



# Avot 4:15 - Rav Kook: Be The First to Greet Others

“R’ Matya ben Charash says, “Be the first to greet every individual...” (Avot 4:15)

Rav Kook commented on a similar statement in the Talmud: “One who is aware that another person is accustomed to greet him, he must greet him first, as it says, ‘Seek peace and pursue it’ (Tehillim 34:15)” (Berachot 6b).

Rav Kook explained the difference between the above teaching in Avot and the comparable formulation in the Talmud. When walking in the market and seeing a friend, it is best to be the first to offer greetings and, in this way, be the one who expresses honor and reveals feelings of friendship. However, when one knows that his friend often is the first to extend greetings, one should make a special effort to arrange to meet him first, so that you will be able to be the first to say hello.

Rav Kook points to the verse quoted in the Talmud — “Seek peace and pursue it” — which suggests that you go out of your way to ensure that you will encounter the other first and thus be the first to extend your feelings of affection for the other person. (Ain Aya, Berachot 6b, piska #66)

It is remarkable to see the Talmud’s meticulous concern for the respect and honor one must give a friend. To such a degree that one should arrange the sequence of events so that he or she can be the one to initiate the greeting!

The eminent former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, cites a beautiful Chassidic interpretation that elaborates on this stunning directive. The Chassidic master, Rebbe Avraham Chaim of Zlotchov, in his work Pri Chaim, reads the Mishnah, “Be first with [presenting] peace to all men,” in a most literal way. The Mishnah is not merely about saying “peace” (i.e., a greeting of Shalom Aleichem — “peace be upon you” — or the equivalent), but about creating peace. If you are in a contentious relationship with someone else, do not wait for him to appease you. Take the initiative in making overtures of peace, and over time he will most likely respond favorably. (Rav Lau on Pirkei Avot, vol. 2, p. 652)

For Rav Aryeh Levin, the beloved ‘Tzaddik of Yerushalayim,’ being the first to greet others was second nature. For over sixty years, without missing a day, he rose before daylight every morning to join a minyan in prayer at the rising of the sun (vatikin), following the practice of the Vilna Gaon. Even when his health began to suffer, he kept his practice faithfully.

On his way to shul, he made it a point to greet everyone he met on the street, and he was especially careful to wish a good morning to the street cleaners, who also rose early to work. Rabbi Simcha Raz, in his classic and

exquisite biography of the saintly Rav Aryeh, shared that he once asked him why he made a special effort to go over to each street cleaner. Rav Aryeh answered:

“I have an affection for the street cleaners. Just look: When everyone is still asleep, they take the trouble to come and clean the streets of Jerusalem so as to support themselves by their own honest labor. Their work is not respected; they are not esteemed for it; their salary is meager. And still, they take the pains to do their task faithfully.” (A Tzadik in Our Time, Raz, p. 101)

Another inspiring and wonderful tale is told about Rav Aryeh and his special devotion in the way he lovingly greeted others. Rabbi Benji Levene, Rav Aryeh’s grandson, related the following:

“Someone once told me that as a young man, he decided to rebel and gave up wearing a kippah. One day he saw my grandfather walking towards him and, remembering that Reb Aryeh was at his brit and his bar mitzvah, he tried to sneak away down a side street so the Rav shouldn’t see him bareheaded. But he was too slow, and my grandfather came up to him.

“Tell me,” he said, “did I ever do anything to hurt you? Because I noticed you trying to avoid me.”

Of course, the young man admitted that he didn’t want Reb Aryeh to see him without a kippah.

“Your grandfather took my hands in his,” he told me, “and said, ‘I’m a very short person; I can’t see what’s on top of your head. But I see what’s in your heart.’ Everyone else was

telling me that I was a disgrace, that I was embarrassing my family. But Reb Aryeh never said anything negative. It was the sweet and sincere words of your grandfather that convinced me to put the kippah back on my head.” (‘When I First Met My Grandfather,’ OU Jewish Action, Spring 2019; see also A Tzadik in Our Time, p. 411, for a similar account.)



Developing a personality that is profoundly sensitive and caring toward others is a hallmark doctrine in Rav Kook’s worldview. For Rav Kook, this noble ideal emerges from the fact that a Jew is to be

cognizant of the holy soul that resides in one’s fellow man. Rav Kook exquisitely expressed this lofty notion in the following way:

“A destructive person should only be despised for their flaws. However, they should be respected and loved for their inner divine image. It is important to understand that a person’s positive qualities are more essential to them than their negative traits.” (Midot HaRa’aya, Ahava, piska #9)

Pirkei Avot’s teaching that we should always take the initiative to greet others is a reminder how a seemingly simple act can have an enormous effect. Rav Kook advises that we calibrate both our mind and heart to continually take notice of the good and inherent holiness in others, and in that way we uncover the hidden goodness contained inside everyone and, ultimately, inside everything. ■



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