

## Not More Than My Place; Not Less Than My Space

by Laura Geller

The morning service of the High Holy Day begins with *Hineni* (“Here I Am...”), a prayer that points to a challenge in my life. Composed by an anonymous cantor in Eastern Europe, it reflects the anxiety the *hazzan* (cantor) feels on the Days of Awe in the face of the awesome responsibility of being the *shaliach tzibor*, the community’s emissary in prayer. It opens with the words, “How can I, with so little merit, stand before God to plead for the people....” The prayer seems to be about humility. But the way it is generally prayed seems just the opposite. The ark is opened; the congregation stands. The cantor enters from the back of the sanctuary and begins to sing, calling attention to himself or herself.



What does humility really mean? How can you find the right balance between acknowledging how little merit you truly have and calling attention to yourself?

One way, says Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Psischke (1765–1827), is to always carry two notes in your pockets. The one in the right pocket reads: “The world was created for my sake.” The one in the left pocket reads: “I am but dust and ashes.” Humility is the space between those two extremes.



To get this balance right in my own life, I have begun to study Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice rooted in the Bible but mostly developed in 19th-century Lithuania. Its goal is to help an individual work on his or her own individual character or soul traits ( *middot* ) in order to become more holy. Each of us is challenged by specific *middot*. Noticing those challenges unveils our own personal spiritual curriculum.

Humility is a *middah* at the center of mine.

In his book *Everyday Holiness*, my Mussar guide Alan Morinis points to the teaching of the 11th-century Spanish Jewish philosopher Rabbi Bachya ibn Pekuda that “...humility is a primary soul trait to work on because it entails an unvarnished and honest assessment of who you are.” Morinis explains: “The ego provides the lens through which we see all of life. To be arrogant or self-deprecating distorts our approach to life. Humility stands on a foundation of self-esteem, and is defined by how much space you occupy. Being humble means occupying your rightful space, which can be physical, verbal, emotional, financial, and so on.”

Humility challenges come up every day. Some seem small, such as deciding whether to be the first to speak up at a meeting or to wait for others to start the conversation; choosing to respond to another person’s story with a story of my own, or being mindful of what that other person might need from me at the moment. Others seem bigger; what

motivates a decision to write an article or give a public lecture or agree to serve on the Board of Directors of a community organization?



Sometimes we can gain insights into ourselves through the confessions of others. Several years ago, a much-loved Jewish physician shared with me her deep disappointment upon learning that *Los Angeles* magazine had not included her on its list of the city's 100 best doctors. "I know it doesn't matter," she confided, "but it still feels as though I am not being seen for how good a doctor I really am. I feel hurt, angry, and a little envious of those who made it on the list. Is it wrong or arrogant of me to want to be publicly acknowledged for my hard work?"

I suggested she view the question through the lens of the Jewish teaching that each of us is imbued with a *yetzer tov* (inclination for good) and a *yetzer hara* (inclination for bad), both of which are necessary for us to be successful. The 11th-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides taught that "without the *yetzer hara*, no one would marry, build a house, or seek a profession." This point is also made in a cautionary tale from the Talmud. Once the ancient rabbis captured the *yetzer hara* and sealed it up in a chest. All of a sudden, hens stopped laying eggs. We learn from this story: "If you kill this spirit, the entire world will be destroyed" (Yoma 69b).

That same *yetzer hara* part of her that desired public recognition also accounted for the drive, ambition, and commitment that led to her helping so many others. Without this impulse, she would never have gone to medical school, never endured her internship and residency, never rushed out in the middle of the night to deliver a baby.

From a Jewish perspective, ambition is a positive value. It follows that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be noticed, acknowledged, and seen—or, in the language of Mussar, claiming "not less than my space."

This, however, is only half of the equation; it must be balanced with "not more than my place."



Like the doctor, I am prone to "list envy." For the past several years, *Newsweek* magazine has published a list of the 50 most influential rabbis in America. I'm not on the list. It's true that many talented, influential, and deserving rabbis also haven't made it. Still, not being on the list is...so public!

I rationalize that the list criteria are not those by which I would hope to be measured. Points are awarded for notoriety, media mentions, and size of constituency—and not for spirituality, activism, being present in people's lives, or communicating the meaning and joy of Judaism.

Like my physician friend, I know making the list shouldn't matter. My friends don't care if I am on it. My family teases me about my desire to be included. My congregants don't seem to notice. Such lists are not a real measure of who I am as a rabbi or what impact my work has had on my community. The Mussar work then challenges me to ask: What

motivates wanting to be on someone's list? It cautions, in the words of the contemporary Mussar teacher Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, "One who craves attention from others has not yet found himself. He is unaware of his true worth."

Maybe it is my *yetzer hara* that induces me to want to make the list—the same *yetzer hara* that served me well when I was one of the first women to become a rabbi. In those early years, when even the idea of a woman rabbi was resisted by many, my ambition to be successful and acknowledged (along with a sense of humor) helped me overcome the many stumbling blocks that might otherwise have seemed insurmountable. As a pioneer, I was often invited to sit on boards, participate in conferences, and do media interviews on the role of women in Judaism. Was it my *yetzer hara* that enjoyed the challenge? On one memorable radio show, the unsympathetic host asked, "What is more important—your Judaism or your feminism?" I paused, then shot back: "And what is more important to you—your heart or your liver?" Silence. I was never invited back on the program.

Today, some 30 years later, women in the rabbinate are not a novelty but the norm, and thankfully we are no longer compelled to justify our existence as spiritual leaders. I am still ambitious, but the goal of my ambition has changed. It is no longer about proving anything to anyone. Now it is about creating a congregation that really makes a difference in people's lives. And to do that, I need to get the balance right—"not more than my place; not less than my space." Creating that congregation requires making space for my talented colleagues to share their gifts; it means finding and empowering lay leaders to share in crafting and implementing our vision for the community. If I don't get that balance right, it will never happen.

Through my Mussar work, I have discovered three strategies to help me find balance. The first is to look at what I actually have accomplished over the years. For me, the real measure of success is my congregation having become a community I would join if I weren't the rabbi. The Shabbat morning *minyan* is my prayer community. I pray there every week whether I am leading services or not. My congregation nurtures me spiritually and it makes me proud and grateful. Gratitude, noticing the abundance already present in my life, is an antidote for wanting more of a "place" than I actually need.

The second strategy is to seek out honest friends and mentors who don't flatter me, but rather open my eyes to see myself as I really am, with all my strengths and weaknesses. These friends and mentors have gently pushed me to keep learning and growing. They have supported me as I stretched out of my comfort zone to participate in continuing education programs ranging from a summer Hebrew intensive at Middlebury College in which the next oldest student was half my age, to the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which introduced me to meditation and the power of silence. Good friends lovingly critique my sermons. They challenge me to ask tough questions about my priorities and about whether I am living up to the goals I have set for myself as a rabbi. They help me clarify what is the "place" I aspire to occupy and they help me assess where I am. They keep me honest and don't let me take myself too seriously.

The third and most important strategy is to not lose sight of whose list really matters and the criteria to make it on that list. A hint comes from the 4th-century talmudic sage Rava. He imagines (in BT Shabbat 31a) that after our death we are called to account for our lives by answering these questions:

1. Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?
2. Did you set aside time to study Torah?
3. Did you have children (or care about children)?
4. Were you hopeful about the future?
5. Did you debate wisely?
6. And did you live your life with consciousness of the presence of God?

Translating Rava's questions into more contemporary language, the criteria to make the list that matters are: Do I treat other people kindly? Do Jewish tradition and learning enrich my life? Have I nurtured my family? Have I worked to repair the world? And how compassionately do I listen to people who disagree with me? In other words, have I crafted a life worthy to be lived in the presence of God?

If I have, then I will have made it on to the only list that matters. God's list.

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