

“The World Was Created for Me” vs. “I Am But Dust and Ash”:

Anava/Humility as a Pedagogy Toward Jewish Peoplehood

OVERVIEW

This pedagogy proposes *anava* — humility — as a foundational value and practice for Jewish Peoplehood education. It argues that the same tension present in every classroom — between cultivating self-worth and celebrating the other — is the central tension of Jewish Peoplehood itself. Furthermore, it offers concrete pedagogical practices, rooted in *chevruta* (paired learning) and the model of Moses, through which humility can be taught, practiced, and embodied.

HUMILITY AS A FOUNDATION OF PEOPLEHOOD

At the heart of education lies a particular tension. On the one hand, we strive to educate toward a sense of self-empowerment and self-worth. At the same time, we encourage students whenever possible to applaud their peers and celebrate their successes. I might wonder: If we truly educate toward self-worth, might this lead to the negation of the other? If we expand this to questions and challenges of Jewish Peoplehood, the question sharpens: if we empower the worth of one's group, might that lead to diminishing the value of other groups — even within our own people?

I would posit that it is specifically here that we must begin to understand, educate toward, and develop a pedagogy of humility — *anava*. Humility must be a starting point and fundamental element in the mindset of the Jewish people studying, creating, and growing together. We all must recognize the strengths and successes of one another, listen to each other, and grow together through a humility that allows us to provide space, encouragement, and room for growth for one another. The Jewish people are fraught with disagreements and a dearth of mutual understanding or willingness to partner toward common goals. If we could learn to speak with confidence and with a degree of self-doubt, as well as a genuine recognition of value in the other, we would be in a very different place.

TWO SLIPS OF PAPER: THE JEWISH TRADITION OF HUMILITY

In society at large — and particularly in traditional, religious settings — humility is often understood as self-degradation: to be humble, we must first disabuse ourselves of confidence in our own value and ensure that others' successes always exceed our own. Maimonides, in his *Mishneh Torah*, reflects this view, arguing that while most character traits require a middle path, for humility one must always strive to humble oneself completely. Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim* (Path of the Just) similarly leaves nearly no room for self-worth, insisting on a humility that instills a specific sense of unworthiness. Yet there is a second tradition. Bahya ibn Pakuda, in the introduction to his *Duties of the Heart*, describes his own struggle with whether to write the book at all. His conclusion: individuals must take a chance. A person may be wrong, may not truly advance the field — and yet their contribution might be the very one that matters. Without taking that chance, there would have been no advancement since the prophets. Humility, here, is not self-erasure but the courage to contribute.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim famously captured this double-edged nature of humility in a teaching that has become iconic: everyone should carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One reads “For me the world was created”; the other reads “I am but dust and ash.” Rabbi Yerucham of Mir extended this: just as individuals must be aware of their sins and strive to atone, so too must they be aware of their positive characteristics and how they may grow through their abilities. Most fully, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook wrote in his *Midot HaReyah*: “Genuine humility and lowliness increase health and vitality, whereas imaginary humility causes illness and melancholy... Whenever humility brings about melancholy it is invalid. But when it is worthy, it engenders joy, courage and inner glory.” And: “At times we should not be afraid of the feeling of greatness, which elevates humankind to do great things. And all humility is based on such a holy feeling of greatness.” Rav Kook teaches that humility specifically inspires individuals to create and add vitality to the world, while recognizing that this is a holy feeling — not an evil inclination pushing us toward personal grandeur. This, I believe, is the *anava* that Peoplehood education requires.

THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

As an educator for over twenty years, I have attempted to instill humility in my students primarily through *chevruta* — paired study — as a staple of my teaching. In *chevruta*, two or three students analyze a text together, each bringing different beliefs and assumptions, arriving at different interpretations and conclusions. The novelty of *chevruta* is that the pair does not split apart at the realization of their differences — quite the contrary. They remain together, listening intently, recognizing their differences, and at times celebrating the gulf between them. Humility is what provides the glue: it allows each partner to recognize that the other's voice is different from their own and yet worthy of recognition and celebration.

The biblical model for this pedagogy is the story of Eldad and Medad in Numbers 11. When two elders prophesied not at the Tent of Meeting but in the camp among the people, Joshua urged Moses to restrain them. Moses' response has become a clarion call for educators across the generations: "Would that all of God's people were prophets." In this, Moses – the prime teacher, the one who spoke to God face to face – prays for a situation in which his own role becomes redundant. As Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch commented: "Moshe's response to Joshua is the eternal example he is providing to educators of all generations – that they will have reached the pinnacle of their work when their own role becomes redundant." From this model, the pedagogy develops four concrete practices: (1) Modeling, in which the teacher embodies humility by inviting student participation in classroom norms, admitting what they do not know, and celebrating when students surpass them; (2) Peer Teaching, in which students regularly teach one another – through *divrei* Torah, summative presentations, or family-tradition sharing – building both self-worth and genuine curiosity about the other; (3) Partnering with Neighbors, in which students venture beyond the classroom into the local community to encounter those who hold different values or life stories, seeking leadership in unexpected places as Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp; and (4) Emotional *Chevruta* Sharing, a structured practice drawn from the Mussar movement's heshbon hanefesh (self-analysis), in which students write in response to a prompt, then share while a partner listens and reflects back only what was heard – without embellishment, without answers – before gradually progressing to clarifying questions and, much later, to alternative perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Humility, as presented here, is the recognition of one's self-worth and the commitment to making the world a better place through one's own capabilities – while at the same time noting others' values and contributions and actively encouraging them to add to the mix. Whether working with teenagers or adult learners, the *chevruta* approach provides camaraderie while also creating a safe space in which to share more personal and emotional dimensions of thought and experience. The two slips of paper – the world was created for me; I am but dust and ash – are not in contradiction. They are the full, honest picture of what it means to be a person among people. I pray that this tool of emotional *chevruta* will allow learners to recognize the value in their own voices as well as that of their counterparts, thus helping to contribute to a healthier, richer, and more humble Jewish people.



DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Yossi Hershkowitz, z"l, Head of School of the ORT Pelech Boys High School in Jerusalem, who fell as a paratrooper in the Israel-Hamas war on November 10, 2023. Those who knew Yossi reflected most on his humility. He was a leader with a clear vision and yet constantly encouraged his staff to create and implement their own goals, trusting them to push beyond what they thought their capabilities were. A week before he fell, he shared a message with his staff opening with the words of Rabbi Elimelech Bar-Shaul: "Hineni – Here I am – for every mission on behalf of the Supreme Providence... all of me, without a defined amount and without leaving any part behind." As Abraham answered hineni, and Joseph, and Moses before the burning bush, this brief word speaks to devotion beyond ego and personal gain – a commitment to forwarding values, not one's self-worth. This was the way of Yossi Hershkowitz. May his memory be for a blessing.



To access the full practice guide, including session structures, *chevruta* prompts, and facilitation notes, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



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