



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Editor, Torah Tidbits

Serving God Out of Love: Rav Kook on the Soul's Natural Longing for God (Avot 1:3)

“Antignos of Socho received [the tradition] from Shimon Hatzadik. He used to say: Do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Rather, be like servants who serve the master but not in order to receive reward...” (Pirkei Avot 1:3)

RAMBAM'S INTERPRETATION OF THE MISHNAH

Many commentators understand this mishnah as addressing those rare individuals who serve God on the highest spiritual plane: out of pure love and the profound joy of knowing that they are fulfilling His will. This is the service of the *chassid*, the pious individual who aspires to go beyond the letter of the law. Such a person is not motivated by the prospect of reward. The knowledge that he has pleased

God is reward enough.

The Rambam, in his commentary on this mishnah, offers a similar explanation:

“Antignos taught that we should serve Hashem like servants who do not seek favors and benefits in return... His intention is that we serve Hashem out of pure love (*ovdim me'ahavah*), without expecting to receive benefits” (Rambam's Commentary to Avot 1:3).

But how can a person attain such a lofty level of devotion, in which the prospect of reward becomes inconsequential?

THE PARABLE OF THE MAN WHO SAVES A CITY

Rav Kook addresses this question by inviting us to imagine a heroic citizen who learns that an invading army or a sudden catastrophe threatens to destroy his entire city. Driven by love for his home and its inhabitants, he steps forward, risks his life, and succeeds in saving them all.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, the citizens gather to praise their rescuer and offer him rewards for his extraordinary courage.

Rav Kook then poses a penetrating question: What is the hero thinking as he receives their praise and gifts?

The true hero is hardly preoccupied with the recognition he might receive. His heart

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is overflowing with joy because the city and its inhabitants have been saved. His deepest fulfillment lies not in the reward but in the good he has accomplished and the lives he has preserved.

The same is true of someone who serves God with sincerity and wholehearted devotion. The reward pales in comparison with the profound satisfaction of doing what is truly good and knowing that one's actions have fulfilled a higher purpose. The good itself is the source of fulfillment.

This is the spiritual ideal expressed in Antigonus's teaching: to serve God not for what we might receive, but because we love Him and delight in doing His will (*Musar Avicha*, ch. 2, sec. 4).

PASSIONATE LOVE

The Rambam describes this ideal of divine service in *Hilchot Teshuvah* (10:2-3), where he portrays the love a Jew should cultivate for the Almighty as an intense, passionate attachment. To convey its depth, he compares it to the consuming love of a person who is so captivated by another that his thoughts continually return to the beloved.

The biblical book that most vividly expresses this kind of love, the Rambam explains, is *Shir HaShirim*, which portrays the passionate relationship between lovers. He also points to Abraham as an outstanding example of someone who discovered God and devoted himself to making that relationship known to others.

In more recent generations, one of the most remarkable Torah leaders to embody this passionate love of God was Rav Kook. His life and teachings offer a vivid illustration of what it means to serve God not for reward, but out of an overwhelming love that gives meaning to

everything else.

UNQUENCHABLE LOVE

Love of the Creator was one of Rav Kook's defining spiritual qualities and a foundational theme of his thought. The words of the *She-ma*, commanding us to love God with all our heart, soul, and might, were not merely an ideal he taught; they were a reality he sought to embody in his life.

His close disciple, Rav Yaakov Moshe Char-

lop, recounted a remarkable incident from the summer of 1921, when Rav Kook was on vacation. Rav Charlop came to visit him, and the two spent much of the night discussing Torah.

The following morning, Rav Charlop noticed something unusual. Rav Kook departed from his customary practice of avoiding other activities before prayer

and approached the owner of the hostel. He began discussing practical methods for growing plants and fruit trees in the surrounding area. The conversation continued until Rav Kook was finally able to turn to his morning prayers.

Surprised by this departure from his usual routine, Rav Charlop asked him for an explanation.

"On this particular morning," Rav Kook



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replied, “a fierce thirst for God was stirring in my heart, to the extent that I feared my soul would depart from my body during prayer. I had to reduce the intensity of these sacred emotions by speaking and thinking about practical matters before entering prayer.” (*Who Was Rav Kook*, Rabbi Dov Kidron, 2024, p. 52)

The account offers a striking glimpse into Rav Kook’s inner world. His challenge was not to awaken a desire for God, but to contain a longing so intense that he feared it might overwhelm him.

For Rav Kook, this love was not an abstract philosophical concept. It was a living force that shaped his daily experience.

HOW RAV KOOK’S PRAYER INSPIRED HIS DISCIPLES

Rav Kook’s passionate love of God was evident not only in his personal life but also in the profound effect he had on those who encountered him. Two particularly revealing accounts concern Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop and Rabbi David Cohen, known as the Nazir, both of whom became among his most devoted disciples.

During the First World War, the Nazir traveled to meet Rav Kook. Already a distinguished Torah scholar with extensive philosophical knowledge, he was searching for a teacher who could guide him in his intellectual and spiritual development. He discussed various philosophical questions with Rav Kook, yet left their conversation feeling that he had not quite found what he was seeking. That night, he retired with the sense that his “life was hanging in the balance,” as he later described it.

Early the next morning, the Nazir awoke to the sound of Rav Kook chanting the biblical passages concerning the Binding of Isaac

(*Akeidat Yitzchak*), recited as part of the preparatory order of sacrifices before Shacharit. The experience transformed him. Hearing Rav Kook’s prayer, he recognized the spiritual master he had been searching for and resolved to become his disciple.

That decision would shape the Nazir’s life and work. He devoted himself to editing Rav Kook’s writings, including *Orot HaKodesh*, and postponed his own literary ambitions. His planned work, *Kol HaNevu’ah*, remained unfinished.

Rav Charlop’s experience was strikingly similar. He first encountered Rav Kook in Jaffa on Shavuot and spent the night listening to his Torah discussions and lectures. Yet what captivated him most was hearing Rav Kook recite *Akdamut* during the Shacharit service.

In both cases, it was not merely Rav Kook’s intellectual brilliance or the content of his teachings that won over these exceptional young scholars. It was the palpable intensity of his prayer - the sense that his relationship with God was immediate, profound, and alive.

Their experiences suggest that prayer can communicate something that intellectual discussion alone cannot: the reality of a love that animates the whole person.

THE SOUL’S NATURAL LONGING FOR GOD

If love of God is so central to spiritual life, how does this love emerge? And what role does prayer play in expressing it?

For Rav Kook, the longing for God is not simply an emotion that a person must manufacture at a designated time. It is rooted in the soul itself. Prayer gives expression to a yearning that is already present, even when it remains hidden beneath the concerns of everyday life.

Rav Kook develops this idea through his interpretation of Isaac’s prayer in the field:

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשָׂנִיחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְפָנוֹת עָרֶב

“Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening” (Genesis 24:63).

The meaning of the Hebrew word *lasuach* is debated among biblical commentators. Rashbam understands it as referring to vegetation, connecting the word to the idea of plants or shrubs. According to this interpretation, Isaac went out to attend to his fields and orchards.

Rashi, by contrast, connects *lasuach* with *sichah*, meaning speech or conversation. On this reading, Isaac went out to meditate or converse in prayer, establishing the precedent for the afternoon prayer, Minchah.

Why does the Torah use this unusual word rather than a more familiar term for prayer? And is there particular significance to the fact that Isaac went out into the field toward evening?

THE SOUL'S INNER PRAYER

Rav Kook often reexamines familiar concepts to reveal their deeper spiritual dimensions. His understanding of prayer is a striking example:

“The soul is always praying. It constantly seeks to fly away to its Beloved.”

Prayer, in this sense, is not limited to the formal words recited at prescribed times. It is the soul's continual yearning for its source, an inward movement toward God that persists even when a person is occupied with ordinary affairs.

The prayers we recite are the outward expression of this deeper, ongoing movement. To pray meaningfully is therefore to become aware of the soul's underlying longing and give voice to it.

The word *lasuach* offers an additional insight. If the word evokes both prayer and vegetation, the Torah may be suggesting a connection between spiritual life and the

natural growth of plants. Just as a tree sends out branches and blossoms in accordance with its nature, the soul naturally reaches toward God. Prayer nourishes this inner life, allowing the soul's spiritual capacities to grow and flourish.

This perspective also sheds light on the timing of Isaac's prayer. The late afternoon, as the working day draws to a close, can provide an opportunity to step back from practical concerns and turn inward. As the demands of the day recede, a person can become more attentive to the soul's deeper aspirations.

Isaac's prayer thus becomes an illustration of a broader principle: spiritual longing is not an artificial addition to life, but a natural movement of the soul that can emerge with particular clarity when we make room for it. (*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 56–57; adapted from *Ein Ayah*, vol. I, p. 109.)

THE NATURAL LOVE OF A CHILD

If the soul's longing for God is natural, we might expect to find traces of it even in the youngest children, before they have acquired extensive knowledge or developed sophisticated theological ideas. Rav Kook explores this possibility through a discussion in the Talmud.

The Talmud (Berachot 48a) teaches that a child who knows to Whom a blessing is being recited may be included in a *zimmin*, the communal invitation to recite Birkat HaMazon. This raises an interesting question: How can a minor, who is not yet obligated in the relevant commandments, participate in fulfilling this communal religious obligation?

Rav Kook offers a penetrating explanation. Understanding God is not a matter of intellectual knowledge alone. Each person's conception of the Divine is shaped by his or her intellectual capacity, education, and depth of

learning. Yet beneath these differences lies a more fundamental awareness: a natural belief in God that can be present even in a young child.

From this perspective, a child who knows to Whom a blessing is addressed possesses an essential foundation of religious awareness. Although the child may lack the knowledge and sophistication of an adult scholar, the underlying recognition of God connects them both. The child's inclusion in a *zimmin* can thus be understood as reflecting this shared foundation of faith.

Rav Kook's interpretation highlights an important distinction: intellectual understanding of God develops over time, but the soul's basic orientation toward the Divine need not depend entirely on intellectual maturity. (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, ch. 7, sec. 26.)

A CHASSIDIC TEACHING:

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM A CHILD

A similar idea appears in a teaching attributed to the Maggid of Mezeritch, the celebrated disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. He taught that there are three qualities we should learn from a child.

First, a child is rarely content to remain idle. We, too, should fill our lives with purposeful activity.

Second, a child can be happy without any

particular reason. Adults, who often make their happiness dependent on external circumstances, can learn from this simple capacity for contentment.

Third, a baby cries persistently until the mother responds. From this, we can learn about the instinctive persistence with which a person turns to God in prayer, continuing to call out until the prayer is answered.

These three qualities - activity, contentment, and persistent yearning - offer different lessons. The third, in particular, returns us to Rav Kook's understanding of prayer. A child instinctively recognizes dependence on someone beyond itself, turning toward a source of protection and care. In a similar way, prayer emerges from the recognition that we are not entirely self-sufficient and that our deepest needs lead us beyond ourselves.

The child's cry is not the product of philosophical reflection. It is an immediate expression of need and relationship. In this respect, it offers a powerful image of the soul's natural turn toward God. ■



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