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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Avot 1:10: Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot The Magnificence of Work

**"Shemayah says: Love work..."
(Avot 1:10)**

Rashi explains that this mishnah emphasizes the importance of earning one's livelihood so that one does not become reliant on charity. One should therefore never regard any occupation as being "below one's dignity." The value of self-sufficiency and independence is held in the highest esteem by our sages.

Rav Kook, however, sees in this mishnah a far deeper message. Work is not merely a means of avoiding dependence on others. More profoundly, pursuing a profession is an integral part of discovering one's purpose in life, developing one's character, and cultivating one's spiritual well-being.

The profound significance of productive

labor is reflected in one of the Talmud's most remarkable statements:

"Greater is one who benefits from the toil of his own hands than one who possesses fear of Heaven (yirat Shamayim)." (Berachot 8a)

At first glance, this statement is astonishing. How can the Talmud place such extraordinary value on work, seemingly elevating it above even fear of Heaven?

Rav Kook explains that part of the answer lies in the concept of *nehama d'kisufa* (Aramaic: נהמא דכיסופא), commonly translated as the "Bread of Shame." This foundational idea in Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah describes the psychological and spiritual discomfort a person experiences when receiving unearned rewards or goodness without personal effort.

Human beings are created with an innate desire to earn rather than merely receive. We seek the dignity that comes from personal accomplishment and meaningful contribution. Therefore, Rav Kook explains that the Talmud praises the toil of one's own hands because a person naturally aspires to be self-sufficient rather than dependent upon the charity of others, even when those benefactors are fulfilling the heavenly mitzvah of giving *tzedakah*. (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, piska 101.)

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Yet Rav Kook sees an even deeper dimension to this teaching. In his classic work *Ein Ayah*, he explains that the highest level a person can attain is the sense of accomplishment born from personal effort and achievement. Through disciplined effort, one experiences the satisfaction of self-actualization and the aspiration to attain greater *shelemut* (wholeness).

Consistent effort and honest labor cultivate self-respect and healthy self-esteem. More importantly, meaningful work becomes one of the primary avenues through which we fulfill our potential and bring forth our best selves. The essence of life lies in discovering one's unique mission and striving faithfully to fulfill it.

The benefits of meaningful work do not remain confined to one's professional life. A sense of accomplishment generates confidence, optimism, and purpose that naturally extend into other areas as well. The positive energy created through productive labor can deepen one's Torah study, enrich one's prayer, and inspire greater dedication to acts of kindness.

Fear of Heaven (*yirat Shamayim*) reflects a person's close relationship with God. Yet Rav Kook cautions that genuine fear of Heaven should never lead one to become overly reliant upon divine providence while neglecting the personal effort required to earn a livelihood and contribute productively to society.

Thus, "loving work" is far more than practical advice. It is a profound religious ideal. Through our labor, we not only sustain ourselves with dignity but also fulfill our God-given potential, refine our character, and become partners

with the Creator in perfecting His world.

ELEVATING A STREET CLEANER

Rav Aryeh Levin was renowned for extending the utmost honor to every individual, treating each person with exceptional dignity and recognizing their intrinsic worth. It was well known that the street cleaners of Jerusalem, whom Rav Aryeh encountered each day on his way to prayer, Torah study, and acts of kindness, could always count on receiving a warm greeting and a kind word from the saintly rabbi.

After Rav Aryeh passed away, one of the street cleaners who worked daily in the alleyways of his neighborhood was asked whether he had any memories of the "Tzaddik of Yerushalayim."

He replied that he vividly remembered Rav Aryeh warmly wishing him "Good morning" each day as he made his way to the synagogue.

He was then asked whether anything else about those encounters stood out in his memory.

"There was one morning in particular," the street cleaner recalled. "Rav Aryeh approached me and said, 'My dear friend, Reb Yehudah, I am envious of the important work you do each day.'

"I replied, 'How could you possibly be envious of me? You are a learned rabbi, while I am a simple street cleaner who sweeps up garbage and empties the bins each day.'

"Rav Aryeh stopped me and explained exactly what he meant. 'I am not sure you appreciate your true importance and merit. Trust me, your merits are greater than mine. You are cleaning the



Rabbi Aryeh Levin zt"l

sacred streets of Yerushalayim. You are helping perfect God's world. With your own hands, you make His creation cleaner and more beautiful. I am jealous of you!"

The street cleaner concluded with a moving reflection:

"When Rav Aryeh walked away, I stood there with my broom in one hand and my garbage can in the other. I felt something in my heart that I had never experienced before. For the first time in my life, I felt proud of my work, and, more importantly, proud of myself. I felt dignified and worthy."

This touching story beautifully illustrates Rav Aryeh Levin's profound wisdom. He understood that every honest occupation possesses inherent dignity because every person who labors faithfully contributes something of lasting value to God's world.

In this sense, Rav Aryeh gave a living

expression to Rav Kook's teaching. To "love work" is to recognize that our daily labor is not merely a way to earn a living. It is one of the primary ways we fulfill our unique mission, become partners with God in perfecting His world, and transform ordinary work into an act of sacred service. (*Derech Avot*, Sternberg, pp. 63–64.) ■



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