. On the surface it appears "religious," but in essence it reflects egotism.

Let me offer another illustration. It is customary in most Sephardic congregations for congregants to remain seated when the Ten Commandments are read as part of the morning's Torah reading. The logic of this custom is that the entire Torah is holy; to stand up for this particular section would imply that the rest of the Torah is of lesser status. On the other hand, the usual custom among Ashkenazim is for the congregation to rise for the reading of the Ten Commandments. This custom calls for the symbolic re-enactment of the original revelation at Mt. Sinai, when the people of Israel were standing. Both customs are perfectly legitimate and deeply rooted in Jewish tradition.

During the eighteenth century, a question came to Rabbi Eliyahu Israel. Rabbi Israel, who was raised in the community of the Island of Rhodes—his father Rabbi Moshe Israel was its Chief Rabbi—served as rabbi in Alexandria, Egypt. The question involved several young men who decided to stand up for the reading of the Ten Commandments, even though the congregation's custom was to remain seated. These young men obviously felt they were demonstrating respect to the Torah. Rabbi Israel, though, ruled that these individuals were guilty of haughtiness and disrespect for the congregation. They were worthy of excommunication, and should desist from these shows of false piety. (See *Kol Eliyahu*, Livorno, 5552, no. 5).

If we could ask these young men if they had intended to demonstrate false piety, if they had meant to show disrespect to the congregation—they would surely reply in the negative. They would say that they were simply trying to perform a pious deed, honoring the Ten Commandments by rising to their feet. But Rabbi Israel, drawing on the concept of *yuhara*, cut through their rationalizations. In disregarding the community's custom they were saying (through their action) that they showed more respect to the Ten Commandments than did everyone else in the synagogue, that they knew better and were more religiously observant than the rabbis and were more religiously observant than the rabbis and sages of all the communities that remained seated for the reading of the Decalogue. Their motives, thus, were not essentially for the sake of Heaven. They were driven, rather, by some inner need to display their piety. This is not genuine religion; this is counterfeit religion.

Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his classic book of moral guidance *Pele Yo'ets*, identifies three guidelines relating to *yuhara*:

- If one is performing a mitzvah, even one that most people ignore, it is not considered presumptuousness on his part. After all, he is following the law and need not be ashamed

of this.

- But if most authorities permit an activity and some forbid it, one should not follow the stricter view in public, unless he is well known for genuine piety. (Very few, if any, should so consider themselves!) One may, though, observe the stringency in private.
- If one wishes to adopt a practice that the law does not require, then he should do so privately. This is especially true of one who is not stringent in all his observances; people will ridicule his hypocritical behavior, and this will lead to desecration of God's name.

Rabbi Papo reminds us: 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 that the leaders of the generation do not do. One should not behave in such a way as to call attention to his piety in contrast to that of other pious and learned individuals.

Here is the nub of the matter: God knows our inner thoughts, our real intentions. We may fool others, we may even fool ourselves, but we certainly cannot fool God. We are supposed to conduct ourselves with this idea constantly in mind. Our goal must be to achieve the highest level of purity in our service of God, to make all our deeds for the sake of Heaven. We need to be absolutely honest with ourselves, constantly cutting through our own rationalizations and egocentric concerns. We should strive to be genuinely in the category of *hasid* and always keep in mind that religious life entails a constant striving for further spiritual growth. If we think we are *hasidim,* if we think we do everything for the sake of Heaven—we can be fairly certain that we are spiritually deficient! We are very likely guilty of *yuhara*.

The following question is discussed in halakhic literature (see *Sedei Hemed* 3:28): May a person perform an act of excessive piety when he is alone in his own home, when no one else can possibly see him? The general opinion is that such behavior is permissible, since no one else witnesses it. Howe can it be in the category of showing off if no one sees it? Yet, there is an opinion that even in such a case a person is guilty of *yuhara.* How can this be? Evidently such activity is likely to fill the person with feelings of self-righteousness—even if no one else knows about his actions. Even if a person's behavior does not involve showing off to others, it may still involve showing off to oneself! This, too, is presumptuousness and arrogance. It feeds a feeling of self-importance and self-righteousness. This frame of mind reflects egocentrism, self-satisfaction, and a sense of ultra-piety; thus, it is not reflective of religion at its best.

Our discussion of the qualities that made King David *hasid*, and out discussion of the concept of *yuhara*, should help each of us focus more clearly on our missions as religious personalities. There is a fine line between genuine righteousness and self-righteousness. Our judgment is easily clouded by self-delusion, rationalizations, and feelings of contentment with ourselves. Our constant task is to guide our actions for the sake of Heaven, not for our own sakes. Ultimately, we are not answerable for our lives to other people, not even to ourselves; we are answerable to the Almighty.