

Humility is True Greatness

ר' חייא בר בא אתא לגבי רבי לעזר אמר ליה פייס לי לרבי יודן נשייא דיכתוב לי חדא איגרא דאיקר ניפוק לפרנסתי לארעא ברייתא פייסיה וכתב ליה "הרי שילחנו לכם אדם גדול. ומה הוא גדולתו? שאינו בוש לומר לא שמעתי". (חגיגה א:ח ז, א)

"Rabbi Hiyya the son of Ba came to Rabbi Le'ezer. He said to him: Persuade Rabbi Judah the Prince to write me a letter of recommendation so that I can go out to another country for sustenance. He persuaded him and wrote: behold we sent you a great man. What is his greatness? That he is not embarrassed to say 'I have not heard' [the law]"

Rabbi Judah saw the ability to say "I do not know" not as a disqualifying negative trait suggestive of a lack of erudition, but on the contrary as a positive trait suggestive of intellectual honesty.

Humility is true greatness, not just virtuous but also scholarly lacking the ability to acknowledge uncertainty hinders one from properly investigating an issue and reaching the truth.

For the Talmud Yerushalmi pleading ignorance is the ultimate admission. However, in the Talmud Bavli, Moshe is praised because he not only was able to say "I have not heard", but even more so: "I heard, but I forgot".

ולא בוש משה לומר לא שמעתי אלא אמר שמעתי ושכחתי (זבחים קא).

For the Talmud Bavli, the ultimate admission is pleading negligence.