



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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# Rav Kook: In Service to Hashem Pirkei Avot 3:11

Rav Chanina ben Dosa says: Anyone whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom will endure..." (Pirkei Avot 3:11)

Rav Chaim Volozhin explains the Mishna to mean that wisdom and intellect alone will not always guard a person from sin (*Ruach Chaim* 3:11). Sincere study of Torah which is geared to enriching and developing a deeper relationship with Hashem can be transformative. In this way, Torah learning becomes a vital catalyst in helping one to guard oneself and overcome sin.

This Mishna clearly echoes a verse in Mishlei: "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord" (Mishlei 9:10).

It should be noted that it is the sage Rav Chanina ben Dosa who emphasizes *yirat shamayim*, sincerity and awe of God. Rav Chanina ben Dosa is the talmudic personality perhaps most well-known for his deep devotion and an amazing capability to perform wonders.

Rav Kook comments on two Talmudic tales concerning this beloved and eminent sage.

First is the story of Rav Chanina ben Dosa visiting his teacher, Rebbe Yochanan ben

Zakai. During his stay, the son of Rebbe Yochanan became dangerously ill. Rebbe Yochanan turned to his student, Rav Chanina ben Dosa and asked that he pray for the healing of his son.

The young boy was healed. The wife of Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai was surprised to see that her husband had asked his student to pray and that he did not pray himself. Rebbe Yochanan answered her with the following illustration: "He is like a servant before the king while I am like a minister before the King." (*Berachot* 34b).

What is the difference between a minister and an officer? Why is it that God is more attentive to the servant? One would think that the king would be more attentive to the minister.

Rav Kook explained that when one stands before God in prayer, one must put one's intellect and analysis aside. It is a time for purity of heart and child-like faith. Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai recognized that his student Rav Chanina ben Dosa exemplified this quality - something that even he himself struggled to attain. Rav Chanina was a man of saintly devotion and extreme righteousness. Rav Chanina performed God's will like a faithful servant without questioning or deeper understanding. (*Ain Aya, Berachot* 34b)

Rav Chanina ben Dosa's teaching in the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot above (3:11) aligns squarely with his heartfelt prayer which healed the child of his master. According to Rav Chanina, purity of heart and sincere devotion is the ultimate pursuit in order to

attain the highest rung of spirituality.

A second poignant Talmudic story regarding Rav Chanina ben Dosa tells of an incident where a venomous snake was harming the inhabitants of a city. They called on the great sage for his help. Rabbi Chanina went to the snake's hole and placed his heel over it. The snake bit him and the snake immediately died while Rabbi Chanina remained totally unharmed. Rav Chanina lifted the snake and said: "It is not the snake that kills, but sin kills. (Berachot 33a)

Rav Kook explained, based on Rashi, that the snake mentioned in this text was not an ordinary snake. The term used in the Talmud is that it was an "arod". This creature is a fusion of two different species: a snake and perhaps a turtle. The mixed-breed that caused pain and suffering was a creature not created by God in the natural course of the days of creation. It is an aberration.

Rav Kook suggested that this fact concerning the "arod" is the key to understanding this aggadic text.

Sin is an act by which a person veers from the organic and healthy path which is natural to man. When man veers off the track, he painfully collides with obstacles that cause ache and suffering. Rav Chanina ben Dosa, who aligned every fiber of his being with the will of the Creator, was certain that if he encountered this deviant creature he could subdue its malice. (Ain Aya, Berachot 33a)

Thus, Rav Chanina declared that it is not a snake alone that is poisonous and inflicts pain; it is the sin of man that so often causes heart-ache and acute suffering. Rav Chanina serves as an exquisite exemplar of living a saintly,

blissful and joyful life. A life in which one aligns their will with the Will of the Almighty.

Another towering twentieth century rabbinic figure also pointed to the remarkable figure of Rav Chanina ben Dosa in accentuating the character trait of purity and exquisite faith. At a gala dinner held in Crown Heights on June 14, 1942, Rabbi Joseph. B. Soloveitchik delivered a short address, celebrating the 45th anniversary of the Lubavitch Yeshiva,

*Tomche Tmimim*. He compared the exceptional work of the Rebbe and Chabad

to the wondrous ways of the talmudic sage, Rav Chanina ben Dosa.

Rabbi Soloveitchik cited a lesser known episode recorded not in the Talmud, but in the Midrash (*Kohelet Raba* 1:1):

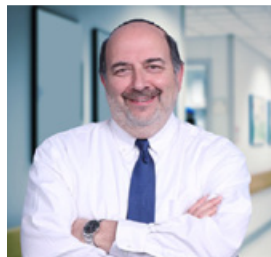
One of the greatest Talmudic sages of his day, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, saw his fellow townspeople taking various offerings to Jerusalem, "Everyone is taking offerings up to Jerusalem, but I take nothing?"

He was destitute and could not bring anything to the Holy Temple.

With this in mind he went to the empty lands outside the city and found a rock. He chipped it, chiseled it and polished it, and proclaimed: "Behold I take upon myself to take it up to Jerusalem!"



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Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa then sought to hire workers to transport the stone and five men chanced to come his way. The workers agreed to lug the boulder for a significant charge. The sage, however, did not have such a sum on him and the workers moved on.

So the Midrash continues: Five angels appeared as regular men and made a similar offer. Though they did not demand immediate payment, they had an added stipulation, "On condition that you bear some of the weight, at least place one of your fingers under the rock."

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa accepted the offer, placing his finger beneath rock.

When they reached Jerusalem, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa looked for the workers to pay their wages but they were nowhere to be found.

There is a deep message here. If the angels are carrying the rock, why did they ask him to

place his finger under the rock?

The answer is, because we are partners with G-d in healing the world. I need to lift my finger. I need to do something. I need to extend my arm. The rest G-d will do. ("Defying Laws of Nature": Yiddish address of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, edited by Menachem Butler)

Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Kook both accentuate the pure, unadulterated faith in God we must all pursue and seek to attain. Indeed, such faith is a source of true blessing and a pathway to experiencing an elevated life in which one feels God's abiding closeness and love. ■



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](mailto:aarong@ouisrael.org) at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.

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