



Raising Many Students

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot 1:1

**“The Men of the Great Assembly Said
Three Things... Set Up Many Students”
(Avot 1:1)**

The above teaching can be best understood against the backdrop of the Talmudic description of the policy in the Beit Midrash of Rabban Gamliel. When Rabban Gamliel became the nasi of the Sanhedrin, he placed guards at the entrance of the study hall to keep out any prospective student who was not absolutely sincere (Berachot 28a).

In the language of the Talmud, a student who was not *tocho k'boro* - whose “inside did not match his outside” - was not permitted to study in the yeshiva. In other words, a person could not simply present himself with the trappings of a religious person; he had to sincerely live an inwardly religious life.

When Rabban Gamliel was removed from his post, his replacement, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, added 400 (some say 700) benches to the study hall (Berachot, *ibid.*). Students streamed in, and each was given an unrestricted opportunity to learn.

When Rabban Gamliel heard about the many students now filling the study hall, he feared that he had been guilty of preventing deserving Jews from learning Torah. The Talmud relates that Rabban Gamliel saw in a dream a vision of white jugs filled with ashes,

alluding to the idea that the additional students were worthless idlers. The final statement in this Talmudic passage, however, explains that the dream was shown to him to assuage his guilty feelings, but that, in truth, he was indeed guilty of having restricted the study of Torah to an elite group (*ibid.*).

Rav Kook offers an exquisite commentary on this passage and highlights a fundamental lesson for our own engagement with Jews from different walks of life.

Rav Kook posits that there are essentially two ways we can understand the nature of man. One way is to see that embedded in the core of man is a tendency toward evil and sinful behavior. Man must therefore struggle to overcome these urges and devote serious effort to uprooting his natural inclinations toward corrupt conduct. This assessment of human nature, according to Rav Kook, does not reflect the Torah's true perception of man.

On the contrary, Judaism, says Rav Kook, believes in the purity embedded in the core of man. The Jew, in particular, possesses an elevated soul that yearns for holiness and for that which is moral and good.

Rav Kook cites a significant proof-text, found in a halachic context, as substantiation for this claim.

Under biblical law, a Jewish bill of divorce (*get*) is valid only if it is given by the husband of

his own free will. However, the Talmud states that in certain circumstances where a divorce is legally mandated, a rabbinical court (*Beit Din*) can physically coerce the husband until he says, “I want to do it” (*rotzeh ani*).

The Rambam addresses the obvious paradox: If a *get* must be given willingly, how can a forced *get* be valid? His explanation relies on a profound psychological and spiritual insight into human nature. The Rambam explains that, deep down, every member of the Jewish people wants to do the right thing, perform the commandments (*mitzva*), and distance themselves from sin (*Hilchot Gerushin* 2:20).

When a man acts spitefully, selfishly, or maliciously by withholding a *get* from his wife, he is not expressing his true inner self. Rather, his true will has been temporarily hijacked or overpowered by his “evil inclination” (*Yetzer Hara*).

Citing this source, Rav Kook maintains that opening the doors of the Beit Midrash reflected the precise approach of our tradition: the inclination toward good is natural, and accessing the purity of the soul is surely within reach. Even one who enters with distorted beliefs or unbecoming conduct can be positively influenced by the upstanding and saintly students who surround him.

RAV ARYEH'S CHOCOLATE PUDDING

Rabbi Benji Levene, the grandson of Rav Aryeh Levin, is fond of telling the following story, which so wonderfully captures the teaching that “many students should be given a place.” Rav Aryeh would always find a way to make students feel embraced and loved, even those who might have been seen by others as problematic.



“My grandfather would be the first to greet anyone he met in the street. It was impossible to say Shalom to him before he said it to you.

“My grandfather was a brilliant educator who could see into the hearts of children. One day in Yeshiva Etz Chaim, where Reb Aryeh was the dean of students, they served chocolate pudding for dessert after lunch. One little boy loved it so much that, after he finished his pudding, he ran back to the end of the line to get another helping.

“The server, remembering him from the first time, gave him a slap and yelled at him: ‘You already had one; there are others who didn’t get any yet!’ Hurt and embarrassed in front of all his friends, the boy kicked the cart holding the chocolate puddings. Down it went, and all the puddings splashed onto the floor. ‘Now you’re in big trouble,’ they all told him. ‘Tomorrow, when Reb Aryeh is here, he’ll decide whether or not to expel you from the yeshiva.’

“That night the boy didn’t sleep a wink. In school the next morning, he heard his friends whispering behind his back, ‘They’re going to throw him out.’

“When Reb Aryeh arrived, he called the boy into his office and asked him, ‘Tell me, is it true

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what they say you did yesterday?’ The boy answered, ‘Yes.’

“Will you ever do such a thing again?” asked Reb Aryeh gently.

“Never,” promised the boy.

“Then Reb Aryeh opened his closet and took out two chocolate puddings. One he gave to the boy, and one he took for himself. ‘I also love chocolate pudding,’ said Reb Aryeh. Then they sat and ate their chocolate puddings together.

“Many years later, the same boy told me how, in that moment, he realized the power that a teacher can have; how one person can change the life of another. He himself, Rav Avraham Bahran, went on to become one of Israel’s leading educators.” (*Derech Avot*, Sternberg, pp. 32–33)

THE SUKKAH BINDS THE ENTIRE NATION

Rav Kook’s love for every Jew and his vision of working toward greater unity within the nation are expressed so beautifully in the way he encapsulated the theme of the holiday of Sukkot.

The Talmud in Sukkah 27b makes a remarkable claim regarding the holiday of Sukkot:

“For seven days... all who belong to the people of Israel will live in sukkot [thatched huts]” (Lev. 23:42).

This teaches that it is fitting for all of Israel to sit in one sukkah”.

Obviously, no sukkah is large enough to hold

the entire Jewish people. What is the meaning of this utopian vision of all of Israel sitting together in a single sukkah?

THE UNITY OF SUKKOT

As long as we are plagued by pettiness and other character flaws, we cannot attain true collective unity. But after experiencing the unique holiness of Yom Kippur, this unfortunate state is repaired. After our lives have been illuminated by the light of *teshuvah*, and the entire Jewish nation has been purified from the negative influences of sin and moral weakness, the soul’s inner purity becomes our predominant quality. With this regained integrity, we merit an ever-increasing harmony among the diverse sectors of the nation.

During the holiday of Sukkot, we absorb the light of Torah and a love for truth. Conflicting views become integrated and unified. Through the spiritual ascent of the Days of Awe, we attain a comprehensive unity—a unity that extends its holy light over all parts of the Jewish people. During this special time, it is as if the entire nation is sitting together, sharing the holy experience of the same sukkah.

According to the Hasidic master Rabbi Nosson (1780–1844), chief disciple and scribe of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, this sense of unity is the very essence of the mitzvah of sukkah. He wrote in *Likutei Halachot* that one should fulfill the mitzvah of sukkah with the following *kavanah*:

“One should concentrate on being part of the entire people of Israel, with intense love and peace, until it may be considered as if all of Israel dwells together in one sukkah.” (See *Silver from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from *Mo’adei HaRe’iyah*, p. 96)

DEFENDING HIS SENSITIVE STANCE

Rav Kook was often criticized for his extreme tolerance and acceptance of the secular

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pioneers and unaffiliated Jews living in the Land of Israel. One of his strongest opponents on this matter was a towering sage of the city of Sfat, Rav Yaakov Dovid Wilovsky, known as the Ridvaz, who claimed that Rav Kook's path departed from the accepted tradition of guarding the sacred principles and structures of Torah.

The following is a short excerpt from a letter Rav Kook wrote to his esteemed colleague, defending the validity of his stance:

"You wrote that it pains you greatly [to see] a man of my caliber following such a dangerous path. The fact that you graciously paid homage to me, calling me a great man, will not mislead me [nor prevent me] from recognizing my lowliness and meager worth, which is as nothing. But realize, my master, that I have worked very hard on the path that I now follow in the service of God, may His name be blessed. I put my blood, flesh, bone marrow, and all of my strength [into discovering the proper path], until HaShem, in His mercy, enlightened me to find it.

"To me, this path is not dangerous at all; I would call it a holy path... In my inadequacy, I am unfit to be called a tzaddik; if only HaShem would grant me the privilege to be able to say confidently that I am an average man. However, the path that I strive to follow is undoubtedly the path of the righteous (thank God).

"Whoever adopts my ways and joins me in Torah and divine service, with a willing heart and true faith in the sages, will merit to see the light and truth of this paved, straight path, which is illuminated by the light of supernal kindness..." (Translation of Rav Kook's letter, 24 Sivan 5673 [1913], *Iggrot HaRe'iyah*, letter #555)

LONG ARMS TO EMBRACE ALL

The theme of all we have seen above is the compassionate and loving stance that a Jew strives to maintain at all times. Rav Kook and his students exemplified this all-embracing and tender approach toward others.

Perhaps the following quote from Rav Kook beautifully personifies this exalted path:

"My beloved brothers, if only I had arms the size of the world, so that I could hug you all with love." (*Iggrot Re'iyah* 2, p. 229) ■



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