



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Editor, Torah Tidbits

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (1:2): The Foundation of Kindness

**The world stands on three things...
upon acts of loving-kindness
(Avot 1:2)**

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHAFETZ CHAIM

In his younger years, Rav Kook developed a close relationship with the famed Chafetz Chaim. They first met when the Chafetz Chaim, while traveling, would stay at Rav Kook's parents' home. Later, when Rav Kook was in his twenties, the Chafetz Chaim invited him to join an exclusive kollel dedicated to studying the laws of the Kohanim and the Temple service.

Undoubtedly, Rav Kook was deeply influenced by the Chafetz Chaim's extraordinary saintliness. The following story illustrates the Chafetz Chaim's

exquisite sensitivity and concern for others.

The Ponevezher Rav, Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, was one of the great Torah leaders of his generation. He founded the Ponevezh Yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael, named after the Lithuanian yeshivah that had

been destroyed during World War II. He was a student of the Chafetz Chaim, although he initially studied at the yeshivah in Novaradok.

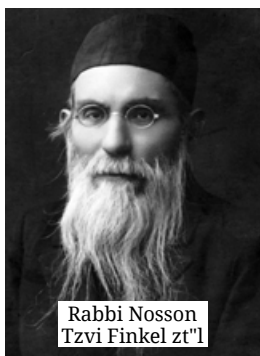
One day, while returning to Novaradok, Rav Kahaneman decided to take a detour and visit the Chafetz Chaim. When he arrived at the Chafetz Chaim's home, the Rebbetzin told him to

wait because the rabbi was occupied.

Suddenly, Rav Kahaneman heard frightening cries. "Don't be alarmed," the Chafetz Chaim's wife explained. "My husband is praying for someone."

Rav Kahaneman assumed that the Chafetz Chaim was praying for someone who was critically ill, perhaps a close family member. "No, it isn't that," the Rebbetzin explained. "He is praying for a local woman who is experiencing a difficult labor."

When Rav Kahaneman witnessed how deeply the Chafetz Chaim felt the suffering



Rabbi Nosson
Tzvi Finkel zt"l



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of a fellow Jew to whom he had no personal connection, he resolved to become his student. (*Beit HaLevi on Ahavat Yisrael*, Sutton, p. 211)

THE GENIUS OF CHESED

Rav Kook, in *Orot HaKodesh* (vol. 3, p. 313), speaks of “the genius of *chesed* of a great giver.” For such a person, “chesed and doing good are his soul’s mission and the crown of his life.” One who possesses an inner vision can discern in this genius “the shine of chesed itself, precious and lofty, higher and more elevated than all acts of chesed that actually come into practical existence.”

“We are all fortunate if the light of chesed shines in our midst. The world is fortunate, mankind is fortunate. And the nation is fortunate if the vision of a genius of philanthropy becomes revealed in one of its sons. The *ruach hakodesh* of philanthropy is a treasure of life.”

This unique genius expresses itself through chesed, bringing a spirit of life to the entire nation. Rav Kook notes that this genius “sometimes reveals itself through the nation’s poor.” A person may possess a genius for chesed even without financial means, excelling instead in practical acts of kindness. And when such a person discovers an opportunity to translate his inner impulse for chesed into action, “his spirit is exceedingly amazed.”

“Those with a sharp inner eye, those who grasp the real value of life, will be able to recognize the splendor of chesed even when cloaked with many coverings of inability to actually reveal itself.”

For Rav Kook, chesed is not merely a collection of good deeds. It can become a defining spiritual quality - a way of seeing

the world and responding to the needs of others.

A SERVANT TO HIS PEOPLE

When Rav Kook first came to Jerusalem, word quickly spread that he was always willing to help a fellow Jew in need. As a result, people came to him at all hours of the day, burdening him with every kind of request.

When his friends and relatives saw what was happening, they decided to intervene. They prepared a sign listing specific reception hours and hung it on Rav Kook’s front door.

The next day, however, the sign was gone.

His well-wishers prepared another sign and hung it in its place. That sign, too, disappeared after a day. Finally, they decided to investigate and discovered that Rav Kook himself was responsible for removing the signs.

When asked why he opposed an arrangement designed to lighten his workload, he explained:

“A rabbi is not his own master. He is a servant of the people, and a servant must be available to serve his master at all times.”

This was not merely a statement about rabbinic responsibility. It reflected Rav Kook’s fundamental understanding of leadership: the spiritual leader exists to serve others.

WATCHING EVERY ACTION

Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel, the famed “Alter of Slabodka,” moved his yeshivah to Chevron in 1924. Among its distinguished students was the young Rav Yitzchak Hutner, who would later become one of the great Torah leaders of the twentieth century. Rav

Hutner frequently visited Rav Kook in Jerusalem and was deeply drawn to his saintly and poetic personality.

Rabbi Yaakov Freitman, a close student of Rav Hutner, related a fascinating vignette about one of Rav Hutner's visits to Rav Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Hutner arrived in Chevron in the summer of 5685 (1925) as a nineteen-year-old yeshivah student. The Alter of Slabodka had recently established a branch of the famed Slabodka Yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael, and Rav Hutner was among his first students.

Later that year, in the month of Iyar, Rav Hutner visited Rav Kook for the first time.

The older rabbi and the young genius from Warsaw took long walks together and spent many nights learning Torah, covering the entire range of Torah study. These encounters established a unique bond between the two rabbinic giants.

Years later, when Rav Hutner left Eretz Yisrael in 1929 to visit his parents in Warsaw, he eventually returned in 1933. When Rav Kook saw him again, he recited the blessing of *Shehechiyanu* with *shem uMalchut*.

The following story, however, concerns Rav Hutner's return to Chevron after one of his early visits to Rav Kook:

The Alter asked Rav Hutner what he had seen at Rav Kook's home. Rav Hutner replied that it had been an ordinary visit: they had "spoken in learning," but nothing particularly noteworthy had occurred.

The Alter was dissatisfied with this response and pressed his young student for more details.

One detail Rav Hutner remembered was particularly striking.

"It was eleven o'clock in the morning," he recalled, "and a glass of milk that the Rebbetzin had brought the Rav was still untouched. In the waiting room sat a high-ranking British official who had an appointment with the Rav. At the same time, Rav Kook was sitting with an elderly *talmid chacham* who was hard of hearing and had several questions.

"Rav Kook patiently answered the elderly man. Because he had difficulty hearing, Rav Kook had to repeat each answer slowly, loudly, and carefully. From time to time, Rav Kook's shamash would enter the room and whisper something into the Rav's ear. Each time, Rav Kook would respond, 'Yes, yes—but *kavod haTorah, kavod haTorah*.'"

Upon hearing this, the Alter of Slabodka delivered an unforgettable lesson in mussar:

"If you did not see this, then what is considered 'seeing'?"

The Alter, one of the great masters of the Mussar movement, recognized in Rav Kook's conduct a profound lesson in midot. Rav Kook was completely attentive to the needs of an elderly man who could barely hear, even while a high-ranking British official waited to see him. His actions demonstrated that honoring another human being - and especially *kavod haTorah* - could not be sacrificed to convenience or status. (*The Jewish Star*, August 5, 2015; see also *Sichat Avot**, pp. 51–52.)*

The Alter of Slabodka was teaching his students to look carefully - to notice the seemingly small actions that reveal a person's true character. Rav Kook's greatness was visible not only in his Torah scholarship and writings, but in the extraordinary sensitivity with which he treated every

person who entered his presence.

PRAYING WITH WINDOWS

For millennia, Jews have faced Jerusalem when praying. The Talmud in *Berakhot* 34b derives this practice from the way Daniel prayed in Babylonia:

“One should pray only in a house that has windows,” as it says: “Daniel would enter his house, where there were open windows in his upper chamber facing Jerusalem; three times a day he would kneel and pray” (Daniel 6:11).

Why are windows necessary for prayer? Is prayer not fundamentally a private exercise of the soul, requiring inward concentration? And why did Daniel specifically face Jerusalem?

ENGAGED PRAYER

Prayer is an intensely introspective activity, but it should never lead us to lose sight of the world around us. If meditation and private prayer cause us to withdraw from the world, we have misunderstood prayer’s ultimate purpose.

The full meaning of prayer cannot be realized by someone who is secluded from the needs and struggles of society. Prayer should inspire us to act for justice, compassion, and the betterment of the world.

For this reason, the Sages taught that one should pray in a room with windows. The windows symbolize our connection to the world outside and remind us that our spiritual lives carry moral obligations toward others.

At the same time, we turn toward Jerusalem. Our aspirations to perfect the world must be directed toward the goal of universal peace. This is the significance of facing Jerusalem, whose name is associated with peace. Jerusalem is the focal point from



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which God’s prophetic message radiates outward: “For Torah shall come forth from Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

Prayer, then, is both inward and outward. We turn inward to encounter God, but we look outward toward a world that needs to be repaired.

(Based on Silver from the Land of Israel, Morrison, adapted from *Ein Ayah*, vol. I, on *Berakhot* 34b [5:124].)

CHESED LE’AVRAHAM

Rav Kook teaches that the uniqueness of Abraham’s *chesed* was its universal scope. Abraham did not restrict his kindness to his family or community; his *chesed* extended to all humanity.

Rav Kook beautifully describes this overflowing quality of kindness and calls upon us to follow in the ways of our nation’s



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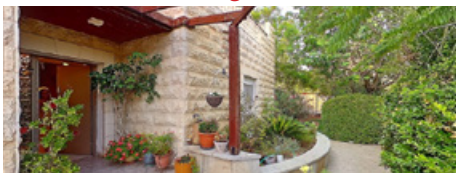
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founding father:

“These are the ways of the tzaddikim who are the foundation of the world: they judge the world by giving each person the benefit of the doubt; they love finding the righteousness in everyone and hate finding fault in others. These are the true students of Avraham our forefather and of those who walk in his ways.” (*Orot HaKodesh* 3, pp. 332–333)

This is the foundation of *Pirkei Avot* 1:2: “The world stands on three things: Torah, avodah, and acts of kindness.”

For Rav Kook, chesed is not simply one virtue among many. It is a way of being. It is the ability to see the dignity and goodness in another person, to feel another’s suffering as one’s own, and to translate that sensitivity into action.

The examples of the Chafetz Chaim and Rav Kook reveal this ideal in practice. The Chafetz Chaim wept for a woman he did not know. Rav Kook gave an elderly Torah scholar his full attention while an important official waited. He refused to limit the hours in which people could seek his help because he understood himself as a servant of the public.

True chesed begins with seeing. It continues with feeling. And it reaches its full expression when that feeling becomes action. ■



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