

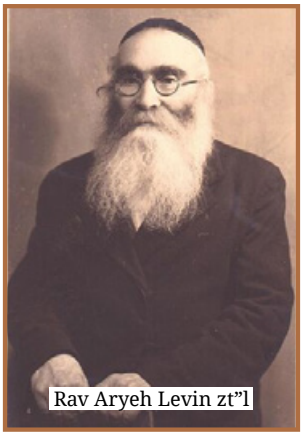
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Greeting Everyone With a Pleasant Countenance

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot 1:15

"Shammai says…greet everyone with a pleasant countenance." (Avot 1:15)

One of the rabbinic personalities who profoundly inspired Rav Kook was Rav Yisrael Salanter, the eminent founder of the Mussar Movement. Although Rav Kook never met him personally, when he heard of Rav Salanter's passing as a young man, he tore his garment and sat on the floor in mourning.


Rav Aryeh Levin zt"l

One of the defining features of the Mussar Movement was its emphasis on treating others with dignity, sensitivity, and genuine concern. In a tribute delivered on the fiftieth anniversary of Rav Salanter's passing, Rav Kook highlighted this important aspect of his legacy:

"The main thing that the current generation needs to know, especially now…that together with the deepening and fanning of the flames of the study of ethics, he undertook the task of publicly emphasizing social justice and the particular severity of commandments and obligations between man and his fellow, without which reverence and purity of one's traits have no foundation." (Cited in *Mussar Avicha*, Gerstein, appendix, p. 207)

In light of this teaching, we can suggest that even the manner in which we greet another person, including the warmth conveyed through our facial expressions, deserves our utmost attention.

The following story illustrates this principle:

On his way to shul for Kol Nidrei on Erev Yom Kippur, Rav Yisrael Salanter encountered a man whom he warmly greeted. The man, however, was so absorbed in the solemnity and awesomeness of the Day of Judgment that he failed to return the greeting.

Rav Yisrael turned to his disciple, Rav Itzele of Petersburg, and remarked, "Why must I suffer from his preoccupation with the Day of Judgment?" (*Visions of the Fathers*, Twerski, p. 60)

Rav Salanter was teaching that even our lack of warmth toward another person can be a moral failing. Regardless of our own preoccupations, feelings, or spiritual

pursuits, we must remain mindful of how we make others feel.

SHAMMAI'S INJUNCTION

Many commentaries explain that Shammai's instruction to greet others with a pleasant countenance is not merely about projecting a pleasant outward appearance. Rather, our demeanor should reflect a genuine and heartfelt appreciation for, and concern toward, our fellow human beings (see the commentary of the Rambam).

But how does one cultivate a more loving approach toward others, particularly when encountering people with whom we do not naturally identify or whom we may feel are undeserving of our friendship?

Rav Kook's writings offer four important insights:

1. HASHEM CREATES INDIVIDUALS

We must recognize that every person is created differently, with unique talents, inclinations, and predispositions. Why should we look negatively upon someone simply because he is different from us? Hashem has deliberately created each person as a unique individual, with his own place and purpose in this world.(*Pinkasei HaReiyah*, chelek alef, Pinkas 4, 49; cited in *Nelchah Ad HaRo'eh: Iyun B'Pirkei Avot*, p. 37)

2. ALL ARE NEEDED TO BUILD THE WORLD

Appreciating the diversity of human personalities is essential to building a world in which different skills, talents, and areas of expertise contribute to the betterment of humanity. When we recognize the value of this diversity, we become more appreciative of the contributions of others and learn to look upon them with a more generous eye.(*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, Chapter 9, #285; cited in *Nelchah Ad HaRo'eh*, p. 38)



3. PERSONAL SHORTCOMINGS

When we are conscious of our own shortcomings and failures, we become less inclined to focus on the faults of others. A person who lives with humility, recognizing that he is far from perfect and does not possess absolute truth, will naturally become more patient and tolerant of those around him. (Ibid., p. 43)

4. DIRECTING ONE'S HEART TO HEAVEN

We can never accurately evaluate the intentions or sincerity of another person's heart. The Talmud teaches:

"One who brings a substantial amount and one who brings a meager amount have equal merit as long as he directs his heart to Heaven." (*Berachot* 17a)

In other words, only Hashem can fully discern the sincerity of another person's intentions and the depth of his feelings. Recognizing this should make us less judgmental and more inclined to see the goodness in our fellow human beings.(*Ein Ayah*, Berachot 17a, piska #59)

RAV ARYEH'S WILL

The Tzaddik of Yerushalayim, Rav Aryeh Levin, left several written wills for his family, sharing some of the values and practices he cherished most and hoped would be carried forward by future generations.

In one of these writings, he stated:

"I was very careful to greet every person with a pleasant countenance until it became second-nature for me. I was also careful to be the first to greet every person who I met on the way."

Rav Aryeh's grandson, Rabbi David Levin, added that his grandfather would emphasize that this practice was something he had worked to perfect for more than forty years in order to acquire this precious *mida tova* (noble character trait). (*Derech Avot*, Steinberg, p. 78)

RUNNING THROUGH HIS VEINS

A student of Rav Aryeh Levin, Rav Yaakov Ginsberg, recalled the warmth and *sever panim yafot* (pleasant countenance) with which Rav Aryeh greeted the students each day at Etz Chaim Yeshiva.

Rav Aryeh would welcome the boys with a smile, making each one feel the warmth of his affection. Among the young students, it became common knowledge that when Rav Aryeh extended his hand and took a child's hand in his own, the child could feel a flow of compassion and love "that would pass through his veins and enter their veins."

The boys would make every effort to get close to Rav Aryeh, hoping to receive a warm caress and experience the comfort and kindness of a loving father figure. (Ibid., pp. 78–79)



A DANGEROUS EMBRACE

Perhaps we can now understand the Mishnah as a whole through the lens of Rav Kook's teachings. While it is certainly a noble *mida* to greet others warmly and treat them with kindness, even those whose commitments or perspectives differ significantly from our own, we must remain steadfast in our Torah values and spiritual convictions. We must be careful not to allow our desire to embrace others to lead us toward influences or perspectives that could undermine our spiritual lives. (*Pinkasei HaReiyah*, section 1, Pinkas 4, 33)

Our Mishnah opens with Shammai's directive to establish fixed times for Torah study and to actively engage in the performance of mitzvot. These deeply rooted commitments provide the spiritual foundation and strength necessary to interact positively and warmly with all those we encounter.

When our lives are anchored in Torah and strengthened by genuine spiritual devotion, we can approach others with kindness, sensitivity, and an open heart without compromising our own values.

That is the balance Shammai asks us to achieve: to remain firmly committed to Torah and fully committed to our own ideal while greeting every person with a pleasant countenance. (See *Nelchah Ad HaRo'eh: Iyun B'Pirkei Avot*, Slav, pp. 43–45) ■



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