



Pirkei Avot (3:7): Personal and Communal Generosity

“Rabbi Elazar of Bartota says: ‘Give Him from His own, for you and your possessions are His.’” (Pirkei Avot 3:8)

The explanation of this teaching is that a person should not withhold either themselves or their wealth from being used to fulfill the will of Heaven. All that a person has belongs to God; hence, when one gives, one is not giving from one’s own possessions, but merely returning to God what is already His.

Surely, this Mishnah is a call against stinginess in matters of charity and expenditures for mitzvot. The commentary of the *Meiri* emphasizes that when one realizes that one is spending God’s money rather than one’s own, one will give more happily and generously.

Regarding this same Mishnah, Rabbeinu Yonah comments that all of a person’s wealth is entrusted to him by God for safekeeping. Unlike a human depositor, God allows a person to use part of the deposit for personal needs, but the remainder must certainly be used according to the depositor’s instructions.

EXTENDING ONE’S TABLE

Rav Kook beautifully elaborated on the balance between attending to one’s own needs and the broader obligation to provide for the needs of others in his comments on the following passage in the Talmud:

Rav Yehuda said: “Three things prolong a person’s days and years: one who extends his prayers, one who extends his table, and

one who extends his time in the lavatory.” (*Berachot* 54b).

The basic understanding of this statement seems straightforward. Praying with great devotion, ensuring that one’s table is used to help the impover-

ished, and attending to one’s physical health by spending ample time in the bathroom all contribute to the blessing of long life.

Rav Kook, in his *Ein Ayah*, finds deeper significance in Rav Yehuda’s statement. He suggests that the items on the list complement one another. A person who prays with great devotion runs the risk of focusing all his energies on achieving closeness with Hashem while forgetting the needs of the impoverished. Thus, Rav Yehuda supplements the



Rav Zelig Reuven Bengis and his wife

extended prayer with the extended table that provides for the poor.

Conversely, a person might be so dedicated to mitzvot, both *bein adam laMakom* and *bein adam lechavero*, that he forgets to care for his basic physical needs. Thus, the first two items are complemented by the extended stay in the bathroom, representing basic physical maintenance. (*Ein Ayah, Berachot*, chapter 9, piska #22)).

The Talmud continues by enumerating three things that shorten a person's days and years. One of them is "one who is given a cup of benediction to bless with and does not recite the blessing." Rav Kook explains that this example parallels the earlier reference to "extending one's table."

"The cup of benediction" refers to the cup of wine used for *Birkat Hamazon* when a group gathers for a meal. The person who turns down the cup of benediction, which is ordinarily offered when others have gathered around the table, resents having to share his meal with others. Such a person diametrically opposes the concept of the extended table. (Ibid.)

This passage in the Talmud, so beautifully elucidated by Rav Kook, emphasizes the kindness and compassion one extends to others. It begins with one's table - with the openness to needy guests and the effort to make them feel welcome in one's home.

A PIERCING CRY

Rav Aryeh Levin, the famed "Tzadik of Yerushalayim," was known for his exceptional compassion toward those who suffered and felt alone. Concerning the Torah's command that a Jew be deeply sensitive to the widow and orphan, Rav Aryeh offered the following penetrating insight:

"You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. If you [dare to] cause this person

pain... for if they shall cry out to Me, I shall surely hear their outcry." (*Shemot* 22:21–22).

Looking at the Hebrew in the verse, it does not merely say *im*, "if" this widow or orphan cries out. Rather, the Torah employs the less common phrase *ki im* ("for if"). Rav Aryeh said that with this additional word, the Torah emphasizes that any reason at all that causes pain to a widow or orphan - even unintentionally - angers God because of one's lack of sensitivity.

Rav Aryeh Levin's son, Rav Simcha Shlomo Levin, was fond of citing a piercing comment from the Kotzker Rebbe on this verse. The Torah employs a doubled expression three times in describing the pain caused to the widow and orphan: *aneh te'aneh* ("if you cause him/her pain"), *tza'ok yitz'ak* ("he/she will cry out"), and *shamo'a eshma* ("I shall surely hear"). Why this unusual emphasis?

The Kotzker Rebbe explained that when a wife is pained by someone's insensitive words or by a particular incident, she instinctively turns to her husband for support. Similarly, a child in pain turns to a parent for solace. The widow and orphan, however, no longer have their loved ones to care for them or protect them. When they suffer, they immediately feel the acute pain of not having their closest loved ones to whom they can turn.

Thus, the widow's or orphan's pain is doubled. First, there is the pain caused by whatever has brought them distress. At that same moment, they also experience the profound pain of knowing that their husband is no longer present to protect them, or that their parent is no longer alive to provide the loving protection they once received. This double-edged distress is subtly alluded to in the Torah's striking use of doubled expressions throughout the passage. (*Derech Avot*, Sternberg, p.250)

ENCOURAGING VISITS

Rav Aryeh Levin made a practice of visiting the widows of rabbis on *Chol Hamoed* and *Shabbat Chol Hamoed* during the festivals of Sukkot and Pesach. He knew that these homes had once been bustling during the holidays, filled with students and colleagues who came to visit. For many of these widows, however, after the passing of their eminent rabbinic husbands, their homes felt painfully vacant and terribly lonely.

Rav Aryeh would, of course, visit the women together with another colleague or friend. Particularly noteworthy were his visits to the wife of Rav Zelig Reuven Bengis, one of Jerusalem's leading sages (Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem for the *Eida Hacharedis*), and to the wife of Rav Kook throughout the years following Rav Kook's passing. He would spend precisely as much time as he felt was necessary to lift the widow's spirits, and then promptly make his way to the home of another widow - sometimes the widow of a deceased and illustrious rabbi, and sometimes simply a woman whom he felt would benefit from a holiday visit. (*Derech Avot*, p.133)

These teachings and stories remind us that true generosity is not limited to giving money, but is expressed through opening our tables, our homes, our time, and our hearts to those in need. When we recognize that all we possess is entrusted to us by God, we become more attentive to the pain of others and more willing to use what we have to bring comfort, dignity, and kindness into their lives. ■



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