



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

EDITOR, TORAH TIDBITS
RAV, THE JERUSALEM SHUL
BAKA, JERUSALEM

SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot: Discovering Righteousness in Every Jew

"All of Israel has a portion in the World to Come. As the verse states, "Your nation is all righteous..." (Yeshayahu 60:21) (Prologue to Pirkei Avot, Sanhedrin 10:1).

The above passage is customarily recited before each chapter of Pirkei Avot.

What is the reason for the placement of this Mishnah at the beginning of each chapter?

One explanation offered in a classic commentary on Pirkei Avot by Rav Moshe Almosnino (c. 1515–1580) is to give a person encouragement at the beginning of a demanding assignment.

Many directives in Pirkei Avot make strenuous demands, and it may feel to the reader that they are not capable of achieving all of its lofty goals. The dictum that every Jew has great worth and potential — that all Israel have a position in the World to Come — is meant to motivate a Jew to pursue his or her place and strengthen his or her resolve to succeed in this great spiritual endeavor. (See Rav Lau on Pirkei Avot, vol. 1, pp. 6–7.)

Rav Kook offered an exquisite perspective on the notion that *tzidkut*, righteousness, is to be found in every Jew. The following episode powerfully spotlights this point of view:

In one of the most startling moments in the

entire narrative of the Torah, Moshe scolds the Jewish people and strikes the rock in order to miraculously release its water. The Talmud (Shabbat 97b) is quick to amplify Moshe's wrongdoing by correlating his actions at this time with criticism he hurled at the Jewish people many years earlier. In his first encounter with God at the burning bush, Moshe voices the following criticism concerning the Jewish people: "They will not believe me, and they will not listen to me..." (Shemot 4:1). The Talmudic sage Reish Lakish comments that Moshe's lack of faith in the people at the opening stages of his leadership reappears once again when he irately strikes the rock.

Rav Kook argued that on both occasions Moshe failed to see that *emunah* (faith), in its purest form, is a hidden and intrinsic quality of the soul. In the words of Rav Kook: "It is an integral part of the inner soul, forming the very basis for life, its light and splendor." The essence of *emunah*, in its true magnitude and strength, is often concealed. (Ain Aya, Shabbat 97b, piska #13.)

At that moment of crisis and confusion, when the people of Israel complained for water and were overwhelmed by gloom, unfortunately even the penetrating eye of Moshe failed to detect the people's inner reserve of faith. The

Talmud states that God turned to Moshe at that moment and told him that the Children of Israel are *ma'aminim bnei ma'aminim* — “they are believers, the children of believers” (Shabbat 97b). God is teaching, according to the Talmud, that unquestionably, the inner fire of faith always burns within their souls.

The lesson Rav Kook taught regarding Moshe’s misstep is a critically important teaching that every Jew must absorb. Indeed, this notion became a clarion call for Rav Kook throughout his life. He believed that especially when we as a people are restoring our nationhood and rebuilding the Land of Israel we can no longer judge our fellow Jew solely according to external actions. We must recognize and extol the sparks of goodness in every fellow Jew.

The statement, “Your nation is all righteous...,” which according to longstanding tradition introduces each chapter of Pirkei Avot, emphatically declares the righteousness of every Jew — a sanctity embedded deep within the soul that is a Jew’s eternal heritage and hidden treasure.

This profound message of the purity of the Jewish soul is poetically conveyed in a beautiful verse in Shir Hashirim: “Do not look upon me because I am black; for [it is only] the sun that has tanned me” (1:6). One can never claim that the Jewish people fail to believe in the word of God, even when their behavior appears dark and tarnished. This discoloration is only superficial. Purity of faith is the most natural and enduring state of the soul of a Jew.

A MEMORABLE DANCE: GUARD YOUR INNER LIGHT

Rav Kook and a small group of prominent rabbis organized a groundbreaking trip

in 1913 to visit the new settlements in the northern part of the country. They wanted to meet the *chalutzim* (pioneers) on “their turf” and share a message of unity and spiritual strengthening.

On a visit to the settlement of Poriah, a beautiful scene unfolded when Rav Kook joined a gathering in the dining hall where the mostly secular workers were singing and dancing.

Following the joyful dancing, when the mutual feelings of brotherhood and camaraderie were at their height, Rav Kook turned to

the men who served as guards in the new settlement, who were wearing Arab cloaks and *keffiyeh* headdresses with rifles slung over their shoulders, and said: “You are heroically guarding the Holy Land and strengthening our people’s return to her borders... Please also guard your holy souls, your inner Jewish spark!”

They all responded by crying out, “We promise!”

Rav Kook then fervently replied, “Happy is the eye that witnessed such dances of *teshuvah* and holiness. Praise be God’s name!” (Stories from the Land of Israel, Morrison, pp. 38–39.)

Rav Kook, throughout his remarkable lifetime and especially during his leadership in the Land of Israel, powerfully taught that the pure soul within every person pulsates with light and boundless potential. It is merely a matter of recognizing this singular quality and consistently seeing more deeply. ■



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, “Torah United” on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at aarong@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.