



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Bet (Part 2)

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.

With Our Fellow Man

As we explained, **Torah** is the root of all service of Hashem, the source which teaches us how to fulfill His Will in matters between man and G-d, and between man and his fellow man. **Service**, whether in the form of sacrifices, prayer, or the fulfillment of the commandments, is in the realm of man's relationship with G-d. However, the world cannot function on interaction with the Divine alone. We must also have the indispensable third pillar of **lovingkindness** (*hesed*), the basis of man's relationship with his fellowman.

If we consider our relationship with the Al-mighty to be on a firm footing, we may imagine that we need not be concerned about our relationships with our fellow man. This is a mistake. **Lovingkindness**, with all that the term implies, is a crucial element in the service of Hashem. The first two legs are not enough to stand on; it takes all three pillars to keep the world solidly fixed on its foundations.

Lovingkindness encompasses all *mitzvot* between man and his fellow man. As we explained, good *middot* and integrity in interpersonal relationships are also part of the Torah given at Sinai. We find this concept in Rabbi Akiva's famous teaching that to love your fellow man as yourself is "a great principle in Torah" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 24:7). When a potential convert asked Hillel the Elder to "teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one foot," Hillel told him, "What is hateful to you, do



not do to your fellow man. That is the entire Torah, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn” (*Shabbat* 31a). In other words, Hillel told this aspiring convert, good *middot* and sincere fellowship among men are the basis for fulfillment of the entire Torah; without them, we have nothing.

Rabbi Hayyim Vital explains that while the Torah does not list good *middot* as explicit commandments, they are nonetheless an essential prerequisite for all the *mitzvot*. Faulty *middot* will prevent us from fulfilling the positive commandments properly, and cause us to stumble over countless negative commandments as well (*Shaare Kedushah*, Part 1, *Shaar Bet*).

Torah study, fulfillment of *mitzvot*, and good *middot* are connected by an unbreakable bond. The Hazon Ish explains that one who does not learn Torah in depth, with careful attention to practical halachic application, will also fail to study ethical teachings (*mussar*) properly. Faced with a moral dilemma concerning *middot* and relationships, he stands to misinterpret the issues and his obligations. Lacking a solid foundation of Torah knowledge, he is sure to err (*Emunah U'bitahon*, Chapter 3).

This concept is expressed in the Blessing of Repentance in *Shemoneh Esre*. Every day we pray, “Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us close, our King, to Your service, and bring us back in complete repentance before You.” Here too, **Torah** comes first, followed by **service** of Hashem. “Complete repentance” refers to serving Hashem wholeheartedly, an impossibility without good *middot* and refined interpersonal relationships. Through these three fundamentals, we fulfill our life’s mission and bring the world to its ultimate rectification.

By Threes

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

In the first *mishnah* in *Avot* the Men of the Great Assembly make three statements: “Be deliberate in judgment, and teach many students, and make a fence around the Torah.” As we see in the second *mishnah*, Shimon HaTzaddik, one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly, also lists three main principles. We may say that the three teachings of the Men of the Great Assembly are relevant principally to judges, scholars, prophets, and great leaders of the people. They must render halachic decisions with care, ensure that there are many students to transmit Torah to future generations, and safeguard the continued existence of Torah by erecting halachic fences in keeping with the needs of the times. The advice given by the Men



of the Great Assembly was for people of their own stature; ordinary laymen will not usually have to contend with these issues.

The three principles of Shimon HaTzaddik, on the other hand, apply to every individual on his own level. The world stands on three pillars, and every Jew has his share in maintaining them.

Three implies the strength of a firm bond, as we learn from the verse “And the three-fold cord will not be quickly broken” (*Kohelet* 4:12). Since three implies a powerful spiritual union, these Sages based their advice on three principles.

Loftier Realms

Later in the chapter, we find a statement, also based on three principles, which seems to contradict Shimon HaTzaddik’s *mishnah*: “Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says, the world exists on three things: on judgment, on truth, and on peace” (1:18). Truth, judgment, and peace are not **Torah**, **service**, and **lovingkindness**.

And yet, these two teachings are not contradictory. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s words relate to the *Olam HaAsiyah*, our physical world of earthly activity. Lacking these three basics, civilization descends to anarchy, where “man consumes his fellow man” (*Avot* 3:2). A civilized, orderly society must have judgment: we need law and order and a respectable court system, with rulings rendered by responsible judges. In addition, there must be truth, for no society can hope to function without it. There must also be peace, because a society without peace will disintegrate with frightening rapidity. The most cursory study of human history shows just how true this has been, unfortunately since time immemorial.

Shimon HaTzaddik, on the other hand, speaks of an entirely different realm, the higher spiritual worlds maintained by man’s **Torah**, **service**, and **lovingkindness**. In ascending order, these loftier worlds are the *Olam HaYetzirah*, the World of the Angels; the *Olam HaBeriyah*, the World of the Throne; and the *Olam HaAtzilut*, the World in Which Hashem Reveals Himself.

These worlds continue to exist due only to a continual influx of Divine bounty. We find this concept in the first blessing before *Keriat Shema*, where we praise Hashem “Who renews, in His kindness, every day, constantly, the work of Creation.” It is as if at every second, the world is being recreated by the Al-mighty, for He constantly recharges it with the Divine bounty generated by our *mitzvot* (see *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 2).



With this in mind, we can understand Shimon HaTzaddik's words. The six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* are essential for the continued existence of the world. Every additional *mitzvah* maintains Creation, "rectifying the world by bringing about its subjugation to the Kingdom of the Al-mighty." These six hundred and thirteen are grouped under the general headings of **Torah**, **service**, and **lovingkindness**, the three pillars which literally uphold the world.

Hesed, Din, and Rahamim

We can understand the concept of three on a more profound level as well. The *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings teach that Hashem rules the world and reveals himself to man in many different ways, through His Divine Attributes (*Middot*). Three principal Divine Attributes include all the others: Lovingkindness (*Hesed*), Judgment (*Din*) and Compassion (*Rahamim*). They symbolize the right, the left, and the middle. Our Sages teach us that "The left hand should always put off and the right hand should always draw closer" (*Sotah* 47a). We should never push away a child, a spouse – or any other person – altogether, with both hands, so to speak. Even when we must be firm, rejecting negative behavior with the left hand, our right hand should be warmly extended, bringing the chastised party close to us again. The left is the hand which repels, because it symbolizes *Din*. The right is the hand which draws the other party closer, because it symbolizes *Hesed*. The body itself, between the two hands, is the middle, symbolic of *Rahamim*, which provides the balance between the two.

The Attributes of the Al-mighty are absolute. His *hesed* is total. He bestows *hesed* on all: the good and the evil, the deserving and those who are anything-but.

Our Sages describe this as "love spoils the line" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 55:8). Imagine that we are supervising the progress of a line of people awaiting admission or service. We are fair and dispassionate, until we spot a familiar face at the end of the line. One of our best friends has arrived, and there are twenty-eight people ahead of him! Our attitude undergoes a sudden change and we find a way to move him up front. Was this fair? We are not even asking, because he is dear to us and we love him. In other words, love has spoiled the line.

The same is true of Hashem's conduct of our world through Divine *Hesed*. The straight, unswerving truth of good-bad/reward-punishment is bent and reshaped by Hashem's vast love for His beings and His desire to grant them good.

Perhaps frightening to contemplate, Divine Judgment works in the same way as well. Standing on its own, our Sages tell us, "Let judgment pierce the mountain" (*Yevamot* 92a). The forces of judgment are powerful and unswerving, tunneling



through mountains in an uncompromising, arrow-straight course. *Din* metes out what we deserve, no more and no less.

Middat HaRahamim, the Divine Attribute of Mercy, is the balance between the two; it is *Hesed* and *Din* in conjunction. For example, perhaps Reuven has sinned, not just casually but in a big way. Based on pure *Din*, Reuven should die a horrible death, in keeping with the severity of his transgression. But before this happens *Hesed* also comes into play, introducing a variety of extenuating circumstances. Reuven had a difficult, deprived childhood which understandably left its mark. He lives and works in surroundings which set a bad example and make it difficult for him to be very pious. He has a wife and innocent young children to consider. Perhaps these factors will not absolve Reuven from punishment altogether, but through Hashem's great *Rahamim*, they will be taken into account in the Divine reckoning, gaining him a lighter sentence than that mandated by unadulterated *Din*.

The Confines of Hesed

Shimon HaTzaddik's three pillars correspond to the Al-mighty's three principal Attributes. **Torah** is *Hesed*, as we find in *Mishle*: "The Torah of *hesed* is on her tongue" (*Mishle* 31:26). **Service** is related to *Din*, as part of the process of repentance, atonement, and forgiveness which mitigate judgment and punishment. **Lovingkindness**, the third factor, is *Rahamim*.

However, man's *hesed* differs somewhat from the *hesed* of the Al-mighty. As we explained, His *hesed* is all-encompassing, dispensed to the wicked as well as to the righteous. G-d can do this; we cannot. Our *hesed* must be defined by *halachah*. For example, it is a great act of *hesed* to provide others with food, yet strictly speaking, we may not offer food to one who will not recite a blessing before eating (see *Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayyim* 169:2).

It is a fundamental principle that "to have mercy on the wicked is considered being cruel" (*Mishle* 12:10). It is cruel to take pity on evil people, because the outcome of our misplaced compassion will be catastrophic. We find a tragically clear illustration of this in the story of King Shaul's encounter with a profoundly evil individual: Agag, the king of Amalek. Hashem in His wisdom commanded Shaul to destroy the Amalekites entirely (I *Shmuel* 15:3), but Shaul hesitated. Surely he could have a little sympathy for a fellow king, he reasoned, and allow the deposed monarch alone to survive. What great harm could come of it? So Shaul let him live until the next day (15:9,19), and the brief reprieve brought disaster upon the Jewish people for all time to come. On that last night Agag begot a child who went on to become the ancestor of Haman, Hitler, and countless other enemies of our people to this day. By the next day Agag was gone, but the damage and the suffering have



lived on for thousands of years, for “to have mercy on the wicked is considered being cruel.”

The Prophet Shmuel, unlike Shaul, approached Hashem’s commandment without allowing misplaced sympathies to override Hashem’s wisdom and Will. This saintly prophet was greater, more spiritual and more holy than anyone we could possibly imagine in our own times. And yet, when the circumstances demanded it, “Shmuel slashed Agag before Hashem in Gilgal” (15:33), as the nation looked on and learned a lesson in cruelty and kindness.

Giving Double

We human beings cannot be indiscriminate in our **lovingkindness**. We cannot say, for example, that we believe in helping everyone, no matter what their agenda. Of course, we support *yeshivot*, but we also support academies of progressive religion (G-d forbid). Our *hesed* must be tempered with sound judgment – with *din*. When we give charity, we need to weigh the destination of our dollar: how much will we give, to whom? We should learn to give properly, and not only to satisfy our own emotional impulses.

It is interesting to note that when the Torah speaks of charity, it always uses double wording. For example, it tells us, *naton titen lo*, “You shall give and give again to him” (*Devarim* 15:10), and *patoah tiftah et yadecha l’ahicha l’aniyecha u’l’evyonecha*, “Open your hand to your brother and open it again, to your poor and your destitute” (*Devarim* 15:11). There are many explanations for this special terminology. A story from the life of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Riminov, an early Hassidic leader, illustrates one aspect.

A pauper once approached the Rebbe for a donation. The Rebbe noted the man’s miserable tatters, heard his tale of woe, and was immediately moved to give him a nice sum of money. The beggar left, pleased with the money and the ease with which he had received it. Moments later, the Rebbe called him back. With a sinking heart the beggar returned, convinced, no doubt, that there had been a mistake, now to be remedied. But rather than ask for a refund, the Rebbe handed him another donation!

When questioned about his exceptional generosity, the Rebbe explained. “When I saw that poor man’s suffering I felt terrible, and I just had to give him something. *I* couldn’t stand it and *I* wanted to feel better. So in essence, I gave that money for my own comfort. But we give charity because the Torah has commanded us to give, and not for our own emotional wellbeing, so I called him back. This time, I gave him the money not for myself, but for the *mitzvah*.”



Mitzvot are not merely emotional, because our emotions may well be misguided. True *hesed* is that which is trained and directed by *halachah*, the careful blend of *hesed* and *din* which together produce *rahamim*.

Looking Ahead

This gives rise to a question.

It is Hashem's Will that we emulate His ways and follow His example, so much so that it is an explicit commandment mentioned several times in the Torah (*Devarim* 11:22, 28:9 et al). Our Sages elaborate: "Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so should you be compassionate and merciful" (*Shabbat* 133b). Hashem clothes the naked, visits the sick, comforts the bereaved, and buries the dead; so should we (*Sotah* 14a). In sum, "He bestows lovingkindness, you bestow lovingkindness" (Rashi, *Devarim* 11:22). He is the Source of all *hesed*. He created our world and all its inhabitants because he wishes to give, imparting of His vast lovingkindness to His created beings. As the Ramhal explains, "It is the nature of one who is good to do good" (*Derech Hashem* Part 1, Chapter 2; *Daat Tevunot* 1:42-43). However, Divine *hesed* is unlimited in scope, and conferred upon the unworthy as well as the worthy. We, on the other hand, are to limit our own *hesed* to the (comparatively) confined boundaries imposed by the *Shulhan Aruch*.

If we are emulating Hashem's lovingkindness, should we not follow Him all the way, so to speak, loving and supporting the evil no less than the pious? Why must our *hesed* be restricted, unlike His?

One answer to this question is that we cannot do *hesed* indiscriminately as Hashem does, because we lack His far-reaching vision. At most we see the present moment, and very little, if at all, beyond. The Al-mighty is cognizant of the outcome of all events long before they transpire, and foresees the long-term consequences of His generosity. We, who have not been blessed with prophecy, cannot know what will happen next. Hashem "tells the end from the beginning," and is aware of the final conclusion of any event even before it begins to unfold (*Yeshayahu* 46:10, *Metzudat David*). His *hesed* is bestowed so that no harm will come of it, while no human being can possibly anticipate all eventualities in this manner.

We see, then, that at times Hashem acts with pure *hesed*, at times with pure *din*, and at times with *rahamim*, a blend of the two. In certain instances, He chooses to overlook gross transgression and treat His children with undeserved mercy. They may have sinned so terribly that calculated strictly by *din*, they would deserve total



eradication, G-d forbid. But Hashem will never destroy His people entirely. He will always allow a remnant to survive, serving as the seed of rejuvenation.

Perhaps the best known example of this principle is the story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's rescue efforts immediately before the Destruction of the Second Temple (*Gittin* 56a,b). This saintly Sage had himself smuggled out of the besieged city of Jerusalem in a coffin, and went to plead with the Roman general Vespasian for mercy. He gained Vespasian's favor by predicting that the latter would soon be emperor of Rome, a prediction which miraculously materialized even as they spoke. Vespasian magnanimously offered the Sage a reward for bringing him the good news. We might have expected Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to seize the opportunity to ask for a reprieve for the Temple, the city, and the people, but he did not, because *Middat HaDin* had decreed total destruction.

He could ask for *something*, however, and he requested a safe haven for Yavneh and its scholars. This turn of events was an act of pure *hesed* on the part of the Almighty. Vespasian undoubtedly did not realize the importance of his gesture, but Hashem knew that this small refuge would ensure the continued existence of Torah, and thus of our people, despite the devastation of the Destruction.

Shaul allowed a man to live another day, contrary to Hashem's decree of annihilation. Our people have suffered the effects ever since, because mortal *hesed* is shortsighted. Hashem allowed a *yeshivah* to survive, while the land and its scholars were ravaged. Our people have reaped the benefits ever since, because Hashem, and only Hashem, "tells the end from the beginning."

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