

“I’m So Proud of Me”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Most of what we are — our intelligence, our drive, our lineage, our land — are gifts. We did not create them, and when we take pride in our abilities or inheritance, we are denying the true Source of blessing. A self-made man, as Mark Twain said, is as likely as a self-laid egg.

“In the world to come,” said R. Naftali of Barshad, “I will be able to find an excuse for all my sins except pride. If they ask ‘Did you study Torah?’ I’ll say I was unfortunately unlearned and did not know how. If they ask, ‘Did you observe the holidays properly?’ I will say I was weak and did not have the strength. If they ask, ‘Did you give a lot to *tsedakah*?’ I will say unfortunately I was unable to, as I was very poor. Then they will ask, ‘You were unlearned, weak and poor, so why were you conceited?’ And for that I will have no answer.”

When Moses tells the Israelites “I stood that day between you and God” (Deuteronomy 5:5) he is referring to the revelation at Sinai. But the Kotker Rebbe teaches that the verse means the “I” often stands between us and God. Ego can block spirit. In a culture of brass self-assertion, humility is the least praised of virtues and, therefore, perhaps, the most essential.