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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Avot 3:18 - Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot: Rebbe Akiva's Boundless Optimism

He [Rebbe Akiva] used to say: Beloved is man who was created in the Image of God...Beloved are Yisrael who are called the children of the Omnipresent...Beloved are Yisrael who were given a desirable instrument (i.e. the Torah)...” (Avot 3:18)

Rabbi Chaim Volozhin points out a striking contrast between the opening mishnah in chapter three and Rebbe Akiva's teaching in this Mishnah, which comes toward the close of the chapter.

Avot 3:1 painted a bleak picture of man's past, present, and future. Man is to be aware that his life begins with a putrid drop (of semen). Man is buried and one's body is placed in the earth alongside the worms and maggots. Man will then be summoned to stand before the King of Heaven and make an accounting of his transgressions. This perspective on life is meant to elicit reverence and fear so that man refrains from sin and lives humbly.

Rebbe Akiva in Mishnah 3:18 counters those points and highlights the positive in each step of the way. Man is born of a putrid drop, but more significantly, man is created in the image of God. Death is certainly a cause for sorrow, but do not be overly troubled, for each Jew, when passing from this world, is reunited with his Father in Heaven.

And lastly, while it is true that man must give a final reckoning before God, we have been gifted the Torah, which has guided us throughout our lifetime and has saved us countless times from succumbing to the evil inclination. With this “desirable instrument,” this treasure of having the Torah, the Jew will be vindicated from harsh judgment in heaven. (Ruach Chaim, 3:18)

Rebbe Akiva presents a perspective that is empowering and uplifting. He sees the positive and instills hope and faith.

Of the many sages of the Talmud, the Jewish people have been magnetically drawn to the personality of Rebbe Akiva and his heroic courage and positivity.

Rav Kook also took special note of the qualities found in Rebbe Akiva's remarkable character and highlighted one particular teaching of Rebbe Akiva that has left a lasting impact. We begin with the backdrop of the Mishnah (Yadayim 3:5 and see Megillah 7a), which discusses the status of the book of *Shir Hashirim* and considers whether or not to include the book in the holy canon. Rebbe Akiva forcefully argued for its holiness and its inclusion among the sacred writings. He famously asserted: “For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which Shir Hashirim was given to Israel! For all the writings are holy, but *Shir Hashirim* is the holy of

holies.” (Ibid.)

Rabbi Akiva felt the need to strenuously underscore the sanctity of *Shir Hashirim*. Rav Kook wrote a soaring passage emphasizing why Rebbe Akiva was most suited to take this stand:

“A soul that is insensitive to feelings of romance cannot relate to the tender sensibilities expressed in songs of love. Such a person will pervert those poetic yearnings, reducing them to the level of his own base desires. Similarly, one who has never ascended the heights of holy contemplation, one who has never experienced the uplifting surge of love for the Rock of all worlds - such a person will fail to grasp how the sublime yearnings of *Shir Hashirim* truly reflect the highest aspirations of the Jewish people.” (Olat Reiyah, Commentary to Shir Hashirim)

Rav Kook argued that a sensitive soul, who relates to others with a delicate and abiding love and develops a similarly deep and passionate love toward the Almighty, is a person who will embrace the depth and pure elegance found in each verse of *Shir Hashirim*. However, one who lacks this sensitivity, the book will appear impure and perhaps even profane. Rebbe Akiva’s lofty and sensitive soul was able to perceive the book’s majesty. Rav Kook goes on to elucidate this point:

“But an insightful person will recognize that the body of literature of this holy nation, whose long history is replete with extraordinary displays of self-sacrifice and martyrdom to sanctify God’s name, would be incomplete

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without a suitable expression of their boundless love for God. As he was cruelly put to death at the hands of the Romans, Rebbe Akiva told his students, “All my life I have been troubled by this verse, ‘You will love God... with all your soul’ - even if He takes your soul. When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this?” Rebbe Akiva recited the Shema, and his soul departed when he reached the word *echad*, declaring God’s unity (Berachot 61b).” (Ibid.)



Rav Kook points to a profound moment during Rebbe Akiva’s life when he expressed his genuine and effusive love for God. Even as he was being tortured, he took it as an opportunity to express his boundless faith and attachment to God.

Rav Kook concludes this passage by sharing the reason why Rebbe Akiva was eminently qualified to teach us about the profound sanctity of *Shir Hashirim*:

“Only a soul as great as Rebbe Akiva could testify that *Shir Hashirim* is the Holy of Holies, and that ‘the entire universe is unworthy of the day that *Shir Hashirim* was given to Israel.’ In his life, Rebbe Akiva experienced love in all of its levels: the personal

love for Kalba Savua's daughter, in its natural purity; the idealistic love for his people, including its fight for independence against Roman occupation; and the lofty love for God, in all of its noble beauty. Thus, Rebbe Akiva was eminently qualified to evaluate the true nature of the love so poetically expressed in Shir Hashirim." (Ibid.)

For Rav Kook, Rebbe Akiva's love for his wife and for his nation were bound up with the love that he shared with God.

It is worthwhile noting that not only was the book of *Shir Hashirim* canonized as part of Tanach, but perhaps unlike any other book of Tanach, it has become traditional practice to recite *Shir Hashirim* at key junctures. Its public recitation is on Pesach. Many recite it after the Pesach Seder. Additionally, many observe the custom to recite the book during the late afternoon on the eve of Shabbat.

Rabbi Akiva's abundant faith in God and faith in his people are emblematic of the positive way he opted to view the world. Returning to his teaching in the Mishnah from Avot above (3:18), Rebbe Akiva emphasizes the redeeming qualities in a Jew that must be acknowledged: A Jew contains within him the *tzelem Elokim*, the image of God, and thus every Jew is holy; every Jew is a child of God and therefore, ipso facto, has a loving Father who is merciful and loving; and thirdly, a Jew is immensely fortunate to be the recipient of Torah, which provides every Jew with the wisdom and inspiration needed to lead meaningful and noble lives. ■



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