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Rav Kook: Healthy Honor and Robust Pride

(Midot HaRa'aya: Kavod, piska #5 and #6)

The dangers of honor are duly noted and often emphasized throughout the writings of the Sages. One well-known example states, "...the pursuit of honor removes a person from the world" (*Avot* 4:21). Not only is chasing honor unhealthy in that it indulges the ego, it also reflects a lack of appreciation for one's inherent worth. If a person truly recognized their own value, they would not be dependent on the approval of others.

The negative trappings of pursuing honor are fairly obvious. However, there is also a positive dimension to accepting honor. Rav Kook, in *Midot HaRa'aya*, reminds us that honor has its place and can be used constructively to encourage and uplift a person's spirit.

In this regard, Rav Kook writes:

"When a person is honored in the world, and he is concerned because the world erred in its esteem for him, let him put aside that concern and invoke it at a time when he is visited by some insult." (*Midot HaRa'aya, Kavod, piska #5*)

In other words, a person should store away some of the positive and uplifting feelings that accompany being honored—even if they slightly inflate the ego—for times when one

may face rejection or ridicule. In this way, feelings of confidence can be used constructively rather than destructively.

In a similar vein, Rav Kook suggests that every person needs some measure of honor and affirmation from others, as it energizes and inspires one to rise to the spiritual heights by which they are perceived. "At times it is fitting to accept honor and to enjoy it, in order to strengthen one's spiritual energies for noble accomplishments..." (*ibid., piska #6*)

AGNON: TWO WAYS TO RESPOND TO KAVOD

The following memorable anecdote brings this idea to life. The renowned Israeli novelist S.Y. Agnon—who, incidentally, shared a close relationship with Rav Kook—wrote that there are two ways people respond to honor. Some hear words of praise and ignore them entirely. Others hear words of honor and choose to learn from them.

Agnon describes the contrasting practices of two towering rabbinic figures of the nineteenth century. Rabbi Akiva Eiger, upon receiving a letter, would immediately fold over the top portion where the writer lavished him with honorifics and lofty titles. He refused



Shmuel Yosef Agnon

even to see them, lest they lead to feelings of haughtiness or an inflated ego.

By contrast, the great sage known as the *Chacham Zvi*, Rav Zvi Ashkenazi, would deliberately unfold the letter and read all the honorifics attached to his name (*tzaddik, gaon, gadol hador*, etc.). He did so not for self-gratification, but to be inspired by the expectations others had of him and to know what he must strive to become. If the letter referred to him as a *tzaddik*, he would say to himself, “Then I must be even more involved in acts of righteousness, so that it will truly be justified for others to see me as a *tzaddik*...” (*S.Y. Agnon, Me’atzmi el Atzmi, p. 33, cited in Midot HaRa’aya, ed. Zev Soltanovich, p. 302*)

RAV AKIVA EIGER’S ASTOUNDING HUMILITY

To fully appreciate the exquisite humility of Rabbi Akiva Eiger, the following story is worth noting.

Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, the Alter of Novardok, recounts an astounding episode in his classic work *Madreigas Ha’Adam* (*Cheshbon HaTzedek*, ch. 6). When Rabbi Akiva Eiger first visited his future father-in-law, townspeople approached him to discuss Torah, having heard of his brilliance as a *talmid chacham*. Yet he deliberately pretended to be unlearned, to the point that his reputation was ruined. His future father-in-law even regretted agreeing to the *shidduch* and asked him to leave town.

“Wait one week,” Rabbi Akiva Eiger replied.

At that time, a newly married *chassan* was staying in town and had greatly impressed the townspeople with his learning. Rabbi Akiva Eiger realized that if he revealed his own Torah mastery, he would eclipse the other *chassan*, making him appear insignificant. Since the *chassan* was scheduled to leave within the week, Rabbi Akiva Eiger chose to conceal his

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abilities temporarily. Only after the *chassan* departed did he reveal his true scholarship, astonishing the town and fully restoring his standing—and his father-in-law’s confidence. (*Olam HaMiddot, Kestenbaum, Artsroll, p. 151*)

What is astounding is not merely Rabbi Akiva Eiger’s sensitivity to avoiding another’s embarrassment. Even as a young man, he was deeply concerned with preserving his friend’s honor, scrupulously fulfilling the Mishnah’s teaching: “The honor of your fellow should be as dear to you as your own” (Avot 2:10).

PRAYING DAILY FOR SELF-CONFIDENCE

Rav Kook (*Midot HaRa’aya, Kavod*, piska #5) cites the Talmudic teaching that a righteous person is able to remain silent and

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unresponsive in the face of ridicule and insult (Shabbat 88b).

Each day, at the conclusion of the Amidah, we pray: “To those who curse me, let my soul be silent...” (*Elokai netzor*). Rav Kook explains that the soul is deeply affected by derision and curse, as these strike at the core of a person’s life force. However, when the soul recognizes that its source is Divine, it remains unaffected by mockery or denigration. When God’s will is one’s clear and defining goal, the taunts of others lose their power. (*Siddur Olat Re’iyah*, vol. 1, pp. 291–292)

RAV KOOK UNDER HARASSMENT

Rav Kook embodied this teaching in his own life. He was frequently harassed by students and followers of prominent rabbis who opposed him. These attacks often crossed the line into mockery, defamatory posters, and even physical violence.

On one occasion, Rav Aryeh Levin’s daughter witnessed zealots knocking Rav Kook’s fur hat from his head. Disturbed by the incident, Rav Aryeh Levin felt compelled to offer his support. To avoid disturbing Rav Kook’s learning, he visited late at night. When Rav Kook finally lifted his eyes from his Gemara and noticed Rav Aryeh’s presence, he told him that he understood why he had come and thanked him warmly.

Rav Kook then said: “It is specifically during these trying times that I merit an increase of Divine assistance in my learning and *chidushim*. I see the words of *Kohelet* come alive: ‘God seeks those who are persecuted’” (*Kohelet* 3:15). (*Tzaddik for Eternity*, pp. 259–261)

Rav Kook not only endured mistreatment, but transformed it into an opportunity to experience closeness to God, elevating moments of turmoil into profound service of the Divine. (*Torah United*, vol. 1, *Goldscheider*, pp. xxxix–xl)

DISCOVER YOUR MISSION

Immediately following this teaching in *Ain Ayah*, Rav Kook offers a related and deeply beautiful insight.

The Talmud records a sage’s prayer at the conclusion of the Amidah:

“*Elohai*—before I was formed, I was unworthy; now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed.”

Traditionally, these words are understood as an expression of humility and self-effacement: *I was nothing before creation, and I remain nothing afterward*. Rav Kook rejected this interpretation and offered a strikingly different reading:

“Before I was formed, I was unworthy; and now that I have been formed—I live as if I had not been formed.”

That is, although I have been created and endowed with unique strengths and potential, I have failed to live up to my mission. I have neglected my talents, avoided my calling, and tragically continued to live *as if I had never been formed*.

Rav Kook teaches that when we recite these words—now said throughout Yom Kippur at the conclusion of the Amidah—we acknowledge that something has obstructed our fulfillment of life’s ultimate purpose. By living passively, we fail to see ourselves as *sheluchim*, emissaries entrusted with a unique mission in the world. (*Ain Ayah, Berachot* vol. 1, pp. 81–82, *piska* #46)

RAV CHAIM VOLOZHIN: THE ENORMOUS IMPACT OF EVERY ACTION

Rav Chaim of Volozhin offers a powerful teaching in his commentary to Pirkei Avot (2:1) that underscores human greatness and responsibility. The Mishnah states: *Da mah lema’alah mimcha*—“Know what is above you.” The conventional interpretation is an

exhortation to be mindful of God.

Rav Chaim offers a novel reading: “Know that what is above—is from you.” In other words, human actions generate changes in the spiritual realms.

The implications are profound. Our words, actions, and even thoughts ripple outward, shaping the world around us and beyond. The more aware we are of our greatness and potential, the more we are called to rise to the challenge of actualizing our best selves.

Rav Kook expresses this idea in his own lyrical language:

“Every person has the ability to change the world. It all lies within one’s spiritual resources. It depends on whether one has the power to reveal them. This is true not only of the sophisticated and learned, but even of the simplest person. There is no limit to the power of the soul—it is a candle of the Divine in this world.” (*Shemonah Kevatzim 1:846; trans. Schwartz, Spiritual Revolution, p. 17*)

A SPIRITUALLY ENERGIZED START TO THE DAY

Each day begins with *Modeh Ani*, thanking God for life and renewal. Yet the phrase *Rabbah emunatecha*—“Great is Your faithfulness”—is puzzling. We place our faith in God, not the other way around. In whom, then, is

God expressing faith?

Rav Kook offers a brilliant explanation. By granting a person life and the opportunity to begin a new day, God demonstrates His faith in humanity. Waking up itself testifies that God believes we still have something meaningful to accomplish. (*Olat Re'iyah, vol. 1, p. 3*)

A Jew is thus taught to awaken inspired, aware of the greatness and profound potential God has embedded within every soul.

LIFE LESSONS

- We realize our potential most fully when we recognize that God has placed our soul in this world to fulfill a unique mission.
- Clarify your long-term goals and identify the steps that will lead you toward them.
- Be someone others can rely on. Strive to be dependable, remembering that many people count on you. ■



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