



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel

Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Bet (Part 1)

1:2 Shimon HaTzaddik was among the surviving remnants of the Great Assembly. He would say, the world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service of Hashem, and on lovingkindness.

Three Roots

Shimon HaTzaddik was among the surviving remnants of the Great Assembly. His lifespan overlapped from the time of the Men of the Great Assembly to the next generation, that of the *Zugot* (Pairs). After Shimon HaTzaddik, subsequent generations were led by a pair of scholars, the *Nasi* (Prince) and the *Av Bet Din* (Head of the Rabbinical Court). After the death of the other Men of the Great Assembly, Shimon HaTzaddik carried on the transmission of the Tradition as described in the first *mishnah* in *Avot* (see commentary of Bartenura).

The world stands on three things.

This statement raises a question. We know that the Torah has six hundred and thirteen commandments. This number is not random. The Higher Worlds are also structured on a system of six hundred and thirteen spiritual components, subdivided into two hundred and forty-eight and three hundred and sixty-five parts. Corresponding to this structure, man was created with two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five sinews, also totaling six hundred and thirteen. According to Kabbalistic teachings, the Torah's two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments correspond to man's spiritual limbs, and the three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments correspond to man's spiritual sinews. Every commandment has a specific source in the Higher Worlds. Its distinctive sanctity and its impact on the Higher Worlds cannot be duplicated by any other



commandment. This parallel between the Higher Worlds and man's physical body and spiritual service is the meaning of the concept of man created "in the image of G-d" (*Bereshit* 1:27).

As we see, then, man's spiritual base is clearly composed of six hundred and thirteen components. If even a single one is absent, his spiritual perfection and the world's ultimate rectification is lacking.¹ Why, then, does Shimon *HaTzaddik* focus on only three elements of service of Hashem?

Clearly, his intention was not to minimize the observance of any of the six hundred and thirteen commandments. His three pillars of Divine service are actually three roots from which all the *mitzvot* branch out.

As we will explain, **Torah** is the ultimate purpose of man's existence. It is the root of all the *mitzvot*, for without Torah, it is impossible to fulfill the commandments.

Service refers to the sacrifices offered in the Temple. Today we no longer have the option of serving Hashem in this sublime manner. However, our Sages tell us, "What is service that is in the heart? It is prayer" (*Taanit* 2a). The three daily prayers were established to correspond to the daily *Tamid* sacrifices. The morning prayers correspond to the Daily Morning Sacrifice, the afternoon prayers correspond to the Daily Sacrifice at Twilight, and the evening prayers correspond to "the limbs and fats left over from the day's sacrifices, which were consumed on the Altar throughout the night" (*Berachot* 26b). In addition, in our times **service** also refers to actual fulfillment of all the *mitzvot*.

The third pillar supporting the world is *hesed*, **lovingkindness**. This means bestowing good upon others, in the plainest sense. **Lovingkindness** is the root of all commandments between man and his fellow man.

Let us try to understand more about the special significance of these three pillars of the world.

¹ In his commentary on the verse, "The entire *mitzvah* that I command you today, you shall observe to do" (*Devarim* 8:1), the Ohr HaHayyim points out that every *mitzvah* is unique. He writes that we may tend to devote ourselves to one or more selected *mitzvot* at the expense of the others. Such behavior can have terrible consequences, may G-d spare us. The words "the entire *mitzvah*" teach us that the Torah's six hundred and thirteen commandments are actually one single, indivisible unit. He cites the *Zohar's* teaching that man was created with two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five sinews, corresponding to the two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments (*Zohar* vol. I, p. 170). If we suffer pain in even one of those limbs or sinews, the entire body is in anguish. So too the *mitzvot*; if even one is lacking, the entire six hundred and thirteen are incomplete.



First and Always

As we see, **Torah** comes first. It is the most basic of all commandments; without it we have nothing, leaving the world without a leg to stand on, so to speak. Torah teaches us how to fulfill all the other *mitzvot* which uphold the world. Sacrifices and prayer come from Torah, moral concepts such as right and wrong and helping others come from Torah, and knowledge of the Will of G-d comes from Torah. True good is defined by Torah, and we can understand, acquire, and implement it only through its study. As our Sages tell us, "A boor is not fearful of sin, and an ignoramus is not pious" (*Avot* 2:5). How can they be? They would not even know where to begin.

Citing numerous teachings from the Sages and the *Zohar*, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin discusses at length the paramount importance of the study of Torah, as well as its exalted greatness (*Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Daled*). Torah truly is the one primary entity which keeps the world intact and operative: "If not for My treaty day and night [through the study of Torah], I would not give continuity to the Heavens and earth" (*Yirmiyahu* 33:25). If the world were left devoid of Torah study for even one single moment, G-d forbid, it would cease to exist. It is Torah, ongoing, nonstop Torah, which brings Hashem's light into the world and maintains its existence.

Torah and Mitzvot

Our Sages weighed the relative importance of Torah study as compared to good deeds. They concluded that Torah is greater, because it leads to good deeds (*Kiddushin* 40b). They also teach that the purpose of Torah is repentance and good deeds (*Berachot* 17a). Through Torah we can reach the highest levels of perfection in the observance of *mitzvot* and refinement of character. With this in mind, we can easily understand why Torah is the first pillar on which **the world stands**.

On a personal level, we as individuals also cannot survive without Torah. We were created for a specific, defined purpose: to fulfill Hashem's Will, study His Torah, and keep His *mitzvot*. Torah is the most important *mitzvah* of all, as our Sages teach us: "Torah study is equivalent to them all" (*Pe'ah* 1:1) and "equivalent to all the *mitzvot*" (*Shabbat* 127a).

The simple meaning of the words *k'neged kulam* (equivalent to them all) is "weighed against them all" or "of equal weight to them all" – Torah study carries the same weight as all the other commandments combined. We may also understand this statement somewhat differently. Torah is an integral part of every *mitzvah*, in fact its source. All *mitzvot* have a root in Torah, and the only possible way to fulfill



the commandments is by learning Torah. There are no shortcuts; if we do not learn, we will be ignorant of the myriad laws and details related to every one of the commandments. This is the true importance of Torah study. As Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes, even one word of Torah study is greater than all the *mitzvot*. This is so because through learning Torah, we come to fulfill the *mitzvot* (*Nefesh HaHayyim Shaar Daled*, Chapter 30).

The *Mekubalim* teach that Torah study is integral to the fulfillment of the commandments. Man's soul has five levels. In ascending order, they are *nefesh*-soul; *ruah*-spirit; *neshamah*-higher soul; *hayah*-living soul; and *yehidah*-unique soul (*Bereshit Rabbah* 14:9). Corresponding to these five levels, every *mitzvah* has five components which together, comprise its perfect fulfillment. Fulfillment of the commandments rectifies the five levels of the soul. The first component is *maaseh hamitzvah*, the actual act of correct halachic performance of the *mitzvah*. Next is *dibbur hamitzvah*, speech which is related to the *mitzvah*. This means learning the relevant *halachot* and reciting the Torah verses from which the *mitzvah* is derived prior to performing it. This is followed by *kavanah*, our intent as we do the *mitzvah*, fulfilling it specifically because it is the Will of the Al-mighty Who so commanded us. Next is the higher level of *mahshavah*, our thoughts while we do the *mitzvah*. The fifth and highest level is *re'utah d'libah*, joy in the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*.

As we see, the essential element of *dibbur hamitzvah* can only be fulfilled through Torah study. This is the meaning of our Sages' teaching that "Torah is *k'neged kulam*"; it is an essential part of every *mitzvah*.

Proper fulfillment of the commandments must always be based on knowledge. The Jewish nation accepted the Torah with the famous words *naaseh v'nishma*, "we will do and we will hear" (*Shmot* 24:7). This means, "First we will fulfill, and then we will understand what we are fulfilling." However, this declaration does not by any means suggest that the commandments can be fulfilled without prior study; that possibility simply does not exist.² It is true that there are unlearned Jews who fulfill

² We find this concept in our Sages' description of the early *hassidim*, who would spend an hour preparing for prayer, another hour praying, and a third hour on the transition to the realities of the mundane world after their intense spiritual efforts in praying – a total of nine hours out of every twenty-four devoted exclusively to prayer. The Sages ask an obvious question: "And if they spent nine hours a day on prayer, how was their Torah preserved, and how was their work done? However, because they are *hassidim*, their Torah is preserved and their work is blessed" (*Berachot* 32b).

Even though so much of their time was taken up with prayer, they retained knowledge of the Torah that they had already studied, and their material needs were otherwise supplied. However, why did our Sages only ask how their Torah was preserved? Why did they not ask when they had time to learn at all? The wording of the question seems to imply that as far as the Sages were concerned, it was clear that they were in fact already learned.

The Ben Ish Hai explains that the Sages make the assumption that they had previously studied the Torah in its entirety, and needed only to remember and retain their learning. They came to this conclusion specifically *because* they are called *hassidim*. The very fact that they were pious enough to merit this title



mitzvot on a simple level, without having ever studied Torah in any depth. However, although they personally lack knowledge, their performance of *mitzvot* is based on what they observe from others who *are* learned and knowledgeable; they watch what they do, and follow their example.

Our Sages tell us that “One whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom endures. And one whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom does not endure” (*Avot* 3:9). Rabbenu Yonah explains why this is so. If we are eager to fulfill Hashem’s *mitzvot* to the very best of our ability, we will be motivated to acquire more Torah knowledge, which will enable us to enhance our *mitzvot* still further. Even if at present our deeds exceed our wisdom, our drive to enhance those deeds will spur us to learn more and more Torah. The more we do, the more we will want to learn. At the same time, the more we learn, the more perfect our *mitzvot* become.

This is why Shimon *HaTzaddik* focuses specifically on Torah as the first of the three pillars of the world. We may compare it to the trunk of a tree, from which all the branches draw their sustenance. Without Torah, there can be no real fulfillment of *mitzvot*, and no perfect service of Hashem.

By Sacrifice

Shimon *HaTzaddik*’s second pillar is the *avodah* of sacrifices, or in our times, prayer.

It is a basic principle that “there is no man so righteous on earth who does only good and will not sin” (*Kohelet* 7:20). It is impossible for us to live in our lowly material world and never transgress; with the evil inclination as our constant companion in life, it cannot be otherwise. We all sin unintentionally at times, while at other times, G-d forbid, we may even sin intentionally.

Hashem in His mercy has granted sinners the possibility to repent. Repentance is a process which includes regretting our misdeed(s), confessing them orally before the Al-mighty, and determining not to sin again, even when faced with the identical temptation. If we truly and sincerely repent, Hashem will forgive us our transgression. But there is another aspect to sin as well.

A sin causes a *pegam* (blemish). As our sins pile up, the accompanying blemishes pile up with them, leaving us stained and imperfect even as we attempt to

testifies to the scope of their Torah knowledge, because it is only through serious, intensive Torah study that one can become a *hassid* (*Ben Yehoyada*).



fulfill *mitzvot* and serve Hashem. It can only be removed by atonement, which we may explain as the wiping away of the sin. When the Temple stood, the sacrifices atoned for sin, bringing the sinner to a stage more advanced than that achieved by repentance alone. They removed the lingering blemish left by sin, purifying the penitent and allowing him to serve Hashem unencumbered by a heavy, clinging load of residual faults and flaws. The atonement of the sacrifices enabled the Jewish people to fulfill *mitzvot* with untainted purity.

The true meaning of the sacrifices is profound in the extreme. Even on the most simple, literal level, the *halachot* surrounding them comprise a vast body of information, discussed at great length in the Talmud. The Rambam's methodical arrangement of these laws fills many chapters of his *Mishneh Torah*, consisting of hundreds upon hundreds of detailed facts. Because sacrifices are relevant to the era of *Mashiah* and so very far removed from our own experience, it is difficult for us to understand their place in the service of Hashem. To truly appreciate their significance, we would have to comprehend as well the deeper underlying reasons behind them. In our times, such comprehension is beyond our grasp.

Through Prayer

However, we do have an avenue of Divine service which is closer to our level: prayer. Through prayer, we serve the Al-mighty with our heart, with thought, intent, and feeling. As is often said, "prayer without thought and intent is like a body without a soul" (see Abarbanel on *Avot* 2:13).

When we pray we should realize what prayer actually means. We ask Hashem for what we need and what we lack, realizing that only He, and none other, can help us. Even when it seems that a human being has come to our aid, we must understand that he has done so only because Hashem has directed his thoughts and deeds, causing him to act in our favor. The Arizal explains that this is the essence of prayer (Introduction to *Shaar HaMitzvot*). Do we have a problem? *En od milvado*: there is none other than Him (*Devarim* 4:35). Do we need help, salvation, urgent solutions? *En od milvado*; there is only Hashem. We throw our burden on Him, knowing that He will help us, and He carries us through (*Tehillim* 55:23).

Our daily prayers are our opportunity to express this unstinting trust in the Al-mighty. We turn to Him with our needs and wants, and ask Him to provide for us. We understand plainly and simply that He is our only Address. Approached in this manner, prayer, in a sense, is the most powerful connection we can have to G-d.

Let us understand why this is so. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and other authorities explain that Torah is the Will of Hashem, and that He and His Will are one (*Nefesh*



HaHayyim, Shaar Alef, Chapter 16). When we learn Torah we become part of this entity, as the *Zohar* says: "The Holy One, blessed be He, the Torah, and Israel, are one" (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 73a). The Torah permeates our minds so that we become one with it, and as such, one with Hashem. Torah, then, is our greatest possible connection to Hashem.

When we learn Torah, we work to understand Hashem's Will. Through prayer, on the other hand, we connect to the Al-mighty on a personal level. Our prayers convey our spiritual and physical needs, expressing what we lack in our daily lives in this world. We come close to Him through the realization that He is the One Who helps and provides, and that we must rely solely on Him. When we bring our requests to Him alone, we demonstrate that we believe in Him implicitly.

The Pillars

Shimon *HaTzaddik*...would say, the world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service of Hashem, and on lovingkindness.

These three basic categories encompass the entirety of service of Hashem.

- **Torah** is the source: it teaches us everything we need to know about how to obey the Will of G-d.
- **Service**, sacrifices and prayer, also includes all commandments between man and G-d; we serve Hashem by fulfilling His *mitzvot*.
- The literal meaning of **lovingkindness** is helping others. In the larger sense, however, it includes the entire range of commandments between man and his fellow man, which touch upon every area of human relationships.

Both **service** and **lovingkindness** come from **Torah**, the expression of Hashem's Will. We have discussed Torah and the **service** of commandments between man and G-d . Let us go on to understand the meaning of **lovingkindness**, serving Hashem through good *middot* and refined relationships with our fellow men.

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