



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

EDITOR, TORAH TIDBITS

SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (5:18): Wholly Concerned with the Community

“Whoever influences the masses to become more meritorious shall not be the cause of sin... Moshe was meritorious and influenced the masses to be meritorious.” (Pirkei Avot 5:18)

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, suggested that one way to understand this Mishnah is through a comment of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk: “The reason a person should not sin is not because it is forbidden. Rather, he should be so occupied with doing mitzvot that he simply does not have the opportunity to sin.” It is noteworthy that the literal translation of the above Mishnah is “that sin will not come to his hand” - that is, he will not have the opportunity to sin. (*Visions of the Fathers*, Twerski, p. 313)

When we think about ways to overcome sinful behavior, one practical path is to be proactively and consistently involved in mitzvot, engaged in communal work, and helping others. The good we do is itself energizing and uplifting. The more we are involved in helping others and filling our hours each day with positive activity that benefits the *klal*, the less time we leave for activities that are unproductive or even sinful.

THE GUEST’S BLESSING

The Talmud (*Berachot* 46b) gives a particular text of the blessing that a guest inserts in *Birkat Hamazon* for the host. The *Shulchan Aruch* codifies this practice (*Orach Chaim* 210) and offers the precise wording: “May it be God’s will that this host not be shamed or humiliated in this world or in the World to Come. May he be successful in all his dealings. May his dealings be close to the city...”

Rav Kook, in commenting on this blessing, was struck by the phrase “May his dealings be close to the city.” Perhaps this simply offers the blessing that the host not be inconvenienced by having to travel to distant places in order to make a living. Rav Kook offered another explanation: The guest who has been so kindly offered a meal is extending a



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blessing that the host continues to be involved in communal affairs and assist those in need of help and sustenance. “May your dealings be close to the city” refers to engagement with the broader needs of the community. One might be inclined, says Rav Kook, to adopt a more sheltered and private way of life in order to pursue a more spiritual and inward-focused existence.

However, the prayer of the guest, composed by the Talmudic sages, gives precedence and the highest honor to one whose efforts and actions are geared toward the well-being of the greater community. Rav Kook concludes his comment by citing the Mishnah above: “The more one is engaged in helping the community, the more one is protected from transgression.” (*Ain Aya*, Berachot 46b, piska #10)

BADERECH

Rabbi Shmuel Boruch Werner (1922–1993) served as the head of the Rabbinic Court in Tel Aviv and wrote a beautiful tribute to the life and saintly character of Rav Aryeh Levin after his passing. He titled the piece *Baderech* (“On the Way”). In the article, he describes Rav Aryeh as always being on a mission, always on his way to help people in need.

The following is an excerpt from the article: “It is nearly impossible to meet up with Rav Aryeh Levin except if you catch him ‘on the way.’ He does not conduct himself in the ordinary way a person lives in a certain place or neighborhood. He was a person who lived life ‘on the way’ to doing an act of kindness for someone else... If you were to suddenly see him walking the streets of Jerusalem, he appeared like a soldier who was keenly focused on a mission. Indeed, he was a

soldier. A soldier in the army of Hashem.”

“When Rav Aryeh stepped out of the doorway of prison, he was *not* making his way back home. He would go directly to the parents of an incarcerated person to share a good word that their child was faring well. Often, he would bring parents a note from their child in prison, and he would receive a note from them to be delivered back to their children who were locked away. From those meetings,



Rabbi Dr. Abraham
Twerski zt"l

he would walk to his next destination - stopping to visit someone who was ill and in desperate need of a friendly face and some companionship. From there, he would make his way to the funeral of a little-known Jew who had passed away and sadly had no one else to offer words of eulogy...Indeed, Rav Aryeh was always *baderech!*” (*Derech Avot*, p. 290)

In this sense, Rav Aryeh, in his day-to-day life, exemplified the Kotzker Rebbe’s interpretation of the Mishnah from *Avot* above: One who fills his life with so much good work, acts of kindness, and concern for others leaves barely a moment for anything else that would be unproductive or improper. “Sin will not come to his hand”—he simply will not have the opportunity to sin.

WHO IS COUNTED AMONG THE LAMED-VAV TZADDIKIM?

As a young child, Chaim Be’er grew up in the Geulah section of Jerusalem and later became a well-known and award-winning Israeli novelist. He recalls a particularly touching story about an encounter he had with Rav Aryeh Levin as a child. He tells of a time when he saw Rav Aryeh walking down the street and could not restrain himself. He ran over and asked him, “Is it true that you

are one of the *Lamed-Vav Tzaddikim*?”

Indeed, according to tradition, the world exists in the merit of the Thirty-Six Tzaddikim who live in every generation. As a young boy, Be'er said, “He seemed to me to be surely one of them.”

Rav Aryeh smiled and said one word: “Sometimes.”

He then went on to explain that the *Lamed-Vav Tzaddikim* are always changing. It is not a lifetime position. “Every time you go out of your way for someone else, do something worthy, or perform an exceptionally good deed, you are considered to be one of them. And then you give your place to someone else who performs an act of exquisite righteousness.” (Sivanrahavmeir.com, “Sometimes”)

Rav Aryeh so beautifully and humbly taught, both by word and by example, that every Jew has the capacity to elevate his or

her life and become a *tzaddik* or *tzadekes*. By becoming more attuned to the needs of others and taking action through acts of charity, kindness, and compassion, we can, in those moments, be counted among the Thirty-Six *tzaddikim* whose merit upholds the world.

GATHERING THE CAMPS

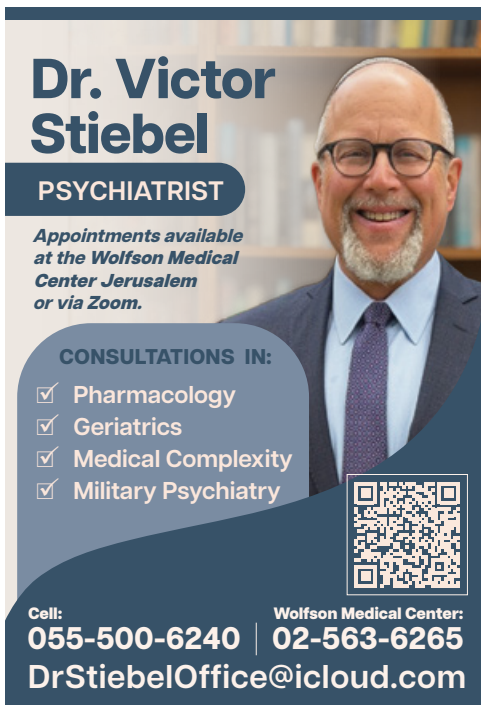
Rav Kook is well known for his remarkably inspiring and insightful perspective on the topic of *teshuva* (repentance). Arguably the most popular volume of all his writings is devoted to his teachings on *teshuva*: *Orot HaTeshuva* (“Lights of Repentance”).

Whereas the major emphasis on *teshuva* has traditionally been on personal improvement and change, Rav Kook placed special emphasis on the *teshuva* of the *klal* (the community).

The sounds of the shofar—*tekiah*, *teruah*—the symbolic calls to *teshuva* that embody the essence of Rosh Hashanah, are mentioned in the Torah in the context of the horns being sounded to gather the nation together (*Bamidbar* 10:1–10).

With this background in mind, Rav Kook composed aphorisms for every month of the year that were published in the 1914 issue of the *Eretz Zvi* calendar in Jaffa. For the month of Elul of that year, he wrote: “The preparation for collective repentance is the sound of the shofar, which rallies together all of the camps.” (*Megged Yerachim*, cited in *Celebration of the Soul*, p. 23)

It is striking that Rav Kook chose to highlight the aspect of the shofar and its blasts that serves to unite the nation. The ideal *teshuva* is one that focuses not only on personal improvement but also on strengthening the loving bonds between every Jew that unite us deeply as a community and as a people. This elevated idea of *teshuva* is especially poignant when considering the unique role Rav Kook



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saw himself playing in guiding the people of Israel as they returned to the Land of their ancestors after a long and painful exile and worked to rebuild the nation.

THE EXPRESSIVE SHAPE OF THE SHOFAR

Does the shape of the shofar itself have any particular symbolism? The poetic and soaring soul of Rav Kook perceived exquisite meaning in the shape of the ram's horn used for the shofar.

He linked its shape to a progression from *prat* (the individual) to the *klal* (the collective). There are the narrow, private issues with which the individual grapples. And then there are the broad, general concerns of the community and the nation. *Teshuva* takes place on many levels. We all endeavor to correct our own personal faults and failings. The nation, too, does *teshuva* as it restores itself to its native Land and revives its true character as a Godly people.

The shofar, with its gradually widening shape, is a metaphor for these ever-widening circles of repentance and spiritual progress. The progression of *teshuva* takes on its most elevated form when it reaches the level of universal *teshuva*—a time when the entire world advances and learns to recognize God's moral rule and sovereignty.

From the narrow straits of personal *teshuva*, the Jew progresses to the wider expanse of communal *teshuva* and ultimately to the attainment of universal perfection. (*Moadei HaRe'iya*, p. 60; also cited in *Silver From the Land of Israel*, Morrison, pp. 45–46) ■



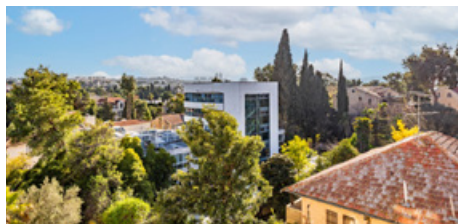
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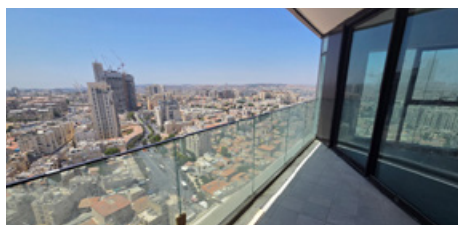
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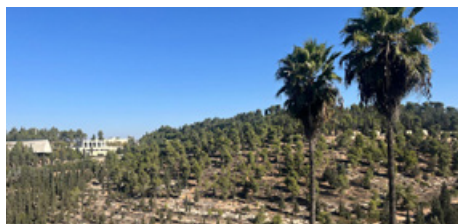
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