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Discovering and Celebrating the Honor in All

(Middot HaRaaya,
Kavod (piska #8 & #9)

One of the most remarkable aspects of Rav Kook's life and teachings was the stunning emphasis he placed on deep respect and sensitivity toward others, and on the esteem one must hold even for those who pursue paths different from our own. This perspective, which he consistently extolled, is reflected in the following teaching from *Midot HaRa'aya*:

"It is essential to find honorable aspects in every situation. Then the light of the whole world, in its highest glory, will become manifest and begin to endure. 'And the reproach of His people will be taken away from all the earth' (Isa. 25:8)." (*Midot HaRa'aya*, Kavod, piska #8)

This teaching can be traced back to a well-known Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot*:

Ben Azzai used to say, "Do not belittle anyone and do not dismiss anything, for there is no man who does not have his time, nor anything that does not have its place." (*Avot* 4:3)

Rav Yisrael Meir Lau cites the classic commentary *Midrash Shmuel*, which explains that even the simplest Jew is overflowing with good deeds. As our Sages state: "Even the empty among Israel are filled with mitzvot as a

pomegranate is filled with seeds" (Berachot 57a; Eruvin 19a). Even if we notice nothing extraordinary about a person, everyone has done something good, demonstrated some kindness, and refrained from some misdeed—"there is no man who does not have his time." (Rav Lau on *Pirkei Avot*, vol. 2, p. 539)

LEARNING FROM THE SINFUL RAVEN

The Midrash offers an astounding explanation as to why Noach chose to send out the raven from the Ark. Why, of all birds, did he select the raven? According to the Midrash, Noach sought to banish it because it had sinned on the Ark. The raven had engaged in intimate relations at a time when all creatures had been commanded to refrain during the Flood. Noach felt the raven deserved exile.

Yet God instructed Noach to allow the raven to return, for the world would one day need it. Indeed, when Eliyahu the prophet hid from Achav in the wilderness, ravens brought him food (Bereishit Rabbah 33:5).

Why did God choose the raven, of all birds, to sustain Eliyahu? Let us recall that Eliyahu went into hiding after cursing Achav and his



Rav Abraham Isaac Kook zt"l

generation with drought. By appointing the raven to feed him, God delivered a striking message: just as the raven—hardly known for generosity—provided sustenance for you, so too must you cultivate greater compassion.

While it is admirable to take courageous measures in defense of Heaven's honor, one must not belittle anyone, for even the most wicked individual retains the capacity for repentance. God was teaching Eliyahu that his condemnation of Achav had been overly harsh (see Rav Lau on *Pirkei Avot*, p. 540).

A SOARING MESSAGE TO THE GENERATION

Many within the religious community were deeply distressed that the Jews returning to build the Land of Israel were not observant and were establishing communities that diverged from traditional Torah values.

Rav Kook believed it was essential to offer a religious response to this new reality. In particular, he sought to address how the religious community should relate to these pioneers. While many rabbinic leaders chose to condemn them, Rav Kook offered a revolutionary perspective in his essay *HaDor* ("The Generation") in *Ikvei HaTzon*.

Rav Kook argued that in previous generations, Jews who abandoned Torah were often morally lax or culturally unsophisticated. In contrast, the contemporary generation consisted of high-quality individuals filled with moral ambition and spiritual yearning. They were searching for absolute, exalted truth—one that would bring *tikkun* (perfection) to Israel and the entire world. They perceived Judaism and halachah as unable to address the profound questions of humanity, nationhood, and universal destiny.

Rav Kook called upon the religious community to respond with depth and grandeur. This generation, he insisted, must be addressed



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with expansive ideas. "The less significant and simpler ideas, although filled with truth and integrity, will not suffice [for this generation]" (p. 112).

Strikingly, Rav Kook emphasized the goodness and idealism within this generation. His goal was not to strip them of their light, but to elevate it through Torah:

"We will not rob them of all the light and good, all the radiance and intensity they have obtained, but rather increase and illuminate them from the light of Life, the light of Truth, shining forth from the source of Israel's soul." (p. 109)

HaDor exemplifies Rav Kook's teaching: "It is essential to find the honorable aspect in every situation." Despite the darkness and the ease with which one could focus on flaws, Rav Kook chose to identify the core of truth and goodness within the generation and declared it essential. This, he taught, is the elevated

path of a Jew—especially at this auspicious moment in history. Draw out the light. Reveal the forces of goodness. In this way we elevate the generation, bring *tikkun* to the world, and pave the path to *geulah* (redemption).

A BRILLIANT TITLE

HaDor appeared in *Ikvei HaTzon*, first published in 1906, two years after Rav Kook's aliyah to Yaffo. The title is drawn from Shir HaShirim: "If you do not know... go out in the footsteps of the flock" (1:8).

Traditionally, the verse implies that the flock follows the shepherd—suggesting that the generation must follow rabbinic leadership. Yet Rav Kook subtly intimates another meaning: that leadership must also learn from the flock. The pioneers returning to Israel were reclaiming noble ideals and elevated yearnings long suppressed in exile. In *Orot HaKodesh* (vol. 2, p. 364), Rav Kook cautions both rabbinic and secular intellectuals not to disconnect from the masses, whose spiritual instincts are often healthier and more authentic.

The brilliance of the title lies in its call for mutual respect and shared growth. True national success requires that both sides learn from one another.

RAV KOOK'S HEART

Rav Kook's insistence on highlighting the good in others flowed naturally from his

overflowing heart. Two exquisite aphorisms capture this spirit:

"My beloved brothers, if only I had arms the size of the world, so that I could embrace you all with love." (*Igrot HaRa'aya*, vol. 2, p. 229)

"The purest tzaddikim do not complain about evil, but increase righteousness. They do not complain about atheism, but increase faith. They do not complain about ignorance, but increase wisdom." (*Arpilei Tohar* 80)

MESSIANIC YEARNINGS

"When the light of Mashiach shines in the heart, it conditions us to respect people. 'It shall come to pass on that day that the nations will seek the scion of Jesse... and his resting place shall be glorious' (Isa. 11:10)." (*Midot HaRa'aya*, Kavod, piska #9)

While "glorious" is the usual translation, Rav Kook reads the verse as pointing toward *kavod*—a world suffused with mutual respect inspired by Mashiach.

Malachi famously prophesied that the final redemption would bring about "the returning of the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents." Once again, Eliyahu stands at the center. After condemning the Jewish people, he is rebuked by God. According to Rashi, God expresses disappointment: "I do not desire your prophecy when you prosecute My children."

As a rectification, Eliyahu returns throughout history—to a Brit Milah, to the Pesach Seder—witnessing the Jewish people's loyalty. Ultimately, he will herald the final redemption (*Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 29).

Rav Kook writes that with our return to the Land, we await a "giluy Eliyahu"—a revelation of Elijah (*Igrot HaRa'aya*, vol. 1, letter 96). Perhaps this means that the lesson Eliyahu learned—compassion over condemnation—must be internalized if redemption is to



unfold. Honor, respect, and love must stand at the center of our communal life.

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop echoes this theme. Just as Moshe and Aharon led the redemption from Egypt, the final redemption will unfold through Eliyahu and the Melech HaMashiach. Eliyahu's task is to restore unity—"to return the hearts of fathers to children and children to fathers." Rav Charlop stresses that this work of reconciliation is essential as we rebuild the Land (*Mei Marom, Mimaynei Hayeshua* ch. 18).

IT'S TIME TO SIT AT THE SAME TABLE

Rav Kook teaches that as we approach messianic times, the urgency of brotherhood intensifies. Why?

The Imrei Emes, the famed Gerer Rebbe, illustrated this with a parable:

A wealthy father married off his daughters to two fine sons-in-law. One ate only dairy, the other only meat, so they sat at separate tables. When the father later fell into poverty and could serve only bread and water, the sons-in-law continued eating separately. Seeing this, the father exclaimed, "When one ate meat and the other dairy, separate tables made sense. But for dry bread—why separate?"

After centuries of suffering and exile, we sit at one table. We share one *Shulchan Aruch*. It is time to sit together in brotherhood and love.

As we near the end of the long night of exile, we must learn to see the goodness and light within every Jewish soul.

LIFE LESSONS

- There is no greater act of *chesed* than offering sincere praise. Encouragement is among the most powerful catalysts for growth and success.
- Whenever possible, share with others the kind words spoken about them.
- A crucial tool in seeing the good in others is the teaching: "Judge every person favorably" (Avot 1:6). The *Sfat Emet* notes the Mishnah's phrase *kol ha'adam*—"the entire person"—teaching that to judge favorably we must consider the whole individual, with all the complexities of his or her life. ■



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