

Patience

Middah for the Hebrew Month of Iyyar 5773

1 Iyyar 5773 - April 11, 2013

What are Middot?

Pirkei Avot (6:6) teaches that the Torah is greater than the priesthood or royalty. According to our tradition, royalty is acquired through 30 middot – virtues or qualities. To be a priest in the ancient Temple, you needed 24 virtues. But the Torah -- the ultimate path we strive to take -- is acquired through 48 middot --

48 character traits by which we measure our lives.

Rabbi Alan Morinis says in his book, 'Everyday Holiness,' that each one of us has every single one of the 48 character traits. He writes: 'What sets one person apart from another is not whether we have certain traits while someone else has different ones, but rather the degree, or measure of the traits that live in each of

our souls.' The angriest person, for example, has an excess of the anger trait, but Mussar, (Jewish ethical literature from 19th century Eastern Europe) insists that there must be at least some degree of calm within that raging soul. So must there also be a touch of anger in even the calmest individual. The stingiest person still has at least a grain of generosity, and so on with all the traits." (Everyday Holiness, pg. 19).

Background texts*

- While this middah is translated as “patience”, the Hebrew word *savlanut* comes from the root *sin-vet-lamed* which means to tolerate, suffer or endure. Patience is the ability to carry or suffer our burden. Impatience is a short step away from anger and rage so those struggling with anger management would do well to work diligently on this middah. When we are in a frustrating situation we need to take our focus off of ourselves and think about others who are involved.
- Woe to the pampered person who has never been trained to be patient. Either today or in the future he is destined to sip from the cup of affliction. (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin, *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*)
- When something bad happens to you and you did not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief. - Rabbi Mendel of Satanov
- The Rabbis of the Talmud (Eruvin 54b) tell the story of Rabbi Preida who had a student who was academically challenged. Rabbi Preida would have to repeat each lesson four hundred times before the student would grasp it. One day, Rabbi Preida had to leave to attend to another mitzvah yet before departing, he taught his student the usual four hundred times. On this occasion, the student did not grasp the lesson. Rabbi Preida asked him, "Why is today different?" The student answered, "From the very moment that the rebbe was notified that he must attend to a mitzvah, my attention

was diverted. I was concerned that at any moment the rebbe will leave me and, thus, I could not concentrate well." Rabbi Preida said to him, "Pay attention, and I will teach you." He then taught him the lesson another four hundred times. A Heavenly voice emanated and asked Rabbi Preida, "Do you prefer that four hundred years be added to your life, or that you and your generation merit life in the World to Come?" Rabbi Preida replied, "I ask that I and my generation merit the life of the World to Come." Hashem said, "Give him both rewards."

- The great Biblical prophets, known for their extraordinary sensitivity to life's trials and sufferings, teach not only the uncompromising need for social justice and compassion, but also the need for patience and hope in God. Micah, for example, at a time of corruption in the courts, lack of proper nutrition in the homes and even terrible cases of family violence, proclaims, "Yet I will look to Adonai, I will wait for the God who saves me; my God will hear me." This is neither a renunciation of responsibility nor a longing for other worldly salvation. On the contrary, learning to have patience in God helps us to find the fortitude to deliver ourselves and our fellows from the evils that seem to be an inherent part of real life. - Dr. Reuven Firestone of the Hebrew Union College Faculty - "Patience," *The Chronicle*, #60/2002

*Many of the texts are adapted from *Everyday Holiness* by Alan Morinis.

A Story from our Sacred Texts

Capturing the Middah

Exodus 16 - The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the God's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Then God said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

Exodus 17 - The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as God commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put God to the test?"

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"

Then Moses cried out to God, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

The Lord answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested God saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"



MIDDAH WORKOUT FOR IYYAR

Middah Meditation – To remind yourself to strive for *Savlanut* - Patience, select one of the following quotes to say every morning. You can rotate the quotes.

- Everything in its time.
- Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. – Victor Hugo
- Patience is the greatest of all virtues. – Cato the Elder

- A man who is a master of patience is a master of everything else. – George Savile Mendel Lefin of Satanov, Cheshbon ha-Nefesh

Middah Exercise

For the *middah* of *savlanut*, for this month, Rabbi Brett Isserow proposes the following practice: Relationships closest to us will likely present the best opportunities for work on *savlanut*. Pick one person for each day of the week (seven different people over the course of the week). Then on each day, tell yourself that no matter what happens with that person you will hold any pain you have and be patient as a result of things not happening exactly the way you would like them to happen.

REFLECTIONS

According to the Talmudic story of Rabbi Preida, what benefit does patience bring? This legend speaks to education. Does teaching require more patience than other professions?

The prophets, such as Micah, spoke out passionately against the injustices of their day. In the above texts, they speak of patience in waiting for God's deliverance. When it comes to social justice when should we be patient and when should we act with urgency?

Discussion: In Exodus, chapter 15, we sang the Song at the Sea. We had just witnessed the Ten Plagues cast upon the Egyptians and seen God's miracle of the parting sea. We had just passed through the Sea of Reeds attaining our freedom after 430 years of slavery yet, immediately afterwards, in chapters 16 and 17 (above), we complain of no food and no water. Why are we so impatient as a people? Why do we have so little faith in God? Is impatience connected with having fear, lacking faith, self-absorption or none of the above?

For further background, consider purchasing in our Discovered Traditions Temple Beth El Gift Shop: *Everyday Holiness* by Rabbi Alan Moranis (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007).