



Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (6:6): Joyful Learning and Finding True Happiness

“Torah is acquired in forty-eight ways... joy...” (Avot 6:6)

Rav Chaim Volozhin offered a deeply insightful comment regarding the need for joy when engaged in Torah study: “One who studies for one hour with joy will accomplish more than one who studies for several hours in a state of distress.” The eminent founder of the Volozhin Yeshiva argued that one accomplishes more when one studies Torah in a cheerful and joyful state of mind. (Ruach Chaim, 6:6)

Rav Kook arrived in Jaffa, Israel, in 1904 and published his first collection of essays in a book entitled *Ekvei Hatzon* (in 1906). In this impassioned work, Rav Kook directed his message to the Jewish community living in the Land, addressing the critical issue of the religious and non-religious sectors who were estranged from one another. Rav Kook presented his thoughts on how to bring the *yishuv hayashan* (religious/

traditional camp) and the *chalutzim* (secular pioneers) closer together.

The second essay in the book, “Joy and Happiness” (*HaOneg V’Hasimcha*), emphasizes the notion that the performance of mitzvot is to be carried out in a joyful manner. He emphasized that Torah study must be engaged in with joy and delight. Whenever we involve ourselves in matters that increase

our happiness and are uplifting, we are eager to continue on that track and to return to it again and again. Thus, joyful Torah study will spark increased commitment and devotion to Torah learning in all sectors of the Jewish community.

Rav Kook elaborates on this idea and says that every Jew needs to identify which area of Torah study he or she finds personally elevating and radiant. Thus, one should give special attention to those particular areas of learning. The study of Mussar, philosophy, Kabbalah, and aggadeta, which have often



Grave of Rav Aryeh Levin and Rebbetzin Tzippora Chana

gone underappreciated, should be treated with reverence and pursued, especially by those who feel drawn to these realms of Torah. (See also *Orot HaTorah* 9:1 and 9:6.)

Rav Kook believed in a Torah study that engenders a feeling of happiness and delight. He felt that when the *chalutzim* experience the positivity and joy found in Torah study, they will surely be interested in pursuing more learning and gradually committing themselves to observing mitzvot. A Judaism saturated with joy offers a pathway back for those who are distant from Torah observance. (*Ekvei HaTzon, HaOneg V'Hasimcha*, Rav Kook)

TRUE SIMCHA

The notion of *simcha* and how to attain authentic joy was a topic that Rav Kook frequently addressed. He analyzed this concept based on the following well-known verse recited during Kabbalat Shabbat and on the night of Yom Kippur.

In Psalm 97, King David describes the gift of light that is “planted for the tzaddik” (righteous one), but for the *yishrei lev* (the straight-hearted) there is *simcha* (joy). The Talmud (Ta’anit 15a) clarifies that the *yishrei lev* are superior to the righteous.

Rav Kook elaborated on the special quality of the *yishrei lev* and the authentic happiness they experience. There are those who struggle with an internal conflict and are able to overcome the evil inclination. They battle and choose the right path. These are the *tzaddikim*. They are guided by the light, and eventually they discover the reward for their conviction to overcome temptation and choose the good. The *yashar*, however, attains a higher rung by being at one with God. His will is aligned with God’s will. He does not fight a battle. Rather, he achieves a

natural affinity and love for every mitzvah.

Thus, the “straight of heart” experiences joy in the present rather than as delayed gratification. Inasmuch as his will is identical with the will of God, he beholds eternity while yet he lives. This exquisite teaching of Rav Kook beautifully echoes the Mishnah’s teaching in Pirkei Avot (2:4): “Make His will like your will.” (*Siddur Olat Reiyah*, vol. 2, p. 17)

Rav Kook, writing in a kabbalistic vein, observes that the initials of *u-le-yishrei lev simcha* form the word “selav,” the quail that the Children of Israel ate in the desert. Rav Kook’s point is that the *yashar* is able to consume meat, a symbol of material pleasures, without in the least compromising his spiritual integrity. He has reached the level at which all of his actions are innately and sincerely geared toward the service of the Almighty. (See *Shemoneh Kevatzim* 2:280 and *Iggrot HaRa’aya*, vol. 2, pp. 168–169, cited by Naor in *Koren Rav Kook Siddur*, p. 390.)

A SHOCKING WEDDING SONG

How does one achieve authentic happiness?

Rav Kook astutely commented on a dramatic Talmudic story about the wedding of Ravina’s son, in which the sage Rav Huna Zuti stood up and entertained the guests by

HAVING A SIMCHA?

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singing a song. The lyrics he chose startled the group: “Woe unto us, for we shall die; woe unto us, for we will die.” Why would he possibly sing about the demise of man in a celebratory setting?

Rav Kook explains this perplexing choice of lyrics by delineating between two types of happiness. When one is feeling unhappy or anxious, one way to help induce calm and happiness is to distract the person from what is worrying him. However, this is not the ideal method because the things that are upsetting him will undoubtedly reappear and sadden him once again.

The more effective method is to demonstrate that even those things that sadden or frighten a person are not a reason to be depressed. With faith in God and an understanding that there is a loving Creator who directs and supervises all that occurs, one can find serenity and calm in one’s life. Therefore, even something as foreboding as death should not depress a person, knowing that everything Hashem does is for the best.

Rav Huna Zuti felt that in a setting saturated with genuine joy, he could impart this profound lesson—namely, to perceive all of life’s challenges, even the deep sorrow of death, as part of a larger plan and to recognize that all that we confront is orchestrated within the

loving providential plan of God. (*Ain Aya, Berachot 31a, piska #15*)

Rav Kook is teaching that true happiness and joy are achieved when we remain attentive to the goodness of God even in the face of life’s trials and tribulations. We achieve a state of happiness when we are acutely cognizant of Hashem’s presence and enduring compassion, even when it is not readily apparent.

“WHERE IS YOUR “BITACHON”?”

The notion that faith in Hashem is the core attribute that invigorates our ability to withstand the tests of life is illustrated in the following story.

The eminent student and dear friend of Rav Kook, Rav Aryeh Levin, would often say that he was deeply inspired by the righteousness of his wife, Rebbetzin Tzipora Chana. He constantly credited her with helping to build a home saturated with heroic kindness and unshakable faith.

During the period of the British Mandate in pre-state Palestine, the financial conditions of the majority of Jerusalem’s Jewish residents were abysmal. At one point, in the home of Rav Aryeh and his wife, there were literally only a handful of coins left, and they barely had a morsel to eat. She turned to Rav Aryeh and asked that he take the little money they had, go to the marketplace, and purchase what he could so they could have a meal. As Rav Aryeh arrived at the marketplace and reached into his pocket, he discovered that the coins were gone. He had somehow lost the money on his way.

Rav Aryeh simply did not know how he could possibly return home and tell his wife that the money had been lost and that he had not purchased a single item of food. With no other choice, he turned around and

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depressingly trudged his way back home. As soon as he walked in, his wife immediately saw on his face that something had gone wrong. She turned to her husband and said, “Aryeh, where is your cherished attribute of Bitachon (faith)?” (*Derech Avot*, Sternberg, p. 181)

Rav Aryeh’s righteous wife personifies the noble quality of holding fast to sincere faith. With deep *bitachon* one perceives life not as happenstance but rather through the prism of the enduring providence of the Almighty. With this lofty perspective implanted in our minds and hearts we can achieve a sense of true serenity and happiness. ■



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