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A Sensitive Soul's Anger (Midot HaRa'aya, Ka'as)

In general, when the Mussar works speak of anger, the emphasis is on how a Jew must quash such feelings and be extremely wary not to be drawn into a scenario in which one might give in to this unsavory response of fury.

Rav Kook, in his unique way, addresses the trait of *ka'as* (anger/agitation) as a natural response that a sensitive soul may experience. Surely, Rav Kook is sharing a feeling that he himself encountered from time to time.

Rav Kook first describes the agitation a spiritually sensitive person feels when he or she is constricted by limitations—even within halacha—that are tethered to this worldly domain. The Jewish soul yearns to feel at one with the endless light of God. “Anger for the sake of the Torah arises when the person of higher

spiritual sensibility who soars in the realm of higher contemplation is forced to confront the narrow world of particularized teachings and precepts, which are imposed by necessity on the alluring heights of universality. And the higher soul is grieved, and thus is engendered irritation of spirit and anger for the sake of the Torah.” (Midot HaRa'aya, Ka'as (Anger))

THREE TIMES A DAY

The Talmud (Berachot 4a) states that one who recites the psalm of *Ashrei* three times daily is assured his reward in the World to Come. The uniqueness of this psalm and prayer, according to the Talmud, lies in the fact that it contains the aleph-bet in acrostic form and includes the verse, “God opens His hand and provides all creatures with their needs” (Psalm 145).

Rav Kook suggested that reciting the aleph-bet thrice daily exemplifies a Jew's yearning to reach the depths of a relationship with the Almighty. He quotes the teaching of the Zohar, which says that the universe was created with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, the letters represent the building blocks and inner structure of all creation. A Jew yearns to know God—intimately, deeply—and to learn His inner secrets.

The second aspect regarding the importance of this psalm—that it contains the verse “God opens His hand...”—relates directly to the notion of a Jew's yearning to reach higher realms of understanding and closeness to the Creator. When a person is bogged down with the distractions and troubles of day-to-day life, one has little time or headspace for



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contemplation and meditation on deeper matters. However, when one develops an ongoing faith that God provides for all, and that Divine Providence oversees every aspect of life, one is able to direct heart and mind toward the loftiest goal of *Kirvat Elokim* (closeness to God). (Ain Aya, Berachot Chapter 1, piska #21, p. 12)

RAV KOOK'S ECSTATIC LOVE

Two remarkable episodes, reported by Rav Kook's close friend and confidant, Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, highlight Rav Kook's elevated and almost otherworldly love for the Almighty.

In 1914, when Rav Charlop traveled with Rav Kook to the agricultural settlements of the Galilee, he witnessed Rav Kook's state of ecstasy:

"I was awakened in the middle of the night. I saw Rav Kook carried away as if by a tempest, pacing the length of the room, back and forth. I was frightened and uplifted at the same time.

Suddenly, the Rav approached me and took hold of me. His hands were cold as ice, while his face was aflame with fire. From his mouth burst forth words of passion: 'Rav Ya'akov Moshe, Ich ver farebrent fun ahava Hashem!'" ("Rabbi Yaakov Moshe, I am being burnt up by the love of God"). (Koren Rav Kook Siddur, Naor, p. 29, quoted from Sichot ha-Rayah, Neriyah, pp. 351–352)

On another occasion, Rav Charlop related this experience: "In the summer of 1921, Rav Kook went to rest in Har Tov. I visited him there, and our private conversation extended into the wee hours. The next morning, I noticed that the Rav did not arrive at prayer. What's more, totally out of character for the Rav (who was punctilious not to engage in any activity before prayer), I saw him approach



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the innkeeper and begin to discuss botanical matters with him. Only after concluding this conversation did he proceed to prayer.

The delay and the incongruous conversation made me wonder, and I plucked up the courage to ask the Rav to explain his curious behavior.

This was his response: "This morning there burned within me such a thirst for the Living God, I feared that in prayer my soul would be consumed. I was forced to dampen my



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enthusiasm by lowering my thoughts to practical, mundane matters.” (Koren Rav Kook Siddur, Naor, p. 28, cited from Rav Moshe Zvi Neriya, Orot Hatefilla, p. 19)

A SECOND KIND OF ANGER TO MITIGATE

Rav Kook describes a second kind of agitation or anger to which a spiritually sensitive person is vulnerable. When someone pursues a path of elevated contemplation and holy thought, yet sees many around him engaged in base and spiritually hollow pursuits, he may feel frustration and grief. “At times this [agitation] also develops because of a sudden confrontation with reality, which remains in its lowly state in the practical world, because life is on a low level of development.” (*Midot HaRa’aya, Ka’as* [Anger])

Rav Kook advises us how to overcome feelings of agitation and anger. One must faithfully perceive that “the descents are in truth ascents.” One needs to focus on potential benefits—the gains that can accrue even from certain deficiencies—and devoutly believe in the greater Divine plan. “The reflective person will understand how all the descents are in truth ascents, and that the particularizations and limitations bring into being a wide illumination of a higher divine light. Then will

a divine inner peace once again pervade the soul and one will find rest and contentment; ‘the light of the righteous brings joy’” (Proverbs 13:9).

REVEALING LIGHT IN THE

NEW HEBREW LITERATURE

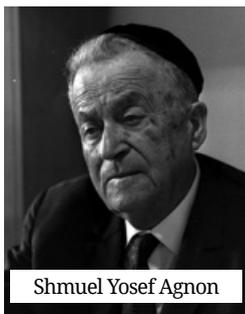
A powerful example of this approach is seen in Rav Kook’s interaction with the

culture outside the sacred confines of Torah study and mitzvah observance. The popularity of Hebrew literature that began to surface in the early 1900s in Palestine could easily have been a source of agitation for Rav Kook and his devotion to tradition. Yet Rav Kook perceived the potential to express Jewish ideals and inspirational teachings through these writings—reaching a broader spectrum of Jews who might not otherwise be drawn to traditional forms of Torah study.

An exceptional example of Rav Kook’s openness in this context was the relationship he forged with a young writer who had just arrived in Yaffo (1908), a few years after Rav Kook’s own arrival in 1904: Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887–1970). Agnon would go on to become a Nobel laureate for his renowned writings.

When Agnon arrived in Yaffo, he had abandoned traditional observance. Rav Kook took early notice of him and asked to read his work. At that time, Agnon’s portfolio was relatively modest, and everything he had published could be read in several days. Yet Agnon hesitated. Some of the material touched on areas of romance, eros, and passion.

Rav Kook read all of Agnon’s writings. The following interaction then took place: “He told me he had read my work. I asked, ‘All of it?’ He replied, ‘All of it, and I will tell you something. The *Pri Megadim*... explains that if one quantity of forbidden food should fall into a volume of permitted food sixtyfold times as large, the forbidden becomes *batel*, and the permitted profits from the prohibited, since there are now sixty-one parts. That’s the way it is with you; even if there is something “forbidden” that has fallen into your books, it is *batel be-shishim*, canceled out and has become permitted.” (S.Y. Agnon, *Me’Atzmi el Atzmi*, p.



Shmuel Yosef Agnon

93, translated in *Tradition, A Portrait of Two Artists*, Saks, p. 36)

Rav Kook sought to identify the positive attributes and the potential good that could emerge from Agnon's writings. Surely, it was a struggle for Rav Kook to legitimize all of his writings—and those of other well-known authors publishing at that time. In a passage from *Orot HaTeshuva* (15:12), Rav Kook stresses the crucial need for authors of modern Hebrew literature to be personally devout and committed to mitzvot, so that their writing reflects the beauty and purity of Judaism:

“The recognition that a decline in the moral realm impedes a literary flowering is a uniquely Jewish sensitivity. Only we [Jews] truly recognize that, in order to rectify literature, [its] authors must first purify their souls” (*Orot HaTeshuva*, 15:12).

One clearly notes that Rav Kook felt strongly that only from a pure and committed soul could authentic and elevated writing emanate. Yet he was able to appreciate the contribution being made by those who had not yet reached that standard of religious devotion—and he hoped that by encouraging and supporting their journey, they would ultimately achieve this ideal. It should be duly noted that in the case of Shay Agnon, one should not underestimate the warm reception and personal friendship of Rav Kook, which played a pivotal role in Agnon's return to embrace Judaism and a committed life of halacha and tradition.

RAV ARYEH'S SELF-CONTROL

Yitzchak Zilberstein emigrated to Israel as a young boy in the 1930s and entered the elementary school of Aryeh Levin. He was soon taken under Rav Aryeh's warm and nurturing wing.

Rav Zilberstein, today one of the leading poskim in the world, harkens back to an

incident with Rav Aryeh Levin that impacted him for the rest of his life.

Rav Aryeh was often summoned to negotiate the release of Jews who were imprisoned by the British in the pre-state years of Palestine. On one such mission, Rav Aryeh brought along his young protégé, Yitzchak Zilberstein. Rav Zilberstein shared what he witnessed in his own words:

“Once I went with Rav Aryeh to negotiate with the British for the release of a member of the Neturei Karta,” recalls Rav Zilberstein. “It took us a great deal of time and effort to reach the prison, and once we were there, it took hours more to secure the release.

“But when the man walked free, he covered his eyes and refused to look at Rav Aryeh, saying, ‘It's forbidden to look at a rasha!’” (a reference to Rav Aryeh Levin's close relationship with Rav Kook zt"l).

“At that time,” recalls Rav Zilberstein, “it really hurt me, and I exclaimed to Rav Aryeh: ‘Does the obligation to love a fellow Jew extend so far?!’

“Incredibly, Rav Aryeh's response was one of surprise. He turned to me, looked me in the eye, and simply said: ‘But he is a Jew!’

“Rav Aryeh's gaze as he said those words accompanies me all the time,” concludes Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein. (*Sweetness and Light*, Mishpacha Magazine, Shulman and Gutentag, April 3, 2023)

“CHANGE YOUR BEKESHA BEFORE EXPRESSING YOUR ANGER”

There is a chassidic tale of a Rebbe who offered his chassidim practical advice on managing anger. When a person feels heated and agitated and senses the urge to express frustration, he should go to his closet and put on a second bekeshah set aside specifically for such moments.

The chassidim later shared their own explanation for their Rebbe's unusual counsel—based, perhaps, on experience. By the time they went upstairs, opened the closet, located the correct *bekesha*, changed garments, and came back downstairs, nearly all of their anger had dissipated. They were then able to discuss the matter in a level-headed way, without raising their voices or lashing out.

The Rebbe's advice proved to be the perfect remedy time and again.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

- Give some of your time to someone else. Try to listen to what they are saying—and what they are not saying—without immediately attempting to answer or solve their problems.
- Make sure that today you not only give people the benefit of the doubt, but even when it seems they are clearly wrong,

try to find some way of justifying their actions. Strive to see their point of view.

- The Sages praise the value of silence—which is often the best response when feeling a surge of anger rising. The Chafetz Chaim writes that when a person wishes to fast voluntarily, it is preferable to accept a fast from speaking (*ta'anit dibur*). (Shmirat HaLashon, Shaar HaTevunah chap. 2, in the note). ■



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