



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

# Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot 1:4 - The Ideal Way to Study Torah with Others

“Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzereidah said: Make your house a meeting place for sages. Roll in the dust of their feet and thirstily drink in their words.” (*Avot* 1:4)

The phrase, “roll in the dust of their feet” implies that one must humbly interact with rabbis when one is in their presence. Rashi takes this approach and understands “roll in the dust of their feet” as directing a student to serve the sages. He must become an aid available to him at all times.

Rav Chaim Volozhin offers a novel way to understand this phrase ‘*mitabek be’afar ragleihem*’ (roll in the dust). He compares this phrase with the verse in the Torah: “A man wrestled (*avak*) with him” (*Bereshit* 32:25), a reference to Yaakov wrestling with the angel. Thus, this term in the Mishnah, *mitabek* similar to *avak*, is teaching that we are required to ask, challenge, and debate Torah teachings

- even when learning from rabbis. At the same time, “we sit in the dust of their feet,” which means the debate must be carried out respectfully and with a recognition that we are learning from those who possess much great knowledge. (*Ruach Chaim*, 1:4).

One of the remarkable qualities of the time-honored way we study as Jews is the healthy debate which animates Torah study. We arrive at the truth when we learn from one another and sincerely evaluate the redeeming qualities in differing viewpoints. Rav Kook, in one of his celebrated teachings, comments on the phrase “The Sages increase peace in the world” (*Berachot* 64a) with the following insight:

“Some mistakenly think that world peace will come about only through uniformity of opinions and characteristics, and for that reason, when they behold sages investigating the Torah, and thereby multiplying the sides and opinions, they assume that the sages bring controversy, which is the opposite of peace. In truth, this is not so. True peace cannot come to the world other than by diversification. There must be made visible all sides and opinions, and it must be clarified how all have their place, each according to its value...” (*Olat Re’iyah*, vol. 1, pp. 330-331, translation Naor, The Koren Rav Kook Siddur, p. 267)

Only when we are willing to challenge one

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another and be open-hearted and open-minded can we as a community arrive at truth which brings wholeness and peace to the world.

Rav Kook's dear friend, Rav Aryeh Levin, lovingly known as 'the *tzaddik* of Yerushalayim,' emphasized the humility needed when we study together with others. Rav Aryeh cited the beautiful teaching of the sages quoted by Rashi (*Shemot* 12:3) which depicts the way in which Moshe studied together with his brother Aharon. Rav Aryeh expounded on Rashi's words; "Moshe would lower his head and say to his brother Aharon, 'You speak first.' Aharon would then lower his head and say to Moshe, 'You speak first.' A single voice then emerged between them."

Rav Aryeh explained that Moshe could easily have thought to himself: 'If I heard the Law directly from God, why must I first hear the opinion of my brother Aharon?'" And Aharon could have also had the thought in his heart: 'I am the older brother, why must I give precedence to my younger brother?' And yet, each one wanted to learn first from the other. Both displayed exquisite modesty and humility. (*R'Aryeh Haya Omer*, Raz, p. 282)

Rav Aryeh placed special emphasis on the sensitivity that must be shown to others in every area of life. This sensitivity must be carried over when studying Torah with others as well.

### A CARING SHIELD

In a similar vein, Rav Kook offered an exquisite explanation of a unique term employed to describe the Sages in the Talmud:



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*baalei tresar* (master of the shield), which refers to the sages when they are debating an issue (see *Berachot* 27b). Why does the

Talmud refer to the rabbis as "shield bearers?" Rav Kook explains that Talmudic scholars engage expressly in a defensive war - *not* a debate with an all out assault to annihilate the opposition.

Since the rabbis recognize there may be an aspect of truth in the opposition, the true scholar must primarily bolster and affirm their own position. Thus, one defends their position, the same way a shield is used for defense. A scholar never looks to demean or belittle the other. When engaged in a sincere search for truth one remains ever aware of disagreeing honorably and with deep mutual



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respect. (*Ain Aya, Berachot 27b, piska #5, p.111*)

### HARMONIZING TORAH STUDY IN THE HOLY LAND

Rav Kook believed that Torah study has been impacted negatively by the long exile. Torah study has been plagued by excessive debate and a lack of harmony among the great sages. With the return of Torah study to the sacred atmosphere of the Holy Land, Rabbis will interact more amicably and a more natural, organic flow of Torah thought and intuition will once again come to the fore.

What is the basis for Rav Kook's novel idea? A striking source found in the Talmud is the amazing episode regarding Rav Zeira. In preparation for his aliyah to the Land of Israel, he fasted one hundred fasts in order to forget his learning of the exile, so that he could learn Torah afresh in the Land of Israel. (*Bava Metzia 85a*)

What in particular did Rav Zeira intend to forget? Rashi offers the following stunning idea:

Rav Zeira wished to forget the *style* of study practiced in Babylonia. The method of study in Eretz Yisrael was one of cooperative analysis and an unargumentative search for the truth, which flowed smoothly as oil. In contrast, the Babylonian scholars of that period were accustomed to joust with each other and attempt to disprove each other without always training an eye on the objective truth. (*Rashi* according to the *Maharsha, Ben Yehoyada*, also see *Artscroll Talmud* which quotes this explanation: *Bava Metzia* p. 85a note #32) ■



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