



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Editor, Torah Tidbits

Judging Favorably

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (1:6)

**“Yehoshua ben Perachya says:
...judge everyone favorably.”
(Avot 1:6)**

Rav Kook felt a deep affinity for the teachings of the Chassidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. It is reported that Rav Kook once said that his soul contained the light of Rebbe Nachman. In this spirit, let us explore a teaching of Rebbe Nachman that undoubtedly influenced Rav Kook’s approach to his fellow Jews.

JUDGING OTHERS AND ONESELF COMPASSIONATELY

Judging others compassionately and favorably, even those who appear guilty of sin, is a central ethos of the Chassidic tradition. One of its most exquisite expressions appears in the writings of Rebbe Nachman.

In a celebrated lesson in *Likutei Moharan* (282), Rebbe Nachman cites a verse from Psalms: “Just a bit more and there will be no wicked one; you will contemplate his place and he will not be there” (Psalms 37:10).

Rebbe Nachman explains that this verse teaches us to look for the good in others.

Even when someone appears to have no redeeming qualities, we must search further. We will surely discover some element of goodness that affirms the person’s worth. This point of goodness is what the verse means when it says, “there will be no wicked one.” “You will contemplate his place”—that is, your previous negative perception of him—“and he will not be there.” By judging

the person favorably, you have already transformed your perception of him.

Rebbe Nachman adds another beautiful dimension to this teaching: we must view ourselves in the same way. Rather than falling into despair over our shortcomings, we should seek out the positive elements within ourselves and judge ourselves favorably on that basis. Such an attitude

brings us the joy necessary to serve God.

RECOGNIZING THE *SEGULAH* IN OTHERS

Rav Kook highlighted a concept first articulated in the Torah in the lead-up to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. God describes the Jewish people as an *Am Segulah*, His treasured people (Shemot 19:5). This suggests a quality intrinsic to every Jew, irrespective of personal choices. We



Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook zt"l

are born precious, and this distinctive inner purity remains with us throughout our lives. (*Igrot HaRa'aya*, p. 186)

Rav Kook drew on this concept of *segulah* to explain his support for the Zionist pioneers (*chalutzim*), even though many were nonreligious or even antireligious. He argued that their love for the Land and their willingness to sacrifice for the Jewish nation were clear expressions of their *segulah* qualities coming to life. Indeed, Rav Kook went further, maintaining that the *segulah* dimension of Judaism is more potent than an individual's decision to observe mitzvot.

THE WAY OF A JEW

Rav Kook reminds us of a Talmudic teaching (Shavuot 30a) based on the Torah's command, "Judge with righteousness" (Vayikra 19:15). One interpretation applies this verse to court proceedings, requiring judges to treat both sides fairly. The Talmud also understands it as a broader directive: we should give others the benefit of the doubt and interpret situations in the most favorable light.

According to Rav Kook, this is the way of a Jew who seeks to live ethically and help establish a peaceful, harmonious community. (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, Chapter 3, piska #24)

JUDGING RABBIS FAVORABLY

Rav Kook comments on a Talmudic passage that emphasizes the importance of judging Torah scholars favorably. The Talmud states: "If one sees a learned person sin at night, one should assume that this person has done teshuvah by the time morning has come" (Berachot 19a). The obligation to judge favorably is especially relevant when we know someone to be



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In the same section, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi declares:

"Whoever makes derogatory statements about Torah scholars after their death will be cast into Gehinnom" (Berachot 19a).

Rav Kook cites the Rambam, who codifies the gravity of denigrating rabbinic authority in his *Mishneh Torah*. Such a sin is particularly difficult to repair. By belittling Torah scholars, one effectively removes potential teachers and guides from one's life. Without rabbinic figures to inspire religious growth, the path toward repentance and spiritual progress becomes much harder.

Rav Kook makes a related point: we may encounter a teaching in the writings of a sage who has passed away that seems defective or unconvincing. To give that sage the benefit of the doubt is to remain open to the possibility that the teaching contains a truth we have yet to grasp. Through deeper analysis and patient reflection, we may come to recognize its validity. (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, vol. 1, pp. 94–95)

JUDGING FAVORABLY IN THE LAND

The Talmud (Makot 7a) describes a striking case involving a person convicted by a court outside the Land of Israel who escapes and makes his way into the Land.

The question is whether his case should be reopened and he should be tried again.

At first glance, there would seem to be no reason for a retrial: he was tried, found guilty, and even attempted to evade his punishment. Yet the Talmud distinguishes between the two directions of travel. If someone convicted in the Land of Israel escapes abroad, his sentence stands. However, if someone convicted outside the Land enters Israel, “due to the merit of Eretz Yisrael,” he receives a new trial. The Rambam codifies this ruling as standard practice (*Hilchot Sanhedrin* 13:8).

Remarkably, the Land of Israel itself is associated with a willingness to reconsider a person’s case and allow another opportunity for judgment. In Rav Kook’s thought, there is a broader social imperative to view one another compassionately. When building a nation and sharing a homeland, it becomes all the more important to give our fellow Jews the benefit of the doubt.

NO HATE

Rav Kook cites the Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot* 6:5), who emphasizes that one violates the prohibition against hating another Jew simply by harboring enmity in one’s heart. No outward action is necessary.

Thus, Rav Kook explained that when people who needed his help had acted disrespectfully toward him, he made an even greater effort to attend to their needs. He wanted to ensure that he did not transgress the prohibition against “hating another Jew in one’s heart.” Rav Kook would often say: “I am not concerned that I failed to fulfill the dictum of hating someone I should have hated; rather, I am concerned lest I fail to properly love a person as I am

commanded to love them.” (*Heichal HaAvava*, Cohen, p. 248)

MOSHE HELD ACCOUNTABLE

Whom does the Talmud cite as a Torah figure who transgressed by judging others too harshly? Strikingly, it is Moshe, and the incident concerns his words to God at the burning bush.

When God tells Moshe that he will lead His people out of Egypt, Moshe responds that “they will not believe me.” God is angered by Moshe’s lack of faith in the people. The famed Talmudic sage Reish Lakish identifies this as an example of *choshed be’kesharim*—“suspecting [sin] of one who is upstanding.” It is for this reason that Moshe’s hand becomes leprous. The episode illustrates the consequences of judging and speaking negatively about others (Shabbat 97a).

The Talmud thus issues a stark warning about the seriousness of casting negative judgments on others.

FINDING ONLY THE GOOD

The following inspiring anecdotes capture Rav Kook’s loving heart and his remarkable desire to see the good in others.

Rav Kook traveled to Rechovot to be present for the grape harvest. During his stay, he learned that some young farmers regularly lit bonfires on Friday nights and gathered around them. Rav Kook publicly urged them to refrain from violating Shabbat. The young people were unhappy with his admonition.

A large group decided to confront Rav Kook and voice their opposition. They resolved to walk to the home where he was staying and express their anger over his pronouncement.

Rav Kook was sitting on the *mirpeset* (balcony), napping, when he heard the group approaching. Seeing a large group of young Jews walking together moved him deeply. With his heart filled with love, he rose to his feet, calling out to them with fervent words of praise and blessing. (*Heichal HaAhava*, Avraham Cohen, p. 24).

* * *

Following a particularly unpleasant incident in which some of Rav Kook's most radical adversaries harshly criticized and maligned him, several of his close students asked how he could endure such attacks without becoming despondent or retaliating. Rav Kook explained his perspective in the following exquisite way:

"I know in my heart, and in all honesty, that the position of Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem is far beyond what I deserve. I am unworthy of this title and honor. Who am I to hold this position when so many other scholars and righteous individuals grace this Holy City?"

"I hold this position like someone wearing shoes that are much too large." Rav Kook invoked the law of *chalitzah*, according to which a shoe that is too large can be made suitable for use by filling it with straw or other materials so that it fits securely enough to walk in.

The Rav continued: "When someone walks in such a shoe, they will inevitably feel some of its sharp edges and protrusions. Yet this is what makes the shoe fit.

So too, the rabbinate of Jerusalem is like a shoe far too large for my foot. Those who malign and vilify me, are in effect, helping my foot fit the shoe through their sharp and pointed edges. In this way, the rabbinate of Jerusalem became a better fit for me". (Ibid.)

THE WHOLE PERSON

Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook, Rav Kook's eminent son, often quoted an insight of the Gerrer Rebbe on the Mishnah in Avot concerning judging others favorably. The Mishnah uses the expression *kol ha'adam* - "the whole person."

When we consider the whole person and remain sensitive to the many factors that shape someone's life - their background, upbringing, and personal challenges - we become more inclined to find merit in them and judge them compassionately. (*Sichat Avot*, p. 70; cited in *Sichot HaRav Zvi Yehuda*, Shemot, p. 88) ■



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