

The *Middot* (Soul Traits) of Annabelle Imber Tuck

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In this week's Torah portion, Moses is called "a very humble man, more so than any other human being on earth."ⁱ Rabbi Max Weiss, writing in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, wonders how Moses can be called "humble:" "Moses stands at the center of the Torah. He, more than any other person, connects heaven and earth. He is the translator, interpreter, and messenger of God's word. He is **judge**, arbiter, and community organizer. Moses mediates between God and the people of Israel."ⁱⁱ

How can a leader, who consistently projects power over the people, be called "humble?" Mussar students of Alan Morinis, including both Annabelle and me, have been taught that, when we are working on *anavah*, or humility, we should recite a mantra: "No more than my place, no less than my space."

When we first meet Moses, he exhibits excess humility. Called to a great task by God, Moses pronounces himself unworthy and even incapable of carrying out the task of appearing before Pharaoh to demand, "Let my people go!" He repeatedly protests, trying to elude God and the responsibility of becoming the great liberator. One of his excuses is that he's allegedly a poor public speaker.

Rabbi Lauren Tuchman reminds us, though, that Moses may have a disability, a speech impediment. In *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Tuchman describes Moses as a disabled person who has internalized his own oppression. Having been dismissed and degraded throughout his life because of his disability, Moses cannot help but see himself as incapable. God, though, sees Moses's potential, and provides what Rabbi Tuchman defines as a "reasonable accommodation:" Aaron, Moses's brother, who speaks well, will be his spokesman.ⁱⁱⁱ

Before too long, though, Aaron's role changes. He becomes the priest, serving God through sacrificial service. Moses, now, does the talking. He seems to have overcome that "internalized oppression" and to have accepted the full mantle of leadership.

Humility, for Moses, does not mean shrinking from public service. Instead, as Rabbi Weiss writes, "Moses's humility is based on his recognition that he lives his life among and with his people, not at the center and not above them. His humility flows from his knowledge of his proper place in the world. This awareness allows him both to lead and to follow, to be in front and to be behind, to

know his power and to know its limits. Moses is humble. He...is not self-abasing, nor does his power lead to arrogance.”^{iv}

Our new Temple president, Annabelle Imber Tuck, is too humble to compare herself to Moses. Still, Annabelle exhibits exactly the kind of humility we see in Moses. Annabelle is not arrogant. She would never recite her own extraordinary qualities and achievements. She does not imagine herself to be better than the people among whom she serves, and she does not expect others to stoop and bow. Instead, like Moses before her, Annabelle has found her proper place in the world. At one time in her life, that meant recognizing that her soul is Jewish, mustering the strength to proclaim her truth to family, friends, and even a church community she loved. Later, she identified her place as that of an Associate Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court, and she made that happen. She would go on to transform Arkansas as the first woman on the Court. Then, when her time came to retire from that role, Annabelle accepted assignments requested of her by her now-former colleagues, but she determined not to interfere with them. People may guess Annabelle’s opinion of this or that Arkansas Supreme Court decision, but we will not read her comment in the newspaper. Were Annabelle to criticize her successors—sitting in **judgment** over them and over litigants before a Court where she formerly served—she would be taking up more than her space.

The Central Arkansas faith community may be grateful that Annabelle chose the Jewish community and interfaith relations as the places to direct her leadership capabilities and talents. Whether at the Interfaith Center, the Arkansas House of Prayer, the Daughters of Abraham, the Jewish Federation of Arkansas—or now, blessedly, Congregation B’nai Israel—Annabelle has added depth and gravitas. She has stepped into leadership only when invited, never taking potshots from outside the governance structure. Annabelle’s humility includes making and implementing decisions, not shying away from them, when those decisions are her responsibility. Her humility inspires her to collaborate with her peers to achieve institutional goals.

Annabelle is a student of Mussar, Jewish ethical discipline, and she is a Board member of The Mussar Institute. Many of us think of Annabelle as a person devoted to *tikkun olam*, repairing our broken world. She is no less devoted to *tikkun middot*, repairing the measures of her own soul.

Alan Morinis teaches that each of us has our own, unique Mussar curriculum. Some people need to work on patience—others, generosity. Some are very good about expressing gratitude but are terribly disorganized. Nobody is perfect. Annabelle would humbly tell us that she has traits that require work.

In addition to humility, though, I would like to highlight two *middot*, two soul-traits, that will stand Congregation B’nai Israel in good stead with Annabelle at the helm.

Annabelle is patient, but not endlessly so. She does not insist on instant gratification or even satisfaction. However, she is not willing to wait longer than appropriate for a matter to reach resolution. Excessive patience can delay justice—and, as we know, there can be no peace without justice. In the congregational context, that means giving people the time they need, whether to act on a responsibility or to pay a bill. And it means not giving them too much time—a delicate balance, but an important one—since extended delays inconvenience others. Alan Morinis has taught us not to make others suffer with our impatience, but also not to permit innocents to suffer because we are excessively patient.

Annabelle’s life experience, which includes heartache, has taught her a lesson that none of us would wish to learn, though we all must. None of us will escape pain and bereavement. Earlier this week, I was told that Hebrew does not have a word for “resilience.” That may be technically true, but Mussar teaches us to cultivate *bitachon*, a level of trust that enables us to take the long view, to experience the pain of our most difficult moments and simultaneously to live with faith that we will, somehow—at some future time, at least—be OK, and perhaps even happy and healthy and successfully again.

Alongside *anavah*, humility, that trust or *bitachon* may be the most important trait Annabelle brings to our Temple presidency. If the last years have taught us anything, it is that we cannot predict the challenges that will face Annabelle and our congregation during the next two years. Come what may, though, we may live with trust that Congregation B’nai Israel will continue to be a *kehillah k’doshah*, a holy congregation, under the leadership of a president with humility, trust and resilience.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 12:3.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Max Weiss, “*Anavah—Humility in Leadership*,” *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2019, p. 225. Emphasis added.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Lauren Tuchman, “Moses, Internalized Oppression, and Disability,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 83-87.

^{iv} Weiss, pp. 225-226.