



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

EDITOR, TORAH TIDBITS
RAV, THE JERUSALEM SHUL
BAKA, JERUSALEM

Healthy Pride and Self-Confidence (Midot HaRa'aya, Ga'ava, Piska #25)

“Everyone who probes deeply into his own nature must assess the feeling of pride—determining which aspects of it are unworthy and alienate him from himself and from God, and which are refined, broaden the horizons of his mind, and remind him of his spiritual self, abounding in majesty and beauty.” (*Midot HaRa'ayah, Ga'avah, §25*)

In his treatment of pride and arrogance, Rav Kook teaches that one must take care not to suppress the healthy aspects of self-confidence that are essential to spiritual growth and inner happiness. Attempting to uproot all forms of pride is not only misguided, but spiritually damaging:

“If he should try to detach himself from this pride, not only will he fail to achieve

any good for himself, but he will stifle his spiritual powers. Angry and depressed, he will go about sad and bowed down. It will appear to him that dejection is an expression of nearness to God, whereas it is, in truth, a form of alienation and turning away from Him.” (*Ibid.*)

False humility, Rav Kook warns, often masks spiritual paralysis. Authentic closeness to God requires vitality, confidence, and joy—not self-erasure.

BOWING — AND IMMEDIATELY STANDING TALL

One of the most beautiful ways Rav Kook develops this idea is through the act of prayer. The daily bowing at the beginning of the *Amidah* teaches us that humility must be balanced with healthy confidence and self-worth.

In *Siddur Olat Re'iyah* (vol. 1, p. 267), Rav Kook explains that bowing and straightening up represent two stages of personal development. A person begins with inner negative forces that must be confronted, subdued, and refined. This difficult work demands humility and ego-subjugation.

This is the stage of bowing—bending oneself in order to weaken and eliminate what

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is distorted or destructive within.

Yet the act of straightening up immediately afterward is no less essential. Rav Kook emphasizes that self-negation is merely a preparatory stage. Its ultimate purpose is positive growth:

“The goal is to shine with the light of God in an abundance of strength and joy. Then all the powers of the soul straighten up and endure with courage and a lofty life force.”

First we bow—but then we stand tall.

Once freed from internal negativity, a person experiences continual strengthening of the inner self with every moral and spiritual advance. The Talmudic source for straightening after bowing is the verse, “Hashem straightens the bent” (Tehillim 146:8). Rav Kook reads this dynamically: God continuously strengthens and elevates those who first had the courage to humble themselves and subdue their negative impulses.

YOSEF AND AN UNSHAKABLE SENSE OF SELF

Among the figures of the Torah, Yosef stands out as the embodiment of healthy, enduring self-confidence. One of his defining traits emerges in the blessing Yaakov bestows upon Ephraim and Menashe:

“May the angel who redeems me from all evil bless the youths. May they be called by my name and the name of my forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they multiply abundantly like fish in the midst of the land.” (*Bereishit* 48:15–16)

Rashi, citing the Talmud, explains that fish are unaffected by the *ayin hara*—the evil eye—because they are concealed beneath the water. What is the deeper meaning of this blessing, and why are Yosef’s descendants uniquely immune?

While some commentators understand the evil eye mystically, Rav Kook offers a strikingly rational interpretation. Human beings are deeply social creatures, constantly—often unconsciously—measuring themselves by the gaze and expectations of others. These subtle social pressures, communicated through glances, judgments, approval, or disapproval, shape behavior and suppress authenticity. This, Rav Kook teaches, is the *evil eye*.

Fish live entirely beneath the surface, untouched by the storms above. Yosef lived with similar inner autonomy. His deep self-assurance enabled him to withstand his brothers’ scorn, resist Potiphar’s wife, uplift fellow prisoners, and boldly interpret Pharaoh’s dreams when others failed. His greatness flowed from an inner world so stable that external judgment could not penetrate it.

Yaakov therefore blessed Yosef’s children to inherit this quality—to live without being pulled by the gravitational force of others’ expectations, and to remain immune to the *evil eye* that demands conformity.

LEAVING EGYPT WITH RICHES

When the Jewish people leave Egypt, they do so laden with gold, silver, and fine garments taken from the Egyptians. While it is understandable that former slaves would

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receive compensation after 210 years of oppression, the Torah places unusual emphasis on this transfer of wealth. Moreover, it was foretold centuries earlier to Avraham at the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*: “And afterward they shall leave with great possessions” (Bereishit 15:14). This promise was reiterated to Moshe at the burning bush: “You shall empty out Egypt” (Shemot 3:22).

Why is material wealth such a critical element of the redemption story?

Rav Kook (Ein Ayah, Berachot 1:114) offers two closely related explanations. First, the wealth would restore the people’s shattered confidence and awaken a sense of self-worth and ambition after generations of degradation. Second, this material success was a necessary foundation for Israel’s broader mission: to illuminate the world with wisdom, morality, and divine consciousness.

Only a nation that commands respect can exert meaningful influence. Economic stability and success enable Israel to serve as a spiritual model on the world stage.

Rav Kook clearly saw this dynamic unfolding in modern times with the Jewish return to the Land of Israel. A prosperous and confident nation would naturally attract interaction and engagement—and through

that engagement, share its unique spiritual message with humanity.

CONFIDENCE AS A NATIONAL AND PERSONAL IMPERATIVE

Only with confidence and pride can we become the changemakers we are meant to be. The Jewish people can fulfill their historic mission of elevating the world only when each individual recognizes their intrinsic holiness and potential.

Rav Kook expresses this idea in soaring language:

“Smallness of faith and a person’s distance from supernal holiness stem from his failure to elevate his own self-worth—to instill in his heart the lofty idea that he is worthy of divine greatness.” (*Orot Yisrael* 160:8)

RAV KOOK AND “HOLY CHUTZPAH”

The Talmud teaches: “In the footsteps of Mashiach, chutzpah will increase” (*Sotah* 49b). This statement is often understood as a warning of moral decline and brazen arrogance.

Rav Kook, however, reads it optimistically. A generation will arise with the audacity to return to the Land, to wrestle with ultimate questions, and to seek religious meaning with courage and honesty. This “holy chutzpah” reflects not spiritual decay, but authenticity—a refusal to settle for shallow answers or passive existence.

LIFE LESSONS

- Recognize that your actions always influence those around you—live consciously and responsibly.
- True *gevurah* and self-confidence lie in perseverance. Begin again, even if you have failed many times before.
- We often know what is right but lack the strength to follow through. Decide who

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