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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot 6:11: Back to Nature

"Everything that the Holy One, Blessed is He, created in His world, He created only for His glory..." (Pirkei Avot 6:11)

It seems profoundly fitting that the extraordinary compendium of teachings in *Pirkei Avot* concludes with a message that speaks of the glory of God. A Jew strives to become ever more cognizant of God's presence and to make *Kavod Shamayim* (God's majesty) more genuinely palpable in his life. The Mishnah teaches that all of creation is joined in the task of making God's goodness manifest and bringing the universe to its ultimate perfection.

The notion of perceiving an underlying unity in all of existence and recognizing God's presence throughout the natural world are among the defining themes of Rav Kook's thought. Again and again, he demonstrates that nature is not merely the backdrop to religious life; it is

itself a revelation of the Divine. The following teachings beautifully illustrate how attentiveness to the natural order deepens our awareness of God's glory.

A WORLD IN HARMONY

One striking example of this worldview emerges from Rav Kook's interpretation of an apparently simple halachic obligation regarding the feeding of one's animals.

Based on the Torah verses that describe God providing food for the animals in the field before providing food for man (Devarim, chapter 11), the Talmud deduces that a person is obligated to feed his animals before sitting down to eat his own meal.

It is generally understood that this unique law expresses the compassion a Jew must demonstrate toward all of God's creatures. While this explanation is certainly compelling, Rav Kook offers an additional and striking insight. By first feeding the animal, one acknowledges that, in a sense, the animal is actually more deserving of receiving the food first. The enormous physical strength of certain animals, such as an ox, a strength humans do not possess, enables the plowing of the fields and the cultivation of the crops that ultimately provide man's sustenance. In this respect, man is indebted to the animal. The animal deserves to be fed first.

Indeed, Rav Kook explains that this

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perspective cultivates an appreciation of the unique role that animals, and, in truth, every facet of nature, play in the harmonious unity of creation. The more we cultivate this awareness, the more conscious we become of the remarkable intricacy of God's master plan and of how every segment of creation contributes to the perfection of the world. (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, vol. 2, chapter 6, piska 26, p. 180)

MAN'S CAPACITY TO REFRAIN

Rav Kook then offers an additional and equally compelling explanation.

Although every part of creation glorifies God, man occupies a unique place, reflected in the fact that he was created last. "Those being created later are superior to their predecessors" (Bereshit Rabbah 19:4). This, Rav Kook suggests, is another reason we feed the animal before ourselves.

The animal lacks the capacity for self-restraint. It is instinctively driven to satisfy its physical needs. By contrast, the human being, and the Jew in particular, possesses the unique ability to delay gratification and subordinate physical appetite to higher ideals.

Accordingly, one first provides the animal with its basic needs, acknowledging the instinctive nature of the beast. Man, however, is expected to elevate himself above mere instinct. Waiting to eat until after feeding the animal underscores man's spiritual superiority over the animal kingdom. He pauses, fulfills his responsibility toward God's creatures, and only then partakes of his own meal in a disciplined and elevated manner. (*Ibid.*)

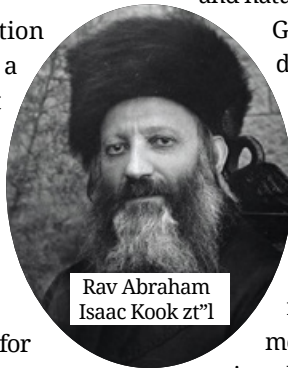
REFRESHINGLY NATURAL

Rav Kook applies this same perspective even to our eating habits.

The Talmud (Berachot 40a) teaches that after a

meal one should eat some salt, and after drinking one should conclude with a glass of water. In this way, says the Talmud, one will not be adversely affected by what one has consumed.

On the surface, this appears to be practical health advice. Yet Rav Kook, as he so magnificently does throughout *Ein Ayah*, uncovers a deeper spiritual lesson. Although Judaism permits us to enjoy the rich bounty of God's world, we should continually accustom ourselves to return to foods that are simple, wholesome, and natural.



Rav Abraham
Isaac Kook zt"l

God has created a world that abundantly provides for our needs, as we proclaim in *Birkat HaMazon*, "*Hazan et ha'olam kulo be'tuvo*" ("He sustains the entire world with His goodness"). Salt and water represent the most basic and natural of foods. The Talmud's recommendation to conclude our meals with these simple gifts symbolizes the importance of appreciating the earth's uncomplicated goodness. Such eating not only promotes physical health but also nurtures spiritual well-being. (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, vol. 2, piska 27)

Healthy eating, and the conscious return to the organic goodness found throughout God's world, is itself a means of perceiving His glory. The nourishing foods and refreshing waters

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that emerge from the earth remind us that we inhabit a universe overflowing with Divine blessing and bounty.

Rav Kook extends this lesson still further by applying it to Torah study. Although rigorous analysis and intellectual sophistication are indispensable components of *Talmud Torah*, we must periodically return to the elementary truths of faith and the simple foundations of Judaism that anchor our spiritual lives. Returning to the "salt and water" of Torah learning is essential for maintaining a healthy spiritual diet.

He concludes by broadening the lesson once more. Just as we return to nature, so too we should return to the quiet simplicity within ourselves, listening attentively to the gentle whisper and authentic yearnings of the soul. In doing so, we naturally cultivate a deeper trust, greater closeness, and a more intimate relationship with our Father in Heaven. (*Ibid.*)

PRAYING WITH SUNRISE AND SUNSET

Finally, Rav Kook carries this appreciation of nature into the realm of prayer.

The Talmud teaches that the ideal time for *Shacharit* is at sunrise, while the preferred time for *Mincha* is toward sunset (Berachot 29b). On the surface, the Gemara is simply identifying the optimal times for prayer.

Rav Kook, however, detects a deeper message. He notes that the Talmud employs an unusually poetic expression, referring not merely to sunrise and sunset but to "the reddening of the sun." This evocative language teaches that when we stand before God in prayer, we should consciously contemplate the beauty and majesty of creation. The splendor of the morning and evening skies awakens within us an awareness of Divine providence and the abundant *chesed* that fills the world.

It is fitting that we draw feelings of awe and reverence from the wellsprings of creation, a

universe in which every detail proclaims the wisdom and glory of its Creator. (*Ein Ayah*, vol. 1, Berachot 29, 1:49)

As we return to the Mishnah with which we began, Rav Kook's message comes into sharp focus. Animals, wholesome food, foundational Torah study, sunrise, and sunset are not merely features of everyday life; they are invitations to perceive the Divine. The more deeply we appreciate the wisdom woven throughout creation, the more readily we recognize that every aspect of existence quietly joins in the same eternal chorus: *"Everything that the Holy One, Blessed is He, created in His world, He created only for His glory."* ■



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