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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (3:1): Contemplating God's Judgment: A Last Resort

"Look at three things and you will not fall into the hands of sin. Know where you came from...from a fetid drop ...Where are you going? To a place of dirt, worms and maggots. And before Whom will you have to give a judgment and reckoning? Before the King, King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He." (Pirkei Avot 3:1)

The underlying theme of the Mishnah emphasizes uprooting pride. When contemplating our less-than-honorable beginnings, we are humbled. When we visualize our end, we vividly bring to mind how our body will lie lifeless, how we will be lowered into the grave, and how our bodies will decompose. Additionally, when we envision that we are ultimately forced to make a reckoning for our sins and are judged for our misdeeds, we will

be more apt to mend our ways.

Rav Chaim Volozhin added a powerful insight based on the language in the Mishnah: Giving "judgment" and "a reckoning" refers to two types of transgressions for which one will be punished: "Judgment" refers to the punishment a person will suffer for the evil he has committed. And "reckoning" takes into account the good deeds he could have performed at those same moments, yet refrained from doing so. (Ruach Chaim 3:1)

CURTAILING DEPRESSING THOUGHTS

The Talmud (Berachot 40a) teaches: "One who is used to eating lentils once in thirty days prevents *askara* (a painful, lethal death). However, he should not eat lentils every day because it causes bad breath."

Although this talmudic teaching seems to be offering good advice regarding one's eating habits, Rav Kook was convinced that, more importantly, there is sound spiritual advice to be garnered from these guidelines. Lentils are the traditional food eaten by mourners. The notion of eating lentils once a month symbolizes the idea that there is benefit to periodically reminding oneself of the fact that death is part of life. Fear of a heavenly judgment day can also be a healthy thing, as it dampens one's spirit in a manner that helps to distance

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oneself from haughtiness.

However, one should use this potent tool of self-reproof only periodically. On a daily basis, one should opt for the higher tier of positive self-encouragement, based on love of Hashem and joyful observance of the mitzvot. Employing the harsher tactic of conjuring up in one's mind fear of punishment will inevitably cause sadness. The "bad breath" mentioned in the above passage is a metaphor for a dampening of one's *ruach* (spirit), similar to the word *re'ach* (breath), with thoughts of death and punishment, which is never the ideal pathway for a person to pursue. (Ain Aya, Berachot, vol. 2, piska #30, p. 182)

ONLY AS A LAST RESORT

Rav Kook underlines in a number of his teachings that one should be extremely wary about contemplating the day of death as a method to fend off sin. A path of positivity and joyful Jewish engagement is always preferred. He sees this vital message relayed in the following Talmudic passage:

"A person should always agitate the yetzer hatov (good inclination) against the yetzer hara (evil inclination)...if this is ineffective [in fending off the yetzer hara], he should occupy himself with Torah study...if this is effective, he should recite Kriat Shema...if this is ineffective, he should remind himself of the day of death." (Berachot 5a).

Rav Kook understood this passage to be teaching that the method of conjuring images of the day of death in order to comply with the commandments is to be utilized only as a last resort.

First and foremost, this passage advises that

one saturates one's time with positive and uplifting activities that will inevitably subdue the destructive allures and forces of the *yetzer hara*. The key is to beat the *yetzer hara* to the punch, so to speak, with positive acts of goodness, thus allowing little space for anything but positivity to permeate one's day-to-day life.

However, says the Talmud, if the positive actions are not sufficiently effective, one should incorporate additional Torah study, especially *mussar*, to assist in this endeavor. And if this still proves ineffective, expanding one's inspirational engagements through reciting the Shema or similar emotionally charged rituals should be employed to help bolster one's resolve.

Rav Kook, in his uplifting reading of this classic talmudic passage, underscores that contemplating the day of death as a means of warding off the yetzer hara should only be employed when all other motivating and positive options have proven ineffective, "...for when a person's power of the soul is weakened there is always going to be a loss of good things as well." (Ain Aya, Berachot, vol. 1, chapter 1, piska #24, p. 13)

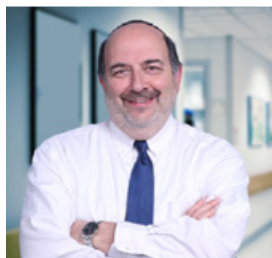
THE MESSAGE ON HIS HEADSTONE

Visiting a cemetery is generally a morose



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and mournful experience. Standing in a place of burial, one feels melancholy when recognizing the limited time a person has on this earth.

Rav Aryeh Levin, the celebrated student and dear friend of Rav Kook, who was well aware that people often experience depressing thoughts and feelings when visiting a cemetery, requested that the following words be etched into his headstone in order to offer solace: "I ask all those who visit my grave to declare wholeheartedly, "I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time when it shall please the Creator..." [a quotation from the last of the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith]. (A Tzaddik for Eternity, Raz, p. 231)

Even in a place of mortality, which could instill feelings of the vulnerability of life and the judgment we will be forced to withstand in the Heavenly Court, Rav Aryeh wished to shift one's focus to a more elevated and hopeful plateau. The Tzaddik of Yerushalayim wished to spotlight a pathway that accentuates the fact that every Jew is destined to live again in a Messianic world that is tranquil and fully serene.

The famed Rebbe of Gur, Rebbe Menachem Alter (known as the Penei Menachem, 1926–1996), a scion of the Gur dynasty, was fond of telling the following story about a woman whose son, serving in the I.D.F. (Israeli Defense Force), was killed in battle in the Shalom HaGalil campaign. Once she heard the dreadful news, she lost her will to live and sank into a black pit of depression. She no longer attended weddings and other social functions and immured herself in her silent home.

On one rare occasion, she did leave to attend the funeral of an old friend at the

Sanhedria Cemetery. Having arrived there early, she was advised by a companion to visit the grave of Rav Aryeh Levin and recite a few verses of Tehillim. The merit of that great Tzaddik might perhaps cure her deadening melancholy.

Having reached the Tzaddik of Jerusalem's grave, the bereaved woman glanced at the tombstone, and suddenly the words engraved on it seemed to leap straight to her. They read as follows: "I ask all those who visit my grave to declare wholeheartedly, "I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time when it shall please the Creator..."

The woman was stunned; a ray of hope shone through the cobwebs of her broken heart. "The dead will be restored to life!" she whispered to herself. "I will see my only son once again."

From that moment onward, a remarkable change occurred, and this broken-hearted mother regained her strength and vitality. This woman began to take part in daily life and regained her will to live, believe, and hope.

This is how the great Tzaddik, Rav Aryeh Levin, was able to comfort the bereaved, even after he himself was no longer alive. (A Tzaddik for Eternity, Raz, pp. 230–232) ■



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