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Clinging to God with Our Feet on the Ground

RAV KOOK ON DEVEKUT

In the opening teachings of *Midot HaRa'ayah* on the topic of *devekut* - clinging to God - Rav Kook presents a profound and practical framework for fulfilling the Torah's command: "And to Him shall you cleave" (Devarim 13:5).

Rav Kook writes:

1. The divine philosophy (Kabbalah) teaches us the attributes of God—the divine *sefirot*—so that we may link ourselves to the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He.
2. We must study God's names, His attributes, and the *sefirot* so that we understand that it is incumbent upon us to cleave to God's attributes; that we are capable of cleaving to them; and that we cannot cleave to God in His



awesome transcendence.

(*Midot HaRa'ayah*, *Devekut*, §§1–2)

The Torah commands every Jew to cling to God—but how is this possible? Rav Kook answers that *devekut* is achieved not through metaphysical ascent but through moral and spiritual imitation.

We study God's ways in order to **embody them in our own lives**. The *sefirot* and *midot*—such as *chesed* (kindness), *gevurah* (moral strength), and *hod* (majesty and beauty)—are not abstract concepts; they are character traits meant to be integrated into one's personality. Through ethical conduct, kindness toward others, and the cultivation of beauty and dignity in the world, a person ascends spiritually and bonds with the Creator.

WALKING IN GOD'S WAYS

This idea is articulated explicitly in the Talmud:

"What does it mean, 'You shall walk after the Lord your God' (Devarim 13:5)? Is it possible for a human being to walk after the Divine Presence, of whom it is written, 'For the Lord your God is a consuming fire' (Devarim 4:24)?

Rather, it means to imitate His ways: Just as He clothed the naked (Bereishit 3:21), so too

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should you clothe the naked; just as He visited the sick (Bereishit 18:1), so too should you visit the sick; just as He comforted Yitzchak after Avraham's death (Bereishit 25:11), so too should you comfort mourners; just as He buried Moshe (Devarim 34:6), so too should you care for the dignity of the dead." (Sotah 14a)

Our conception of God is thus translated into a **code of human behavior**.

RABBI SOLOVEITCHIK: IMITATIO DEI AS A FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik emphasized that *imitatio Dei*—emulating God—is a foundational principle of Jewish life. Rabbi Hershel Schachter, in *Nefesh HaRav*, records teachings in which the Rav urged students to look beyond the list of divine attributes enumerated by the Sages and to identify additional dimensions of God's ways that demand imitation (pp. 49–71).

Strikingly, the **first attribute the Torah reveals about God is His capacity to create**. The Torah opens not with commandments, but with the story of Creation.

The Rav asked: Why devote an entire chapter to a narrative that is enigmatic, incomplete, and shrouded in mystery?

His answer was profound: Creation is meant to be a **moral challenge**. Just as God creates, so too must man create.

As the Rav expressed it beautifully:

"Man, like God, is often confronted with *tohu va-vohu*, utter chaos. He doubts his ability to say *yehi or*—let there be light.' Yet man is commanded, by the principle of *imitatio Dei*, to create, to become a partner (*shutaf*) in *yetzirah*, fashioning form out of chaos." (Reflections of the Rav, p. 26)

RAV KOOK AND THE ACT OF PLANTING

Rav Kook similarly understood Creation as

a paradigm for walking in God's ways. Rabbi Ze'ev Gold recounts a powerful episode:

While accompanying Rav Kook to Magdiel in the Sharon region for a tree-planting ceremony, Rabbi Gold observed something remarkable. As Rav Kook received a sapling, his face radiated with intensity and his body trembled with emotion. He knelt down, dug into the soil with his bare hands, and planted the tree with reverence, murmuring gratitude to God for the privilege.

On the return journey, Rabbi Gold asked why Rav Kook was so moved, given that hundreds of trees were planted daily in the Land of Israel.

Rav Kook replied:

"When I held that sapling, I recalled the teaching of the Sages: At the beginning of Creation, the Holy One engaged in planting—'God planted a garden in Eden' (Bereishit 2:8). Likewise, when you enter the Land, you must first engage in planting (Vayikra 19:23).

At that moment, I felt as though I were clinging to the Shechinah." (Vayikra Rabbah 25:3; *Mo'adei HaRe'iyah*, pp. 222–223)

PRAYER AND ACTION

Rabbi Soloveitchik applied this principle to prayer itself. Each morning we recite blessings for sight, mobility, clothing, and sustenance. God does not require our praise; rather, these blessings sensitize us to the needs of others.



They call upon us to ensure that those who lack these necessities are cared for—by us.

In a similar vein, Rav Kook explains why the *Amidah* is recited silently, yet with moving lips. Silence reflects inward contemplation and humility before God. The movement of the lips symbolizes **action**. Meditation alone is insufficient; spiritual closeness must be actualized through concrete deeds (*Ain Ayah*, Berakhot 5:20).

THE CHAFETZ CHAIM: EIGHT EXPRESSIONS OF IMITATION

The Chafetz Chaim opens *Ahavat Chesed* by noting that the Torah commands us to emulate God **eight times**. The number eight often represents transcendence beyond the natural order—such as the eighth day of circumcision or the eight garments of the Kohen Gadol.

Through acts of kindness and the cultivation of divine *midot*, a person rises above the limitations of the natural world and touches a higher, sanctified realm.

The Chafetz Chaim adds that this principle pervades the entire Torah. A quintessential example is:

“You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Vayikra 19:2).

The Ohr HaChaim explains that *kedoshim tihyu* is written in a future, ongoing tense: **“You shall become holy.”** Holiness is not a static achievement but a lifelong process. Just

as God’s holiness is limitless, so too must our striving for sanctity have no upper bound.

LIFE LESSONS

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander summarizes this lofty ideal with practical wisdom (*Sifsei Chaim*, vol. 1, p. 205):

- Supporting another person emotionally
- Greeting others with warmth and kindness
- Thoughtfully seeking ways to benefit others

These seemingly small acts constitute **walking in God’s ways**—and through them, we achieve genuine closeness and *devekut* with Him. ■



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

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