



## *Insights into Pirke Avot*

by

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### *Perek Alef, Mishnah Yud-Bet*

**1:12 Hillel and Shammai received from them. Hillel says, be disciples of Aharon. Love peace and pursue peace, love people and bring them close to Torah.**

#### *Hillel's Ways*

As we have seen, the precepts recorded in *Avot* reflect the essence of the Sage who taught them, and the issues he found to be of particular relevance for his generation. *Shalom*, peace and harmony among men, was an especially appropriate topic for Hillel the Elder, for whom the principles of humility and forgoing one's own honor and personal concerns for the sake of peace and cordial relationships were paramount.

Our Sages teach us about the far-reaching impact of this special trait of Hillel's. "Why did the House of Hillel merit that halachic rulings are decided in keeping with their teachings? Because they were easygoing and tolerant, and they would cite their own teachings as well as those of the House of Shammai. Not only that, they would cite the teachings of the House of Shammai [even] before their own" (*Eruvin* 13b).

The *Gemara* records several instances where Hillel and Shammai disagreed on questions of *halachah*. Even so, these disputes were never allowed to deteriorate into personal conflicts between the two groups. While Hillel's rulings were given precedence, he preserved the honor of the house of Shammai, and dealt with them in a respectful manner.

Humility is the key to peaceful relationships. The humble individual negates himself and is devoid of arrogance. Happy with his lot, he is not jealous of others. His lack of envy makes room for the love which promotes peace and brotherhood.



Through Hillel's humility and love of his fellowmen, he merited to follow in the footsteps of Aharon, and **bring** others **close to Torah**. Even non-Jews were attracted by his gentle, patient manner. Our Sages relate the story of three non-Jews who sought to convert to Judaism on unrealistic terms. Through Hillel's sensitive, perceptive handling they recognized their errors and converted wholeheartedly. When they met, they concurred that it was "Hillel's humility which brought us to shelter under the Wings of the Divine Presence" (*Shabbat* 31a).

### ***At Peace***

Hillel, the paragon of humility and peace, advises us to be **disciples of Aharon**. What do we know about Aharon? "Aharon loved peace and pursued peace and made peace between man and his fellow man" (*Sanhedrin* 6b). He had a boundless love for his fellow beings and helped **bring them close to Torah**. He was at **peace** with those around him, helping and encouraging them and in general, trying to raise their spirits.

Aharon's truly noble approach to human relationships required great humility. A sincerely humble individual is free of jealousy and desire, so he never has any cause for argument. In most cases, it is envy which gives birth to controversy. The man who is consumed with jealous spite over another's happiness or good fortune will always find ways to stir up a quarrel. The Al-mighty Himself testified that Aharon was far removed from such pettiness.

As we discussed earlier (1:1), when Hashem instructed Moshe to confront Pharaoh and liberate the Jews from Egypt, his response was startling. He refused outright, saying, "Please, Hashem, send by the hand of whom You will send" – in other words, someone other than himself (*Shmot* 4:13). Rashi explains: "By the hand of he whom You are accustomed to send, and that is Aharon," who had prophesied to the enslaved nation for eighty years (*Shmot Rabbah* 3:16). Moshe was afraid that his distinguished elder brother would feel slighted if Moshe were to replace him as the leader of the people and Hashem's chosen messenger.

Hashem, Who alone truly knows man's hidden thoughts and emotions, assured Moshe that this was not so. "He is coming out to greet you, and when he sees you he will rejoice in his heart" (*Shmot* 4:14). Not only would Aharon not have any latent negativity, he would do even better. He would be happy over his younger brother's success, and his pleasure would not be a superficial convention. It would be sincere and heartfelt – "he will rejoice in his heart," where it really counts.

Many, even most, of us are careful to respond properly when we hear a friend's good news. "I'm so happy for you," we say. "It's just wonderful that you got that



great job / *shidduch* / raise.” But our mouths say one thing, while we think and feel quite another. “Why him?” our inner self fumes. “Does he deserve it? Is he any better than me?”

Aharon was different, the very antithesis of this meanness of spirit. He had no desire for what was not his, so he could rejoice sincerely in another’s good fortune. Our Sages cite the verse, “‘When he sees you he will rejoice in his heart.’ The heart that rejoiced in his brother’s glory will wear the *Urim V’Tumim*” (*Shmot Rabbah* 3:17). Because Aharon’s heart was so exceptionally pure and untainted, he would merit covering it with the Breastplate. Because he was happy when his younger brother attained a higher level of prophecy than his own, he would be granted the prophecy transmitted through the *Urim V’Tumim*. This was a man who could love peace, because he honestly had nothing to fight about. He accepted G-d’s distribution methods as implicitly just, leaving no room for argument.

Aharon had perfect faith that “no person touches what is set aside for his fellowman... even by a hair’s breadth” (*Yoma* 38b). What is ours will remain ours, and what belongs to our fellowman will remain his. No one can take away our status or opportunities or money or life’s partner, if they are indeed truly destined for us. Everything is from Hashem, and He knows exactly what we need and deserve. Envy, ill will, and cutthroat competition stem from a lack of faith, with hatred and controversy as the inevitable result.

## ***Reaching Out***

**Love peace and pursue peace, love people and bring them close to Torah.**

The *Tanna* discusses two important qualities in which Aharon excelled: love of peace and love of his fellowmen, which he expressed by helping them come close to Torah. The two are closely connected, as we learn from our Sages’ description of Aharon’s tactics.

“When Aharon encountered a wicked person, he would greet him with ‘*shalom*.’ The following day, when that man wanted to commit a sin, he would say [to himself], ‘Woe to me, how will I be able to face Aharon? I am ashamed, now that he greeted me with *shalom*.’ And so it happened that this man restrained himself from sin.” By the very act of dealing amicably with others, Aharon inspired them to repent. Because he **loved people**, truly and sincerely, he was able to **bring them close to Torah**.

Aharon also found no effort too difficult or demeaning in his pursuit of **peace**: “[When] two people quarreled, Aharon went and sat by one of them and told him, ‘My son, look what your friend said [about you]: I am embarrassed of him, because I



sinned against him.’ And he sat by him until he removed the envy from his heart. And [then] Aharon went and sat by the other one and said, ‘Look at what your friend says: Woe to me, how can I lift my eyes and look at my friend? I am embarrassed of him because I am the one who sinned against him.’ And he sat by him until he removed the jealousy from his heart. And when [the two friends] met, they embraced and kissed one another. This is why it says (*Bamidbar* 20:29), ‘And they mourned Aharon for thirty days, the entire house of Israel’ (*Avot D’Rabbi Natan* 12:3).

### ***Aharon’s Truth***

In describing Aharon’s activities, the Sages cite the verse, “The Torah of truth was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips, with peace and fairness he walked with Me, and turned many away from sin” (*Malachi* 2:6). Because Aharon “walked with peace and fairness,” he “turned many away from sin” with his loving, caring ways.

However, can we really say that the “Torah of truth was in his mouth?” While it was permitted for him to deviate from a strict recounting of the truth for the sake of peace (see *Yevamot* 65b), bottom line, Aharon’s tales of the other party’s regret and distress were his own invention. And yet, our Sages specifically tell us that he was truthful, because on a profound level, his words were in fact the truth. Aharon looked into the hearts of his fellowmen and saw the inner G-dly soul that is the core of every Jew. He knew that the two Jews who had quarreled truly did love each other, and that their spat did not reflect their deepest feelings. “With peace and fairness he walked with Me,” by addressing the G-dly soul of his fellow men. He walked “with Me,” recognizing that this G-dly soul was the individual’s true essence, and that the anger and controversy were only superficial.

In his dealings with sinners, Aharon’s methods also related to the G-dly soul in every Jew. Deep down, even the most wayward of Jews has the capacity to be righteous and pure. With the right guidance and encouragement, his true nature will be revealed. We may say that this is how Aharon **loved peace and pursued peace**. Because he loved peace and spiritual perfection, he sought to bring out these qualities, buried in the hearts of all his Jewish brethren.

Nonetheless, Aharon’s behavior raises a certain question (see *Binyan Yehoshua* on *Avot D’Rabbi Natan* 12:3). “*Shalom*” is one of the Names of Hashem, and it is forbidden to use it in greeting a wicked person, as we learn from the verse “There is no *shalom*, said Hashem to the wicked” (*Yeshayahu* 48:22; see *Zohar*, vol. I p. 171b and vol. II p. 23b). How, then, could Aharon have greeted sinners with the word *shalom*?



Aharon's greeting was permitted, because it was far more than a simple "hello." It was his way of forging a personal connection with those he addressed, knowing that his warm greeting would prevent them from sinning. Sin builds barriers around the transgressor's heart and soul, separating him from the Al-mighty, as we learn from the verse "For your sins divide between you and your G-d" (*Yeshayahu* 59:2). Aharon broke through these barriers and rekindled the holy spark in the sinner's soul, making his greeting of *shalom*, even to those who appeared to be wicked, beneficial and permissible.

We find proof of the concept of the righteous inner spark in a Jew's G-dly soul in *halachah* as well. The Rambam rules that if a husband is obligated by a *bet din* to grant his wife a divorce and he refuses, the *bet din* is permitted to administer lashes until he says that he is willing to grant the divorce. Interestingly, this is not considered coercion, which would invalidate the divorce. The Rambam explains why this is so. "Coercion" means forcing another party to act against his will. However, inducing a Jew to do what is right is not coercion, because every Jew's G-dly soul longs to obey Hashem and do what is right. Once the barriers erected around this soul by sin are set aside, even if it takes a good, hard push to dislodge them, his inner goodness can rise to the fore (*Hilchot Gerushin* 2:2).

With this in mind, we can understand why at Moshe's death, "the house of Israel" mourned him for thirty days (*Bamidbar* 34:8), but upon Aharon's passing, the "entire house of Israel" mourned for thirty days (*Bamidbar* 25:29). Every Jew, man and woman, without exception, mourned the loss of Aharon. Why was the mourning for Aharon universal, more so than for Moshe, the incomparable leader and prophet? Our Sages tell us that it was because Aharon "judged with absolute truth," while Moshe "judged with truth" (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 12:4).

### ***What does this mean?***

Moshe taught the nation with straightforward, uncompromising *halachah*. He dealt in truth: a sinner was a sinner, who was explicitly rebuked and instructed to correct his ways, regardless of any discomfort or embarrassment. Aharon, as we know, had a different approach to sinners. Rather than addressing their transgressions openly, he spoke to "the absolute truth," to the inner soul which was their true essence. He appealed to the soul's desire to do good, not to the sins surrounding it. As a result, there was not a single Jew who did not love him and mourn his death.

Aharon's methods of absolute truth teach us an important principle in educating our children and students. If we tell them that they are bad they will take our word for it, turning our criticism into a self-fulfilling prophesy. If we instead point out that their



bad behavior is unworthy of them, and that they are too smart and too good for such nonsense, that will be the message they absorb and act upon.

## *Twofold Love*

The *Tanna* tells us that Aharon **loved peace and pursued peace**. At first glance, this wording might seem redundant, but as we now see, it is not. Aharon could easily have decided that it was enough for him to speak to a single party in an argument; if one of them surrendered his anger and was ready to reconcile, that would suffice to break the ice and bring the two together. This alone would have qualified him as one who **loved peace**. But Aharon not only **loved peace**, he **pursued** it as well, taking the trouble to seek out the second party and appease him as well, ensuring a successful outcome.

In addition, we may say that Aharon **loved peace** within himself – he was free of malice and spite. Even more, he also **pursued peace** for his fellow Jews. Aharon's **peace** and **love** were not merely theoretical concepts, comfortably confined to talk about the importance of these fine principles. He took practical, active measures to enhance peace and love among his people.

## *Aharon's Disciples?*

**Love people and bring them close to Torah.**

How do our own peacemaking methods measure up to Aharon's?

Perhaps we meet an individual who is widely known to be a sinner. We can hardly bear to look at him, wicked being that he is. We bestow an unmistakably disapproving scowl and stalk off, effectively pushing him that much further away from Torah. Aharon, on the other hand, succeeded in bringing about a change of heart even in hardened sinners simply because he really did love them: his concern for their wellbeing was sincere. Had his words been tinged by hypocrisy, they would have been meaningless. It was only because the people saw that he loved and cared for them that they were moved. If Aharon considered them his friends, how could they disappoint him by sinning? Surely a personal friend of Aharon's could not sink so low.

It is also worth noting that Aharon's peacemaking efforts were not confined to prominent public figures. He loved even the simple, ordinary members of the nation, as we learn from the wording of the *mishnah*: ***ehov et haberiyot, love people***. *Beriyot* is an inclusive term, encompassing all of mankind, not only selected,



avored groups or individuals. At times, we encounter avowed peace lovers who expend great effort in reconciling sparring parties. However, these parties all happen to be powerful and prominent, making it a feather in an ambitious cap to be part of their entourage, even in the minor role of peacemaker. This is not love and pursuit of peace, or love of one's fellows – it is carefully disguised love of self. Sincere fellowship and love of peace means reaching out to the humble and unknown, helping *them* achieve peace and tranquility in their relationships with those around them.

## *The Greatest Love*

**Love people and bring them close to Torah.**

Aharon's behavior stemmed from his **love** of mankind. However, what does it actually mean to love others? What form does this love take? It is often thought that the way to express love is by showering the object of our affections with material gifts and assets. We love, so we give. But what guarantee have we that we are indeed acting for the other party's benefit? Can we be sure that the money or the gift will be well used? Perhaps they will in fact be misused, and cause our loved one more harm than good. If we truly love someone, the best thing we can do for him is to **bring him close to Torah**, as Aharon did.

Many wonderful Jews devote themselves to helping others in countless ways, arranging for financial aid, interest-free loans, medical referrals, and much more. However, this is not enough. We must seek to benefit our brethren spiritually as well, making sure that they have Torah, the ultimate good: "there is no good other than Torah" (*Berachot* 5a). Aharon understood that the loftiest form of love for another is helping him realize his maximum spiritual potential. The only way to achieve this goal is through Torah.

Loving our fellowmen and **bringing them close to Torah** are closely related. Love for others is one of the "forty-eight means through which Torah is acquired" (*Avot* 6:6). Why is loving others a condition for success in Torah study?

Our Sages teach us that "One who studies Torah in order to teach is given the ability to study and to teach" (*Avot* 4:5). The ultimate purpose of Torah study is to spread knowledge of Hashem's Word to all Jews. If our Torah study is motivated by this goal, we will be granted the privilege of achieving it. However, we cannot teach Torah if we lack proper appreciation of the inherent worth of every individual Jew. If we suffer from a lack of love for the Jewish people, we will not be able to teach them Torah.





A tragic illustration of the crucial role of loving respect for our brethren is the story of Rabbi Akiva's students. Our Sages tell us that the great *Tanna* Rabbi Akiva had twenty-four thousand students, great scholars in their own right, who were to have transmitted the Torah to future generations. They all died in their prime within a few weeks, "because they did not treat each other with respect" (*Yevamot* 62b). The entire Oral Tradition, in our possession to this very day, was passed on by only *five* surviving students of Rabbi Akiva. Can we imagine what we could have gained had those twenty-four thousand giants of Torah lived to study more and teach more?

The message of the *mishnah* is clear. Transmission of Torah, the greatest benefit we can bestow on our fellowmen, is only possible in a setting of love and respect. Aharon, through his abiding love for all his fellow Jews, succeeded in opening their hearts to Torah.

### *Hand in Hand*

Hillel tells us to learn from the refined and pious ways of Aharon.

Aharon **loved** peace; he was suffused with total faith in the Al-mighty, which freed him of jealousy and conflict.

He **pursued peace**, teaching others to let go of their little squabbles and live in friendship and harmony. Often, the roots of a seething, burning fight are so petty or so obscure that they are quickly forgotten, while the feud lives on for its own sake.

He **loved people**. **People** is a very broad term, big enough to encompass all of our fellow Jews without exception: Ashekenazi and Sephardi and Yemenite, *hassid* and *mitnaged*. These divisions and sub-divisions are not Torah concepts. We should love all of Israel and express this **love** as Aharon did, helping others achieve ultimate good by **bringing them close to Torah**.

The *Tanna* teaches us a fundamental principle. Torah and **peace** walk hand-in-hand, and they are inseparable. As we learn from the untimely end of Rabbi Akiva's students, a lack of peace among Jews has catastrophic results. When Torah scholars live in peace and friendship, Torah flourishes and the entire world benefits. "Torah scholars increase peace in the world" (*Berachot* 64a). Torah *is* peace, and there can be no peace without it. If we are to follow Aharon's example, we need Torah. Through Torah we will achieve faith, acceptance, inner tranquility, harmonious relationships, and **peace**.





## *Pillars of Torah*

We explained that Aharon's love of his fellowmen was based on Torah; through his loving ways, he brought out their inherent righteousness, enabling them to grow in Torah. With this in mind, we can understand a profound concept mentioned in *Tikune Zohar* (Second Introduction, Eliyahu's Prayer). Moshe and Aharon are referred to as "two pillars which uphold truth," akin to the two legs which uphold the body. These pillars correspond to the two pillars in the First Temple known as *Yachin* and *Boaz*. Let us try to understand what this means and how it relates to our *mishnah*.

The Forefathers, the founders and leaders of the nation, each excelled in a specific trait which defined and guided their lives. Avraham's primary trait was *Hesed* (Lovingkindness), and Yitzhak's was *Din* (Strict Judgment and the capacity for self control). Yaakov's trait was *Emet*, the truth of Torah (also known as *Tiferet*). Moshe and Aharon were the two "Pillars" (*Netzach* and *Hod*) which supported the truth of Torah revealed by Yaakov. They are followed by Yosef, whose soul was rooted in *Yesod* (Foundation). These extraordinary *tzaddikim* so perfected their respective traits that they became an earthly microcosm of Hashem's Divine Attributes of *Hesed*, *Din*, and the like, worthy of being part of "Hashem's Chariot."

*Yesod*, Yosef's primary trait, is the sanctity achieved by withstanding temptation. *Shalom*, peace, is associated with *Yesod* which, in Kabbalistic terms, is the connecting link between the giver and the recipient. In the Heavenly Chariot where these traits are represented, it immediately follows Aharon's trait of *Hod*. This is why Aharon constantly strived for *shalom*, in order to strengthen the pillars supporting Torah upon a firm foundation of sanctity.

We can understand that pillars must have a strong, stable base if they are to support the structure they uphold. However, why does the Torah need the support of two "pillars"?

Moshe and Aharon each made their own distinctive, indispensable contribution to the transmission and continuity of Torah. Moshe Rabbenu was the prototype teacher of Torah, who passed on to succeeding generations the entirety of Hashem's Word as given by the Al-mighty Himself. Aharon, on the other hand, brought the **people close to Torah** with his boundless love of peace and of mankind. By revealing and enhancing the good in his fellow Jews, he enabled them to receive and internalize Torah.

Aharon fostered love for Torah on two planes, namely "Yissachar" and "Zevulun." The Tribe of Yissachar was devoted to full-time Torah study. Zevulun, their brother-



tribe, expressed their own deep love for Torah by supporting Yissachar's Torah study. The contribution of both Tribes is essential to Torah and precious to the Almighty. We find this concept in the *Zohar's* interpretation of the struggle between Yaakov and Esav's guardian angel (*Bereshit* 32:25-33).

After a long night of bitter combat, the Torah tells us, Esav's angel "saw that he could not overcome him, and he struck the socket of his hip. And Yaakov's hip socket was dislocated when he wrestled with him" (32:26). Yaakov was the embodiment of Torah. When the angel saw that he would never be able to uproot the Torah itself, he hit upon another tactic: he struck Yaakov's left hip. The hip supports and upholds the body, symbolic of Aharon's pillar of *Hod*, which supports Torah through the benefactors who sustain Torah study (*Zohar*, vol. I p.171a). If the supporting pillars are struck down, G-d forbid, the entire structure crumbles.

Moshe and Aharon were eternal pillars of Torah. Moshe taught the nation, while Aharon's love brought them close to Torah, encouraging them to study and support it to the best of their abilities.

*This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.*