



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Avot 1:5 - Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot: Tzniut and Discovering Dignity

“Do not converse excessively with a woman. This was said concerning one’s own wife; all the more so with the wife of one’s friend.” (Avot 1:5)

The vital lesson relayed in the above Mishnah emphasizes the worthiness and nobility of maintaining the laws of tzniut (modesty). The classic commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah on this Mishnah offers a straightforward lesson to be gleaned from this statement. By engaging in excessive chatter with women, one incites his own evil inclination. One may legitimately claim to be overwhelmed by passion only when he himself did not provoke it.

Rav Kook’s exquisite volume on character development, *Midot HaRa’aya*, compiled by his son, Rav Tzvi Yehiudah, presents eighteen primary character traits that a Jew must pursue. Indeed, the *mida*, attribute, of Tzniut (modesty) is included among those enumerated.

It is widely known that the Torah and the earliest codifiers of halacha established strict boundaries in this area and thus the unique

domain of tzniut stands out as one of the defining features of the halachic community. Laws such as *yichud* (not being alone with the opposite gender) or *mechitza* (separation during prayer) are two well-known examples of the halacha’s concern with maintaining a sacred and healthy social structure.

A Jew places inestimable value on the purity of marriage and of family life. Regulations and practices which may appear at first glance to some as slighting the opposite gender are actually meant to achieve a higher goal. Moreover the halacha is deeply concerned that ill-advised social interactions do not deteriorate and lead to much more serious transgressions.

As an example of the lengths we go in the area of modesty, Rav Kook cites a striking halacha found in the *Shulchan Aruch* which states that there is a prohibition against sending regards to a woman via her husband (*Kidushin* 70a). Although friendship and camaraderie are generally very positive things, the value of modesty often necessitates setting boundaries over common courtesy to help ensure sanctity within the Jewish community which strives to maintain purity. (*Midot Hara’aya*, Tzniut, *piska* #1)

A PRINCIPLED STAND

As the newly minted rabbi of Jaffa, Rav

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Kook took a decisive stand regarding a communal fundraiser in which there would be performance with both men and women singers participating. Rav Kook tried dissuading the organizers from following through with this planned event.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, 5666 (1905) soon after Rav Kook's arrival in Jaffa, he issued a proclamation that was posted in Jaffa and appeared the following week in the newspaper HaChavtzelet (14 Tishrei 5666):

"I come here to proclaim before the entire nation of Hashem who dwell in our holy city and its environs that for a few weeks I have politely requested, with peaceful appeal, that the women of the society Ezrat Nashim not establish a theatrical [evening] on behalf of their society. Theatrical productions in general, especially with women and men signing together, are forbidden to us by the law of our holy Torah, and heaven forbid that we should perform acts of upright charity via sinful means.

"The very idea of raising charity with soirees and theoretical production is anathema to all who are straight of heart. And it is well-known that this causes more damage in debasing people's moral spirit than it provides benefit, which is [only] temporary, short lasting assistance..."(Translated in 'Charity Elevates A People,' Tau, p. 118)

Although we immediately think of Rav Kook's tolerance and abiding compassion for others, one sees in the above proclamation, an example of times when Rav Kook took a principled position and firmly called out what he considered flagrant transgression of the law.



Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook zt"l

Rav Kook in his loving way was reluctant to condemn the less observant, so it is significant to see that Rav Kook publicly expressed his deep concern when he witnessed denigration in the realm of tzniut.

It is also noteworthy to observe Rav Kook's assertive language regarding the character trait of Tzniut in Midot Hara'aya: "The attribute of tzniut (modesty) holds great importance in the world...which forms the foundation of both the spiritual and physical realms" (Midot HaRa'aya, Tzniut, piska #1). In fact, Rav Kook calls the attribute of tzniut a "foundational" principle that "holds great importance in the world."

Rav Kook emphasized that maintaining boundaries between the genders is clearly not meant to be a slight or to disrespect the opposite gender in any way. Quite the contrary. The halachic boundaries were sensibly instituted to safeguard and protect the sanctity and the intimacy of marriage. By reserving romantic energy for one's spouse rather than dispersing it through causal interactions, these boundaries preserve the special, exclusive nature of the marital relationship and maintain a healthy and vigorous social structure.

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RAV KOOK'S AFFECTION FOR HIS WIFE

The very close and loving relationship that Rav Kook shared with his wife was unique.

In 1889, not long after Rav Kook became the rabbi of Zeimel, Lithuania, his wife Batsheva contracted a fatal disease and passed away at the age twenty-two, leaving him with a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter named Freida Chanah. Rav Kook struggled to deal with the pain of losing his wife. This is part of poem he wrote about her:

Shadows surround me, and darkness descends; fog thickens, the sun becomes dim for me.

The sun shines, rays of light emanate; yet for me they are dark. O Heavens!

[She] lies in the grave, but is still alive; there is no end to the heartbreak, for agony never stops...

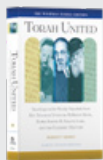
I cry out loud, deafen ears, breathe into the dust, and it rises to heaven.

Thoughts of confusion, great is the turmoil. That my soul was abandoned, in its crooked path.

To the light, it seems that I have been saved. I will immerse myself in Torah, because her face I can no longer imagine.

My longing hope, from your lovely friendship; here it is burned, like a pure sacrifice.

...Like a pillar of light floating in the air, it passed by so fast and has now disappeared. And just before she dried up, she gave birth to a daughter for me. (Pinkasei HaReiyah 1, pp. 80-83, translation Schwartz, The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook, p. 210) ■



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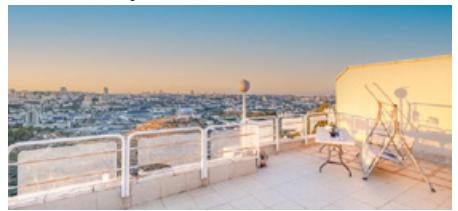
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