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The Sensitive Heart of Shmuel Hakatan Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot 4:24

Shmuel HaKatan says: “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles...” (*Mishlei* 24:17) (*Pirkei Avot* 4:24)

Rav Chaim Volozhin comments on this Mishna that praying for the destruction of one’s adversaries and enemies is often not the best solution. As a proof he cites the talmudic story of Rav Meir and his wife Brurira who were being tormented by local hooligans. Rabbi Meir prayed for their demise. Brurira taught her husband that it is better to pray that the wicked repent. As Rav Meir’s wife inferred from the verse, “Sin will be gone from the earth”: sin will cease, but not the sinners, for “the wicked will be no more,” they will repent (*Berachot* 10a on *Tehillim* 104:35). (*Ruach Chaim* 4:24).

Rav Kook comments on this talmudic passage saying that it is essential that one never lose sight of the divine image that is found in others. Even when interacting with a fellow Jew who is corrupt and sinful, Rav Kook advises to perceive the potential and see the

sanctity embedded within the soul of each person. Brurira’s advice was taken to heart by her husband, Rav Meir. He prayed for the wellbeing of his antagonists. They changed their ways and repented. (*Ain Aya, Berachot* 10a and see Rav Kook’s *Midot HaRaayah, Aha-va* #9)

The teaching of Shmuel HaKatan in the mishna in *Pirkei Avot* cited above is unique in that it has a sage quoting a verse from the book of *Mishlei*. Rav Kook explains that the verse quoted by Shmuel HaKatan in this mishna captures the core of the sage’s personality: his sensitivity and exquisite righteousness.

The Talmud (*Berachot* 28b) recounts a significant moment in Jewish history following the destruction of Jerusalem. Rabban

Gamliel who presided over the Sanhedrin in Yavneh recognized the urgent need to amend the daily Amidah. The Jewish people needed Divine protection against heretics and informers. Who could possibly compose a prayer that calls for destruction of others?

In the end, Shmuel HaKatan - Samuel the



Rabbi Aryeh Levin zt”l

modest - agreed to formulate the prayer, called *Birkat Haminim*. Why was it so difficult to find a sage to compose the blessing? What made Shmuel HaKatan qualified for the task?

Rav Kook suggested that a prayer which petitions for the demise of heretics and slanderers touches on the powerful emotions of hostility and anger. It is natural to feel hatred towards those who seek to harm us and our community. To compose a fitting prayer against enemies requires an individual who is utterly pure and holy, one who has succeeded to remove all hatred and petty resentments from his heart.

Only Shmuel HaKatan was a suitable candidate to compose this challenging prayer. His life's guiding principle was "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls" (Avot 4:24). Shmuel succeeded in removing all enmity from his heart, even towards personal enemies. (Sid-dur Olat Reiyah, vol 1, p. 278)

In one's determination and zeal to uproot evil, Rav Kook warns us that our actions must be carefully assessed to be certain that excessive hate does not seep in and that our actions are purely for Heaven's sake.

Rav Kook elegantly expresses this critical notion in his classic work *Orot HaKodesh* (vol. 3, p. 244):

"We must refine the attribute of zeal, so that it enters into the realm of the holy, it will be a zeal for God. Since zealotry often harbors some slight influence of human failings, our powers of self-examination must determine its primary motive. We must be sure it is not rooted in personal jealousy, which rots one very bones, but rather a genuine zeal for God, which provides a covenant of peace."

Rav Kook himself was forced to deal with others who expressed enmity towards him. It was not uncommon for Rav Kook to be

harassed by students and followers of leading rabbis who disagreed with him, and they often crossed the line by mocking him, posting defamatory broadsides, and even physically attacking him.

One time, Rav Aryeh Levin's daughter witnessed, with horror, zealots knocking Rav Kook's fur hat off his head. Rav Levin felt that he needed to go give Rav Kook his support after this latest incident. So as not to disturb his studies, he visited him late at night. He sat at a distance from Rav Kook in the study hall. When Rav Kook finally broke his concentration and noticed Rav Levin's presence, he told him that he knew why he was there.

He said: "It is especially during these trying times and when I am silent and compassionate towards those who intend to insult me that I merit a surge of divine help in my studies and 'chidishei Torah.' I see the words of *Kohelet* spring forth to life: God seeks those who are persecuted" (*Kohelet* 3:15). (Raz, Tzaddik for Eternity, p. 259-261)

Evidently, along with Rav Kook's ability to withstand the torment of others, he turned the experiences of mistreatment into opportunities to feel God's closeness. He was able to elevate times of turmoil into service of God. (See Torah United vol. 1, Goldscheider, pp. xxxix-xl) ■



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

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