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RAV, THE JERUSALEM SHUL
BAKA, JERUSALEM

Be'ezrat Hashem, this column, for the coming season, will be devoted to the ethical, moral and Mussar teachings from Rav Kook. In particular we will look at a distinct *mida* (character trait) each week from Rav Kook's sefer *Midot Hara'aya*, learn more about its content and seek to contemplate how these ideas can help foster personal spiritual growth and greater *Kirvat Elokim* (closeness with the Almighty).

Rav Kook's Midot: A Time for Self-Reflection

When young Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, then an eighteen-year-old Talmidic student in Smargon (today Smarhon, Belarus) heard of the passing of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, he rent his garment, removed his shoes and sat on ground in ritual mourning. And when the premier disciple of Rabbi Salanter, Rabbi Yitzchak Blaser (known as "Reb Itzeleh Peterburger" after his rabbinate in the Russian imperial capital), was hospitalized in Jaffa, Rav Kook walked to Sha'arei Zion hospital, rather than ride in a wagon. Rav Kook explained that to pay a visit to someone of Reb Itzeleh's spiritual stature, it is fitting to set out on foot as a pilgrim. (The Legends of Raba Bar Bar Chana, Naor, p. 214)

Fifty years after the passing of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, Rav Kook penned a eulogy to honor

his beloved master. In it he sums up Rav Yisrael Salanter's remarkable achievements and writes the following:



"The theme that encompassed his entire life was inventing a comprehensive 'bandage' that would heal every type of illness that afflicts the soul...He noted how profound the disease of distraction from self-examination is, how people are preoccupied - either with their daily physical concerns, or with their own intellectual fixations - and no one thinks of trying to find himself on the storm of life." (Mussar Avicha, Rabbi Joshua Gerstein, p. 206)

It is apparent that Rav Kook held Rabbi Yisrael Salanter in awe. However, Rav Kook did not fully accept his pathway. In what way did Rav Kook differ?

It is instructive to study Rav Kook's small work, *Midot Hara'aya* in order to gain insight

into Rav Kook's distinct pathway in Mussar and see which areas he placed special emphasis.

Midot HaRa'aya, a somewhat lesser known work of Rav Kook, was compiled by his son Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook. It contains concise insights regarding eighteen character traits which one should contemplate and develop in one's service of God. Some of the categories in the treatise are familiar categories that one finds in many of the Mussar books, but occasionally, Rav Kook invokes concepts that are distinctive to his unique worldview.

The opening page begins with the two introductory statements which serve as a preface for the book:

"The refinement of morals by reason must precede their cultivation in feeling, for unless a person can distinguish between good and evil, how will his feelings help him to acquire the good as an attribute of his nature, and to purge his nature of evil after he has become accustomed to it?"

"Every good attribute bears with it some accompanying defect and this is the full service of God: to express the good attributes cleansed from all the dross and the defects."

The teachings above from Rav Kook echo a foundational theme in the Mussar movement. Namely the essential need to consistently devote time and energy to contemplating one's actions and assessing one's character. One who fails to take personal stock on a regular basis will most likely come up short in one's spiritual development and service of God.

It is noteworthy that Rav Kook's opening statement in *Midot HaRa'aya* hints at a particular critique of the method found in the classic Mussar movement. One of Rabbi Salanter's innovations was that Mussar be



read aloud with "burning lips" (*sefatayim dolekim*), thus engaging the emotion. Students were encouraged to recite the texts in a mournful tune. (Ibid. p. 215)

Rav Kook believed that this emotional overload was counterproductive and potentially hazardous. It was conducive to depression (*atzvut*) whereas the study of Torah and *teshuva* should be pursued with a cheerful outlook and in a state of equanimity.

HILLEL AND THE RAMBAM: SELF-IMPROVEMENT

The notion that Judaism places immense value on self-examination and moral growth is not a new idea which was discovered by the Mussar movement in the 1800s. This notion of working on bettering one's *midot* can be seen in a multiplicity of statements and teachings from the revered Sages of the Mishna and Talmud. One exquisite example of this idea is found in a teaching of Hillel in the Mishna: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now when? (Avot 1:13)

The Rambam, in his commentary on this Mishna, argues that Hillel is speaking of the need for religious self-examination. The opening phrase "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" refers to the need for a person to take ownership of improving their virtues

and bettering their character.

The second statement “And if I am only for myself”, the Rambam understands to mean that when I look honestly at myself, my conduct and behavior, I realize “what am I?,” I have much to improve on and miles to go in mastering my *midot* (character traits).

And lastly, “If not now when”, is expressing the idea that one must address their faults and character flaws swiftly before they become too ingrained and established where it will be nearly impossible to make the needed adjustments. (Rambam’s Commentary on Pirkei Avot 1:13)

A DAILY PRAYER TO EXCEL IN OUR CHARACTER AND ACTIONS

In the morning prayers, following *birchot hashachar*, one says the following: “Help us attach ourselves to the good instinct (*b’yetzer hatov*) and to good deeds (*maasim tovim*). Rav Kook explains that a person often has an urge to pursue loftier character traits and act more righteously, however, those aspirations easily fade and one fails to incorporate these qualities and make them part and parcel of one’s personality. We therefore pray, *v’dabekenu*, to help us to bond with virtuous deeds. (*Siddur Olat Re’iyah* p. 78)

In a similar vein, Rav Kook offers a novel interpretation of the morning blessing, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who makes firm the steps of man.” (*Birchot Hashachar*). This blessing recognizes a remarkable ability granted to man in that he is able to balance himself so that he walks and can even run at rapid speed.

Rav Kook extends the notion of balance from the physical body to the ability of man to balance the many conflicting values and choices that a person consistently makes in

life. For example, we know that we are not to hate and yet there are times when hatred of evil is necessary. We must develop a character which is deeply compassionate and generous and yet there are times we must restrain ourselves and from being too compassionate which can ultimately be harmful to others and to ourselves. This unique “balancing act” in the area of *midot* is what we strive to achieve and bless God daily for the human capacity to achieve this nuanced path in life. (Ibid. p. 74)

40 DAYS LIKE NONE OTHER

The forty days from the first of the month of Elul until Yom Kippur, is a unique and auspicious time for every Jew to direct one’s mind and heart in self-reflection and *teshuva*. The well known verse from ‘Shir Hashirim,’ *Ani le’dodi v’dodi li*, is cited in this regard because of the fact the first letter of word spells *Elul* and that it captures the love and intimate bond between a Jew and Hashem which can be intensely experienced this time of year. The Chafetz Chaim (*Mishnah Berurah, Hilchot Rosh Hashana*) adds that each word of the Hebrew phrase *Ani le’dodi v’dodi li*, ends with the letter yud (the *yud* is the equivalent of 10). All four *yuds* add up to 40. This hints to the distinct opportunity and heavenly gift given to a Jew each year, for forty days, to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh, tikun hamidot*, and strive for lasting spiritual growth.

LESSONS FOR LIFE:

- We must approach spiritual growth in an orderly fashion, grasping and integrating each level before moving on to the next higher level.
- Even positive traits need careful watch and vigilance. Humility, for example, can be misplaced, and there are times

when one must exert one's leadership and authority rather than be docile and humble.

- It is characteristic of the pleasure-driven person that he scorns constructive criticism. However, righteous and insightful individuals in our midst who see things from their sagacious vantage point can offer counsel and steer others in the right direction. Those who are wise will seek their counsel. ■



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, "Torah United" on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at aaron@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.

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