



Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (2:1): A Mitzvah to Speak Hebrew

**“Be as scrupulous in performing a ‘minor’ mitzvah as in a ‘major’ one, for you do not know the reward given for the [respective] mitzvot.”
(Pirkei Avot 2:1)**

The Rambam comments on this Mishnah and emphasizes that this injunction exhorts us to perform all *positive* commandments with equal zeal. The reward for fulfilling them, and the punishment for not doing so, is not given explicitly in the Torah, so that we remain unaware of the relative importance of the various commandments. This ensures that we will perform them all with the same care and enthusiasm. (Rambam, Commentary on Pirkei Avot 2:1)

The Rambam offers examples of mitzvot that we might consider “minor,” yet are more weighty than we realize. One particular example is especially surprising because it is generally not classified as a mitzvah. The Rambam says that learning the Hebrew language is a mitzvah that falls into the category of a seemingly “minor” mitzvah that should nevertheless be taken with the utmost seriousness. (Ibid.)

It is striking that the Rambam classifies proficiency in the Hebrew language as a mitzvah. Perhaps its obligation is rooted in

the necessity of mastering Hebrew, being that it is a key to understanding the Torah in all its subtlety and richness.

GOD’S LANGUAGE

One of Rav Kook’s finest students in his yeshiva was a young man by the name of Rav Yehuda Gershuni. Rav Gershuni arrived in Palestine in 1933, two years prior to Rav Kook’s passing, in order to bask in the presence of the great Rav Kook and study with him. Prior to his arrival, at the age of eighteen, the young Yehuda Gershuni was already famous in the yeshiva world of Europe as the *Grodner Illui*—the genius from Grodno. He studied for five years with the famed Talmudic gaon, Reb Baruch Ber Leibowitz, the rosh yeshiva of the Kaminetz Yeshiva. He then set off for Palestine and became one of the great lights in Rav Kook’s yeshiva.

It is interesting to note, especially in the context of appreciating the sanctity of the Hebrew language, that it was Rav Kook who encouraged him to Hebraize his name. Thus, he decided to change it from Sorokszabel to Gershuni—“son of Gershon,” his father’s name. (The Times of Israel, “Remembering a Great Man,” Ukeles, January 2022)

Rav Gershuni passed along a few select ideas that he heard in a teaching given by Rav Kook on the topic of the lofty nature of

the Hebrew language and the importance of speaking the holy language: A learned and committed Jew, especially one living in the Land of Israel, should endeavor to speak only in Hebrew. The more adept one is in Hebrew, the more one comprehends and discovers the true and authentic meaning of the Torah. God Himself created the world with the holy language of Hebrew, and the Torah was given to Moshe and the Jewish people in Hebrew. It is God's language, and the secrets of the Torah are contained within its letters and words. The nation of Israel is bound with the God of Israel through this divine language. This is the reason why the Hebrew language is indeed so eminently known as *lashon hakodesh* — the holy language. (*Sichat Avot*, p. 152)

TEACHING IN YIDDISH OR HEBREW?

Rav Kook gave a daily class teaching Mishnah, which was attended by local *balabatim* and learned Jews. Rav Kook chose to teach in the language that would be most suited to the majority of the group and thus gave the class in Yiddish.

One of Rav Kook's most eminent students, the famed "Nazir," Rav David Cohen, was also a regular attendee of the class. However, at some point, Rav David Cohen stopped attending.

What had happened was that although Rav Cohen was a loyal student of Rav Kook and took every opportunity to humbly sit at his feet and learn Torah from his master, he found it unbearably difficult to listen to the study of Torah in any language other than *lashon hakodesh*, the holy language of Hebrew.



An acquaintance of Rav David Cohen came to Rav Kook and told him that Rav David Cohen had chosen to refrain from attending the class because it was distressful for him to hear Torah taught in Yiddish. He had accepted upon himself the sacred practice of studying

Torah only in Hebrew.

Rav Kook turned to this fellow and offered the following response:

"The Nazir is a very holy person. It is fitting that he has chosen this sacred practice. He is observing the dictum of the Sages who stated: 'Anyone who lives in Eretz Yisrael, and speaks the holy language, and recites the Shema morning and evening, is assured a place in *Olam*

Haba (the World to Come).' (Sifri, Haazinu, 333). "He is certainly a Jew," said Rav Kook, "who lives his life, even in this world, with the radiance and reality of the ethereal world of *Olam Haba*."

Rav Kook went on to note that for generations there have been holy individuals among our people who have sought to embrace the exalted observance of speaking Hebrew. Some of these holy Jews adopted the practice of speaking their native languages during the weekdays, but on Shabbat they would speak only Hebrew over the entire twenty-four-hour period.

Rav Kook said that the Nazir perceived coming to the Land of Israel as being tantamount to elevating the weekdays so that they would be saturated with the holiness of Shabbat, and therefore the Nazir elected to speak Hebrew throughout the week as well. What, then, was the Nazir's practice on Shabbat? On Shabbat, the Nazir did not speak at all in

order to imbibe the great elevation of the day. On Shabbat, he speaks only when he learned Torah, prayed, and was involved in the mitzvot of the day. (*Sichat Avot*, p. 152)

The story is told that this episode, in which Rav Kook explained and praised the practice of his eminent student, the Nazir, took place immediately before he began his daily class teaching Mishnah. Rav Kook then opened the Mishnah to where they had left off previously. Rav Kook taught the Mishnah in *Peah* (4:1), which discusses the topic of leaving a corner of one's field for the poor.

The issue raised in the Mishnah is that although the law states that the poor enter the field and pick the produce themselves, if the owner prefers to pick it and distribute it, that is also acceptable. There is, however, a scenario in which this would not be accepted: Even if 99 prefer that the produce be distributed by the owner and one person prefers to pick it himself - it must be left unpicked for the entire group. The rationale is that the one who prefers to pick the produce is indeed observing the law in the manner in which the mitzvah of *Peah* is expressly mandated in the Torah. Thus, all the others must follow his preference.

Rav Kook commented and said that perhaps there is an implicit message that we should glean from this regarding our own daily learning of Mishnah. Although the majority of the group prefers to learn in Yiddish, if there is one person who is observing the Torah's directive, we might very well be obliged to follow his higher path! (*Ibid.*) ■



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