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Lessons from Mesillas Yesharim's Glaring Omission

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The *sefer Mesillas Yesharim* can rightly be called one of the most essential *sifrei mussar* for a *ben Torah*. The structure of the *sefer* is based on a statement made by Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair in *Maseches Avodah Zarah*:

אָמַר רַבִּי פִּנְחָס בֶּן יָאִיר: תּוֹרָה מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי זְהִירוֹת, זְהִירוֹת מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי זְרִיזוֹת, זְרִיזוֹת מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי נְקִיּוֹת, נְקִיּוֹת מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי פְּרִישׁוֹת, פְּרִישׁוֹת מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי טְהוֹרָה, טְהוֹרָה מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי חֲסִידוּת, חֲסִידוּת מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי עֲנוּהַ, עֲנוּהַ מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי יְרֵאת חֹטָא, יְרֵאת חֹטָא מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי קְדוּשָׁה, קְדוּשָׁה מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי רוּחַ הַקּוֹדֶשׁ, רוּחַ הַקּוֹדֶשׁ מְבִיאָה לַיָּדִי תְּחִיית הַמֵּתִים.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said:

The Torah leads to caution, caution leads to alacrity, alacrity leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to separation (from impurities), separation leads to purity, purity leads to piety, piety leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to sanctity, sanctity leads to *ruach hakodesh*, and *ruach hakodesh* leads to the resurrection of the dead.¹

The *Ramchal* built *Mesillas Yesharim* as a step-by-step exploration of each of these *middos*, culminating with the *middah* of *kedushah*. However, there seems to be one

step missing: Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair opens by stating that Torah brings one to *zehirus*, caution regarding sin, but the first *middah* addressed by the *Ramchal* is *zehirus*; why doesn't the *Ramchal* address what seems to be the "first rung" of the ladder, Torah?

Fundamental principles from three different *baalei machshavah* can lead us to important lessons that can be derived from the *Mesillas Yesharim*'s striking omission.

1. TORAH IS PART OF THE OTHERS

In a letter, Harav Yitzchak Huter, *zt"l*, observed that there is a distinction between the *middos* described by the *Mesillas Yesharim* and the stage of Torah. Physics states that a person can only be in one place at a time; if they are on one step, they can't simultaneously be on another step. Similarly, if a person is working on the stage of *zehirus*, that means they have not yet reached *zerizus*. Once they advance to *zerizus*, they by definition have incorporated the practice of *zehirus* into their *avodas Hashem* and they are no longer found on that step.

Torah, though, is different. Torah is not distinct from the other steps on the staircase leading up to *ruach hakodesh* and *techiyas ha'meisim*; it is incorporated into every



Rabbi Dovid Miller

1. 20b.

step. For this reason, the Ramchal did not limit Torah to the beginning of the *sefer*. He instead built Torah into every *middah*, showing how learning serves to help an individual develop himself as an *eved Hashem*.²

PRACTICAL TORAH IS COMPLETE TORAH

Rav Hutner's principle is aptly described by the *Ramban* in his letter to his son, where he states that a person should not step away from a *sefer* before figuring out how his learning can impact his *avodas Hashem*. While this is relatively simple when learning a *mussar* or *machshavah sefer*, it can be many orders more difficult when learning Gemara or the intricacies of halachah. People must avoid falling into the trap of learning a bifurcated Torah — or, even worse, living a bifurcated life — where some *limudim* are about improving oneself as a servant of the Creator and others are about “developing skills” or enjoying the back-and-forth of the *sugyah*. Even if one can't follow the *Ramban's* advice every time he finishes learning, at least once a week a person should spend time reflecting on what he learned over the past week and try to glean some lesson for his *avodas Hashem*. In this way, he will be applying Rav Hutner's understanding of the *Ramchal's* omission: Torah is part of working on all the *middos* in *Mesillas Yesharim*, not a distinct step that one works on and then moves on from.

2. HIGHLIGHTING MITZVOS HA'LEV

Harav Mandelbaum, author of the commentary *B'mesilah Naaleh*, suggests that the *Ramchal* has his own explanation for this curious omission of Torah. The *Ramchal* originally wrote *Mesillas Yesharim* as a debate between a *chacham* and a *chassid*. In this

original version, known as *Sefer Havikuach*, the *chassid* says to the *chacham*, “Consider the *pasuk* of *yiras Shamayim*: ‘*V'atah Yisrael, mah Hashem Elokecha sho'el mei'imach...* — And now, Yisrael, what does Hashem ask of you...” After listing such crucial mitzvos as *yiras Hashem*, *avodas Hashem*, and *ahavas Hashem*, the Torah continues, “*lishmor es mitzvos Hashem v'es chukosav* — to guard Hashem's mitzvos and *chukkim*.” The implication is that whatever came before this final phrase was not included in the “mitzvos and *chukkim*” that we are called to guard and protect, but how can that be? The *Ramchal* has the *chassid* explain that the Torah is distinguishing between mitzvos of the intellect, like loving and developing awe for Hashem, and mitzvos of the body, the many mitzvos that are accomplished through action. The fact that the mitzvos of the intellect, what he calls “*mitzvos ha'lev*,” are listed first is meant to indicate that they are more *chashuv*, more important and consequential for true *avodas Hashem*.

The *middos* described in *Mesillas Yesharim* are components of those *mitzvos ha'lev*. Learning Torah, though, as important as it is, is considered a *mitzvah she'b'guf*, an active mitzvah. In order to highlight the pre-eminence of the *mitzvos ha'lev*, the *Ramchal* chose to leave out his discussion of Torah as the first step of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair's program of spiritual growth.³

“DISTRACTED” BY LEARNING

I have seen the consequences of focusing too much on learning, without developing one's *middos* and the foundations of *avodas Hashem*. A *maggid shiur* once shared with

3. This answer does beg the question of why Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair did choose to include Torah in his list of how to reach *ruach hakodesh* and *tehiyas ha'meisim*.

2. See *B'mesilah Naaleh*, pg. 85.

me that one his *talmidim* was learning very well in his second year. He set a goal to work through all of a large yeshiva *masechta*, an impressive feat. However, the *mashgiach* called him in for a meeting and encouraged him to focus on a few weak points in his *avodas Hashem* that could use more targeted work. The student chose not to listen to the *mashgiach*.

This student indeed completed the *masechta* that year and went on to spend a year or two in a more “prestigious” yeshiva. After a couple of years, he got married — but shortly after that time, he got divorced. Today, this student is not very religious anymore. This is what the *mashgiach* foresaw: focusing on learning to the exclusion of developing one’s spiritual character is a recipe for disaster.⁴

3. TORAH IS CLARITY

Mori v’rabi Harav Dovid Miller, *shlita*, pointed out that in fact, the *Ramchal* does incorporate Torah into the *Mesillas Yesharim*. There is one chapter before the *Ramchal* begins to delineate the *middos* from Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. He opens with his well-known line: “The foundation of *chassidus* and the root of service is for a person to have total clarity regarding his obligation in this world...” Torah provides guidance regarding exactly this question — what is a person’s obligation in this world, and how are they to accomplish it? In fact, the word “*torah*” itself indicates this: it means “to teach” or “to guide.”

4. This student adopted the same approach toward *shalom bayis*. I asked him when he was engaged if he had prepared for *shalom bayis* at all by learning the *hashkafic* underpinnings of marriage and the ideal relationship between a husband and wife; he answered that he had not, he had learned the *halachos*. Those are of course essential, but the “*mitzvos ha’lev*” must be prioritized as well.

The Gemara in *Avodah Zarah* divides human history into three periods.[5]⁵ The first two thousand years are “*tohu va’vohu*,” the next two thousand years are “Torah,” and the final two thousand years are the time of *Mashiach*. Doing the math, it turns out that the two millenia of Torah begin not with *Kabbalas HaTorah*, as one may have expected, but with Avraham being sent to Eretz Canaan: “*Lech lecha mei’artzecha...*” In what way is this Torah? Rav Miller explained by noting that until this point in the Torah, people are described as leaving places, not as being sent towards places. Avraham was the first person who was given a specific charge to go to a certain place. This is the essence of what Torah is: to clarify one’s destination in their mind, along with the steps needed to get to that place. In this way, the *Ramchal* opening *Mesillas Yesharim* by discussing “a person’s obligation in this world” is really a discussion of Torah, as it serves to give a person clarity regarding the destination toward which they should be heading in life.

Chazal have described the power of having clarity regarding one’s goals in life. They promised, “*B’derech she’adam rotzeh leilech, bah molichin oso* — Hashem brings a person down the path that they truly wish to follow.”⁶ This applies not only to the general path of one’s life, but to *she’ifos* as well: if a person wants to become a *talmid chacham* of note, Hashem will make it happen. If a person wants to become a renowned doctor or lawyer, He will bring them down that path.⁷ The only two requirements are that the person must truly want it, and they must genu-

5. a.

6. *Makkos* 10b.

7. Note, though, that there is no guarantee to receive *kavod* or wealth, too.

inely work for it.

RAV VOSNER'S *SHE'IFOS*

Two stories about one individual drive home the impact of knowing what a person wants to become. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to spend significant time discussing communal and halachic issues with Harav Benzion Vosner, *shlita*, the son of famed *posek* Harav Shmuel Vosner, *zt"l*. A grandchild of Rav Shmuel Vosner's was once helping his grandfather organize his *seforim*. Looking at an old *sefer* from when Rav Vosner was in yeshiva Europe, he noticed written on top, "Shmuel Halevi Vosner, rav of Lodz." Confused, the grandchild brought the *sefer* to his grandfather, asking how he could have possibly been old enough to serve as the rav of Lodz when he was in Europe. Rav Vosner smiled and remarked, "You have caught me. When I was a *talmid* in Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, what was considered to be the ultimate achievement in Torah was to become the rav of a city. I set my sights on Lodz, the largest city in Poland behind Warsaw, and as a reminder of my goal, I wrote this in one of my *seforim* at the time." While Rav Vosner never became the rav of Lodz, he did become the rav of Bnei Brak and the *posek* for Chassidim across the world.

THE REBBE'S PROMISE

Another story only came to light a few decades ago from Harav Don Segal, *shlita*; not even Rav Vosner himself was aware of it. Rav Vosner's mother did not grow up in a Chassidishe home. She was born in Austria and was blessed with an uncommonly beautiful voice — so beautiful that a famous opera company offered to hire her to come on tour with them. She desperately desired to accept the offer, but her parents felt that it was inappropriate. Her father brought her

to meet with the rav of the city, Harav Shlomo Baumgarten, who tried to convince her to give up the opportunity, but she was not convinced. He brought her to Harav Yitzchak Meir, *zt"l*, the Kapishnitzer Rebbe, who asked her why she wanted to sing with the opera. She honestly answered that she wanted the fame that came with such a position. The Kapishnitzer Rebbe nodded, understanding her, and declared: "Listen closely, my daughter. The dream of every Jewish woman is to have a child who will illuminate the world with his Torah. I promise you that if you turn down this offer, you will have a child who will light up the world with his *piskei halachah*." Rav Vosner's mother accepted the promise and turned down the opera.

When Rav Vosner first heard this story from Rav Don Segal, who came across the account while researching the histories of different Jewish communities in Europe, he shared that his mother never told him about that encounter. However, she would often encourage him to invest in his learning, saying, "You can't imagine what I sacrificed for you!"

Both stories illustrate the power of developing a clear understanding of one's ultimate goal. While it is true that we don't have the promise of the Kapishnitzer Rebbe for ourselves, we have something even better: Chazal's promise of *B'derech she'adam rotzeh leilech, bah molichin oso*. This clarity of purpose is the true meaning of Torah, which is why the *Ramchal* chose to open *Mesillas Yesharim* with "a person's obligations in the world." ■

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