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Subduing Arrogance and Loving the Land

Midot HaRa'aya, Ga'avah
(Arrogance) (piska #12, #13)

A student once approached Rav Kook with a question:

"Why is it that whenever I speak with you about any topic in Torah, the conversation always seems to circle back to something connected to the holiness of the Land of Israel? It seems that you are always speaking about the Land of Israel!"

Rav Kook replied:

"Whenever I open a Chumash to study Torah, I see that Hashem is speaking about the Land. The Torah begins with the promise of the Land to the forefathers. It continues by assigning Moshe the task of bringing the Jewish people to the Land. It lays out a multitude of laws—agriculture, Temple service, and more—that are all dependent on the Land. Moshe ends his life praying to enter the Land. If Hashem is always speaking about the Land, it seems only proper that I should do the same."



This story comes vividly to life in Rav Kook's teachings on character development. When addressing the trait of **ga'ava** (arrogance) in *Midot HaRa'aya*, Rav Kook teaches, in a striking and perhaps surprising way, that overcoming arrogance is directly related to a Jew's relationship with the Land of Israel. He writes:

"Whoever bestirs himself to purge his heart of pride will make himself worthy of loving Eretz Yisrael." (*Midot HaRa'aya*, Ga'ava, piska 12)

THE PRIDE OF THE SPIES

At first glance, the connection between subduing pride and loving the Land of Israel is not immediately clear. However, one of the most formative episodes in the Torah regarding the Land—the story of the spies—helps illuminate Rav Kook's insight.

A well-known question is asked: How could twelve righteous leaders, handpicked by Moshe Rabbeinu, return from scouting the Land with such a negative report and advise the nation not to enter it? A compelling answer is offered by the Ramchal in *Mesilat Yesharim* (chapter 11), based on the Zohar (Bamidbar 13:3). The spies feared that upon entering the Land, they would lose their prestigious positions of leadership. Life in the wilderness required one type of leadership; life in the Land would require another. Afraid of relinquishing their authority and honor, they chose self-preservation over truth. In a word, their downfall

was arrogance.

Rav Kook was certainly aware of this explanation, but he takes it further. He applies it not only to the spies, but to the inner world of every Jew confronting the challenge of building a life in the Land of Israel.

Rav Kook lived at a time when he witnessed firsthand the sacrifices made by those who left behind familiarity, comfort, and professional stature to begin anew in Eretz Yisrael. What was true a century ago remains true today. Making aliyah often demands humility—accepting that one’s career, status, and sense of accomplishment may be diminished or disrupted while adjusting to a new society and culture.

A LAND OF GODLY CLOSENESS

The Torah highlights a profound contrast between the Land of Israel and the land of Egypt:

“For the Land to which you are coming to possess is not like the land of Egypt that you left, where you planted your seed and watered it on foot like a vegetable garden. Rather, the Land you are crossing to possess is a Land of mountains and valleys; from the rain of heaven it drinks water.” (Devarim 11:10–11)

The Ramban explains that Egypt’s agriculture depended on the predictable overflow of the Nile, while the Land of Israel depends directly on rainfall—a clear expression of Divine providence. Rain is granted only when the people are worthy; neglect of mitzvot inevitably leads to drought. Eretz Yisrael is therefore more sensitive to spiritual failure than other lands (Ramban, Devarim 11:11).

Living in such a land naturally cultivates humility. Our actions visibly influence God’s response. Dwelling

in Eretz Yisrael is akin to living in the palace of the King. Awareness of His closeness engenders reverence, submission, and a deep sense of responsibility.

HUMBLY IN NEED OF ONE ANOTHER

Rav Kook continues:

“One who truly loves Eretz Yisrael will attain the virtue of hating pride.” (*Midot HaRa’aya*, Ga’ava, piska 13)

Life in the Land fosters an aversion to arrogance because it demands national interdependence. In exile, Jewish communities could remain insular and limited in scope. In the Land of Israel, however, we are tasked with building a full, functioning nation—government, army, economy, healthcare, agriculture, and culture. No individual can do this alone.

Recognizing how deeply we rely on one another requires humility. We learn to value contributions that differ from our own and to appreciate strengths we ourselves may lack.

The Talmud (Shabbat 62b), citing the prophet Yeshayahu (3:16), states that the Temple was destroyed because “the daughters of Zion were haughty.” Rav Kook interprets this to mean that arrogance blinds a person to their own deficiencies and prevents them from recognizing that others possess precisely the qualities they lack (*Ein Aya*, Shabbat 62b, piska 27).

Arrogance, Rav Kook teaches, causes a



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person to lose their very place in the world. Nation-building requires humility—the ability to see how every citizen, with their unique talents, plays an indispensable role.

SEEING THE GOOD IN EVERY BUILDER

This teaching lay at the heart of Rav Kook's life mission. He strove tirelessly to recognize the redeeming qualities in every segment of Jewish society.

At a time when many in the religious world dismissed the secular pioneers for their lack of Torah observance, Rav Kook viewed them differently. He compared them to the laborers who constructed the Beit HaMikdash. Though they were not Kohanim and did not serve in the Sanctuary, they were essential partners in building the holy structure—and worthy of gratitude and honor.

Rabbi Simcha Raz, in *An Angel Among Men*, recounts a powerful moment. Rav Kook was

once sitting with close associates discussing the builders of the Land—many of whom lived secular lives, reflected even in the structures they built.

Rav Kook said:

“The Talmud teaches regarding the builders of the Holy Temple: ‘They build with the mundane, and afterward they sanctify it’ (Me’ilah 14a). The same is true of the building of our Holy Land. It is now being accomplished in a partially secular manner, but it will be sanctified in the end.”

Suddenly, Rav Kook rose from his chair and began dancing with fiery passion, repeatedly singing the words of the Talmud:

Bonim be’chol, ve’achar kach makdishin! “They build with the mundane, and afterward they sanctify it!” (*An Angel Among Men*, Raz; trans. Lichtman, p. 428)

Rav Kook's ability to see goodness in others flowed from profound humility—making space for others and recognizing the Divine light each soul brings.

LIFE LESSONS

- The decision to move to Israel and begin anew in the Holy Land requires heroic humility and surrender to the will of the Almighty.
- Living in Eretz Yisrael heightens awareness of God's presence and providence, nurturing a refined and enduring humility.
- Sharing one Land teaches us how deeply we need one another—and how much we gain from the diverse strengths and skills each individual contributes. ■





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