

RABBI AARON GOLDSCHEIDER
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Personal Growth and Communal Responsibility

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (1:13)

"He [Hillel] used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, then when?" *(Avot 1:13)*

The Rambam explains that this Mishnah speaks to the responsibility each person bears for their own spiritual growth: "If I will not motivate my soul to attain personal virtues, who will motivate it instead?" (*Rambam's Commentary to Avot*)

Self-improvement is one of the central themes of *Pirkei Avot*. Hillel's dictum highlights two essential dimensions of Jewish life: the pursuit of personal spiritual growth and the responsibility to contribute to the spiritual advancement and success of the wider community.

"IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF..."

Rav Kook places great emphasis on the need for each person - each unique soul - to pursue their own path and develop their distinctive talents and God-given gifts.

One of his celebrated teachings bears a title closely echoing Hillel's words: *Bakashat HaAni HaAtzmi*—"The Search for My True Self" (*Orot HaKodesh*, vol. 3, p. 140). In this profound teaching, Rav Kook laments the loss of self that occurs when a person is swept along by the currents of surrounding culture and the pressures of conformity, never discovering their own voice or expressing their unique potential.

Kabbalistic teachings often use the term *kelipah*, meaning "shell," to describe an outer layer that conceals the inner essence. The shell must be removed to reveal what lies beneath.

Rav Kook connects this idea to the first sin in human history, when Adam ate from the forbidden fruit. Influenced by the serpent, Adam was persuaded to act against his own best interests and true nature. When God called out to him, *Ayekah*—"Where are you?"—the question carried a deeper meaning: How did you allow yourself to be persuaded to act in a way so contrary to your true essence?

Sin can often begin when we lose sight of who we truly are.

DISCOVERING YOUR PERSONAL PATH

Rav Kook offers a striking interpretation of an exchange between two sages concerning the time devoted to prayer and Torah study (Shabbat 10a).

When Rava saw Rav Hamnuna praying at length, he criticized him: "You are abandoning eternal life"—Torah

study—"for transient life," referring to prayer. Rav Hamnuna responded, "The time for prayer is independent of the time for Torah."

Rav Kook explains that Torah study connects us to eternal truths and teaches us how to incorporate them into our lives. Prayer, by contrast, gives expression to our immediate needs and our personal relationship with God. From this perspective, Rava questions the prioritization of prayer over Torah study.


Rav Abraham Isaac Kook zt"l

Rav Kook, however, offers a deeper understanding of Rav Hamnuna's response. Each has its proper place, and a person must learn to recognize where their heart is calling them to invest greater time and devotion. Our inner inclinations can help reveal what will most deeply uplift our spirits and draw us closer to the Creator.

Some people are naturally drawn to the treasures of Torah study, which sustain both the individual and the community. At other times, however, a person may feel a powerful need to pour out their soul before Hashem. That need, Rav Kook suggests, may be the more pressing spiritual priority at that moment, even when compared with the lofty pursuit of Torah study.

The time devoted to Torah and prayer is therefore independent: each has its place. The challenge is to understand ourselves well enough to recognize when one requires greater attention than the other. (*Ein Ayah*, Shabbat 1:6)

PERSONALIZED TORAH STUDY

Rav Kook encourages every Jew to discover their own distinctive connection to Torah. He emphasizes the extraordinary diversity of Torah learning and the many paths through which its wisdom speaks to the different personalities that make up *Klal Yisrael*. Each person has a place within Torah that they must discover for themselves.

"We should all work in our field, in the area where we are most adept. This principle is especially true with regard to Torah study. Even though circumstances may make it difficult to adhere to the discipline that interests us, we should be resolute and not forgo that which cultivates our spirit." (*Orot HaTorah* 9:1; translated by Rav Chanan Morrison, *Orot HaTorah*, pp. 76–77)

Different areas of Torah naturally speak to different individuals. Some are drawn to the intricacies of halachic debate, while others find their spiritual inspiration in Aggadah or the hidden wisdom of mystical teachings. Rav Kook urges each student to pursue the path of learning that "cultivates



the spirit"—one that fosters contentment, spiritual depth, and religious growth.

He was concerned that people who feel compelled to pursue areas of Torah unsuited to their natural dispositions may become frustrated and disheartened. Indeed, he warns:

"Some people abandoned Judaism because, in the particular path they took in Torah study and spiritual growth, they betrayed their own disposition."

He illustrates this point with those whose interests lie in Aggadah but who devote themselves primarily to the legal analysis of Halacha. Rather than recognizing and developing their own strengths, they conform to prevailing expectations and immerse themselves in studies that do not resonate with their innate abilities. The result is a deep-seated resistance to the material.(*Orot HaTorah* 9:6)

Rav Kook's message is not to limit ourselves to what comes easily, but to recognize and cultivate the unique spiritual capacities through which we can grow most fully. Personal growth begins with self-knowledge and requires the courage to pursue a path that brings our deepest abilities to life.

"IF I AM ONLY FOR MYSELF…": BALANCING PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL SUCCESS

Hillel's dictum also challenges us to balance personal growth with our responsibility to the wider community and the Jewish people.

Rav Kook develops this idea in his commentary on a Talmudic discussion about the division of chapters at the beginning of Tehillim. Although Psalms 1 and 2 appear to be distinct chapters, the Talmud suggests that they should be regarded as a single unit (Berachot 9b).

For Rav Kook, this is more than a technical observation. The two chapters express complementary themes: the first focuses on the individual, while the second addresses the broader community. Their unity conveys an essential principle: personal growth cannot be separated from the destiny of the Jewish people.

As Rav Kook writes:

"The ideal perfection of a person can only be accomplished by focusing one's energy on improving one's own individual self as much as possible. Yet at the very same time a person should always keep in mind that one's own individual perfection will never be completed until the Jewish people have successfully reached national perfection. And from national perfection, a person must aspire to the perfection of all humanity."(*Ein Ayah*, Berachot 1, p. 47)

Personal development is indispensable, but it is not an end in itself. Our growth reaches its fullest expression when it contributes to the flourishing of the Jewish people and, ultimately, to the betterment of all humanity.

KLI YAKAR: WINGS AND FACES

The balance between personal spiritual growth and communal responsibility is beautifully expressed by the Kli Yakar in his interpretation of the Holy Ark and the *keruvim*.

The Ark, situated in the Holy of Holies, was adorned with two figures facing one another, their wings extending upward. The symbolism of their posture is significant. Their raised wings evoke the individual's aspiration to holiness and closeness to God through personal spiritual

devotion. Their faces turned toward one another, meanwhile, expressing the importance of directing that devotion outward, toward relationships with others and responsibility for the wider community.

The *keruvim* are also described as having both angelic and childlike qualities, evoking innocence and purity. Their symbolism suggests that spiritual wholeness requires both dimensions: striving for personal purity while contributing our unique talents to the growth and flourishing of the Jewish people.

True spiritual growth is therefore neither exclusively inward nor exclusively outward. It demands that we cultivate our own souls while using our gifts to strengthen the community of which we are a part. *(Kli Yakar, Shemot 25:18–20)*

Hillel's three questions thus form a unified vision of Jewish life. We must take responsibility for our own growth, recognize and develop the unique gifts with which we have been blessed, and ensure that our personal achievements serve a purpose beyond ourselves. The task is urgent: we must begin now, for both our own sake and the sake of the Jewish people and humanity as a whole. ■



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