

## Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb



### What Does it Mean to be a “Student of Ahron”?

The mishna in Avot (1:12) famously teaches, in the name of Hillel, “Be from the students of Ahron, [someone who] loves peace and pursues peace, who loves people and who brings them closer to Torah.” Many of the commentators quote the well known tradition (Avot D’Rebbe Natan 12:3) that establishes Ahron as the paradigm of peace: when two people were fighting Ahron would approach each of them and explain how the other person genuinely regretted what he had done and very much wanted to reconcile. Softened – and encouraged – by Ahron’s message, the disputants were moved to forgive each other and resume their relationship with renewed friendship.

Ahron’s credentials thus established, it still remains puzzling why the Mishna mentions Ahron at all; why not just tell us to love and pursue peace without making reference to Ahron? What is gained by including Ahron in this teaching? The Chida explains that what made Ahron special was not just that he pursued peaceful relationships, but that being a “lover of peace” was an integral part of his personality. The Mishna is encouraging us

not just to do things which foster peace, but to be like Ahron and allow those peaceful actions to mold and shape our personality.

### If we truly love another person then we want what’s best for them in all areas

While the description of Ahron as someone who “loves peace and pursues peace” is inspiring, it is also enigmatic. What is the difference between these two phrases? In what substantive way does “pursuing peace” add to “loving peace”? Rabbenu Yona suggests that some people genuinely value peace but they are not necessarily willing to take the time or extend the effort to actually bring resolution to a discordant situation. The Mishna is teaching that it is not enough to love peace, we have to do whatever we can to achieve it. Other commentators, such as the Midrash Shmuel and Maharal, explain that the double formulation in the Mishna refers to two different scenarios. Being a “lover of peace” refers to creating a peaceful environment that prevents argument and fighting from ever taking place. However, in a situation where ill will already exists, being a “pursuer of peace” demands that we take an active role and

engage the parties in order to resolve the disagreement.

The Mishna's final exhortation, to love people and bring them closer to Torah, is also somewhat confounding. What does loving people have to do with bringing them closer to Torah? These are both essential and admirable values, but they are independently important and not necessarily connected to each other. What do Chazal intend to convey by combining these two ideas into a single charge?

The Chafetz Chayim explains that the Mishna is teaching us that part of loving someone is caring about their spiritual welfare. If we truly love another person then we want what's best for them in all areas, spiritual as well as material. The obligation to love our fellow Jew certainly includes providing for their physical needs, but it also demands that we do whatever we can to expose them to the wisdom and beauty of Torah. Additionally, the Tiferet Yisroel and others explain that the Mishna is conveying a critical insight into how we can bring people closer to Torah, and that is, only by loving them. It does not matter if it is a child, student, congregant or casual acquaintance, people will only be receptive to your message of religious guidance if they are convinced that you truly love them and want what's best for them. If you genuinely love the person that you are teaching – you can't fake it, people can usually detect your true feelings – then he or she will be open to your message. This was the key to Ahron's success and it is a necessary component whenever anyone is trying to communicate the nobility of

Torah ideas and ideals.

Ahron remains one of the great heroes of our tradition, but he is more than that; he is also a role model who we can and must learn from. Ahron personified the values of genuine love and peace and he utilized these values to inspire others to better their interpersonal relationships as well as their relationship with Hashem. He set a high standard, but one which we must all aspire to. ■

*Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb is a Ram at Yeshivat Har Etzion (Gush) and the rabbi of Kehillat Ha'ela, a new community located in the suburbs of Ramat Beit Shemesh.*

*To contact R. Gottlieb, or to join his Daily Divrei Torah group:*

[rabbidovidgottlieb@gmail.com](mailto:rabbidovidgottlieb@gmail.com)

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