



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Gimel (Part 1)

1:3 Antigonus of Socho received from Shimon HaTzaddik. He would say, do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward. And may the fear of Heaven be upon you.

A New Era

Antigonus of Socho received from Shimon HaTzaddik.

There were thousands of great Sages in the time of Shimon HaTzaddik and thousands in the generation which followed, that of **Antigonus of Socho**. The younger scholars **received** the Oral Tradition from their elders, but the *mishnah* specifically mentions these two because they were the greatest Sages of their respective generations (see the Rambam's Introduction to *Mishneh Torah*).

We explained that "receiving" relates to the recipient and his capacity for reception. That capacity is proportional to the effort expended by the recipient in preparing himself to receive. "Passing on," in contrast, is related to the ability of the giver. We learn from this *mishnah* that the period of the Men of the Great Assembly was a turning point in the transmission of Torah.

Hashem gave Moshe the Written Torah in the form of general principles, which can be applied to every new circumstance as it arises. Moshe, a man of unequaled spiritual stature, was the only individual capable of receiving this endlessly vast Torah in its entirety. From his time on until the era of the Men of the Great Assembly, the Tradition was transmitted exactly as Moshe had received it. The era of the Men of the



Great Assembly ended the period of “passing on” Moshe’s Torah, and began a new era of “receiving,” as we learn from this *mishnah* and those which follow.¹

Our Sages tell us that in the time of Mordechai and Esther, during the era of the Men of the Great Assembly, “they fulfilled and accepted [the Oral Torah] upon themselves and on their descendents” (*Esther* 9:27). It was now that the nation embraced the Oral Torah anew, with the same willingness and enthusiasm as they had had for the Written Torah centuries earlier at Sinai (*Shabbat* 88a).

The Oral Tradition demands the sacrifice of both endless, dedicated study and painstaking, meticulous fulfillment; one must kill oneself over Torah (see *Tanhuma Noah* 3). From this time on, Torah learning would no longer be the study of the basic, inclusive principles of the Written Torah handed down by Moshe. Now it would consist primarily of the more complicated, in-depth study and analysis of the myriad ways in which these principles are applied to changing times, or in other words, the study of *Mishnah* and *Gemara*. Now it would be a question of “receiving” Torah, in accordance with the effort exerted by the individual to make himself a fitting vessel for its wisdom.

Servants and Sons

He would say, do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward.

How should we view our responsibility to serve G-d? The answer to this question is complicated by the issue of reward. Since we know that there *is* reward, we may find ourselves performing *only* for reward. This, he says, is not the way to work. **Do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward.** Divine service is far too important to be reduced to mere give-and-get.

The *Zohar* defines two levels of service of Hashem: the service of a servant, and service of a son (Introduction to *Tikune Zohar*, p. 4b).

What is a **servant**? A hired wage earner. He has terms of employment which list his obligations and compensation, and that is where the relationship ends. We can understand this by picturing a workingman who has been engaged as a family’s driver, with hours and salary clearly specified in his contract. One day the cleaning

¹ See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:1, Part 1 for a fuller discussion of this topic.



man does not come in for work, so the boss summons the driver and explains that he needs a little extra help that morning. The driver hears that he is expected to mop the floors and he puts his foot down. True, he is paid by the hour, but to drive, not to scrub. Floors are not in his contract, so he doesn't do them.

The following week, the boss's son attends a late class and wants a ride home. The boss asks the driver to pick him up as a favor, even though it is after his hours. Since nothing was said about overtime or a bonus, the driver refuses. Favors are also not in his contract, so he doesn't do them either.

Bottom line, a servant's service will always be self-centered. Even as he follows his master's orders, he is hardly motivated by a selfless desire to fulfill the master's will. He is looking out for his own interests, primarily his job and his salary. Asked to do anything extra not outlined in his contract, his answer will be a flat "no."

In addition, the servant may be serving his master out of fear; his master is powerful and intimidating, and the idea of arousing his wrath terrifies him. Here too, his labors are motivated by selfish interests – concern for his own wellbeing.

This is no way to approach service of Hashem. **Instead**, the *Tanna* tells us, **be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward**. What servant works with such devotion? It will not happen if he is a hired hand; it will only happen if he is the master's own child. A son's sole desire is to please his father. To this end he is prepared to do just about anything, simply because he is his father and he loves him. He serves from loyalty, respect, and deep affection, not from ulterior motives.

Children caring for ill or elderly parents are a special breed. If an ailing father calls at 2:00 A.M. because he needs his son, he will not be brushed off with a brusque "I start tomorrow at 11:00. Wait until then." The son will come, because he is his son. It is neither an easy nor a pleasant job to tend to the needs of sick parents. It often involves out-of-pocket expenses or loss of income, coupled with interruption of sleep and disruption of other plans. But children do it, out of love and gratitude. Reward is not even a consideration, and it is not what earns parents their children's devotion.

Service from love, like that of a son, is free of the desire for gain. Its only purpose is to bring pleasure to the Al-mighty by fulfilling His commandments.



Avinu Malkenu

And may the fear of Heaven be upon you.

Apparently, then, what the *Tanna* really means is, “Instead, be like sons who serve their father, not in order to receive reward.” Why does the *mishnah* not in fact use these words?

The continuation of the *mishnah* provides the answer to this question: **And may the fear of Heaven be upon you.** This caution is not a second, isolated piece of wisdom, but rather an integral part of the first teaching. At first glance, the two seem to be unrelated: first, do not serve Hashem for ulterior motives, and second, be sure to maintain a continual, active fear of Heaven. Now can see that one in fact follows from the other.

Do not... serve the master out of a sense of dry obligation or compulsion, only **in order to receive reward**. Instead, serve Him with the loving devotion of a child who serves a beloved parent, **not in order to receive reward**. And yet, at the same time, we cannot allow ourselves the easy familiarity of relating to Hashem strictly as our Father. We must approach Him with fear and awe at all times, as the *mishnah* tells us: **may the fear of Heaven be upon you** (see *Midrash Shmuel*, citing Rabbi Ephraim).

Serving Hashem with love is a source of great joy. However, that joy must be tempered with the trembling that comes from fear of Hashem as our King. We serve Him gladly, like children serving their parents. He loves us as His children, but expects full subjugation from us as His servants. We must “serve Hashem in fear, rejoice with trembling” (*Tehillim* 2:11).

This parallel is expressed in the *Avinu Malkenu* prayer. We address Hashem as *Avinu* – You are our beloved Father. But in the same breath we must say *Malkenu* – You are our King, Whom we hold in fear and awe.

We also find this concept in the *L'shem Yihud* recited prior to fulfilling *mitzvot*: “For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence, with fear and with love.” The combination of the two, fear and love, produces perfect service of Hashem. This is why Antigonus specifically said, **instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward**. Our service should be prompted by love, not fueled by the desire for reward. At the same time, no matter how close we come to Him, we should always retain the element of respectful submission, like a servant who trembles before his all-powerful master.



Profound Service

We can understand the difference between serving Hashem like a servant and serving Him like a son on a more profound level as well. The *Zohar* teaches that the Divine service of one who is not knowledgeable in the secrets of the Torah will be “the service of a servant.” Only one who is fluent in *Kabbalah* can reach the level of “the service of a son” (*Tikune Zohar, Tikun Lamed*, p. 73b)

First let us consider the *Zohar*’s definition of service of the Al-mighty. “Who is a saintly person (*hassid*)? One who is saintly (*mit’hassed*, literally ‘does *hesed*’) with his Creator” (*Zohar*, vol. II, p. 114b). How can any mortal being bestow lovingkindness on the Al-mighty and do favors for Him, as we would for a fellow man? He lacks for nothing, and there is nothing we can give him. The entire universe is in any case His: “If you are righteous, what do you give him?” (*Iyov* 35:7).

The only “*hesed*” we can do with Hashem is to fulfill His Will on earth. The Ramhal explains that a *hassid* is one who strives to reveal Hashem’s honor in this world, so that all mankind will know that “there is none other than Him” (*Devarim* 4:35). He understands that this is what Hashem desires, and is anguished by any slight to His honor (see *Mesillat Yesharim* Chapter 19). This is true, perfect service of Hashem.

Rabbi Natan Shapiro explains this concept. He writes that one who is unfamiliar with the Kabbalistic intents of the prayers can only serve the Al-mighty for the sake of reward. His prayers are on a simple, literal level: he says “bless us” and “heal us” and “remember us for life,” thinking of no more than his down-to-earth need for blessing, wellbeing, and life. The more intensely he prays, the more fervently he pleads for his own needs and wishes. The same is true of his *mitzvot*. He fulfills them not for their esoteric spiritual importance, but as a way to earn Divine bounty. He serves Hashem faithfully, and his service is precious to the Al-mighty, so much so that he is called “a perfect servant.” However, because he understands Torah and *mitzvot* on the simple level of material reward, he remains a servant, and not a son.

One who is knowledgeable in the wisdom of *Kabbalah* realizes that prayer has far deeper significance than a mere request for personal needs. He says “bless us” and “heal us” not for himself, but to generate the different types of Divine influx bestowed upon the higher spiritual worlds by these blessings, thus bringing about their rectification. His intent is the greater revelation of Hashem’s honor in this world, caused by prayer and the fulfillment of the Torah’s commandments. This is the service of a son, as compared to that of a servant; it addresses the Will of the Al-mighty and not his personal needs. It is perfect and complete, born of love rather



than of the desire for any form of reward. One who reaches this lofty level is fortunate indeed (Introduction to *Pri Etz Hayyim*).

There is nothing wrong with heartfelt prayer to the Al-mighty, recognizing Him as the Source of all salvation and beseeching Him to help us and grant us what we need. Such prayer is the first step in achieving proper intent in serving Hashem. We must begin our service of Hashem on a simple level and work to enhance it. Rectification of the Higher Worlds through profound Kabbalistic intents is an exalted height, not a starting point; we should never attempt to jump ahead of where we really are. As Rabbi Hayyim Vital, the Arizal's great disciple, writes, "A person should not say, I will go and engage in the wisdom of *Kabbalah* before I engage in Torah, *Mishnah* and Talmud. For our Sages, of blessed memory, said that one should not enter the orchard [of Kabbalistic study] if he has not filled his stomach with meat and wine [a reference to study of the revealed Torah]."

He writes that the revealed Torah is comparable to the body, while *Kabbalah*, the hidden Torah, is like the soul. The spiritual soul cannot fulfill *mitzvot* without a physical body to actually carry out the actions the soul desires. If we lack the basics of Torah, *mitzvot*, and good *middot*, yet still attempt to dabble in *Kabbalah*, we are like a disembodied soul, which has nowhere to reside. It is impossible to understand the hidden Torah without first acquiring extensive familiarity with the revealed Torah.

However, even if we lack deep understanding of the wisdom of *Kabbalah*, it is still possible for us to achieve the level of serving Hashem without expectation of reward, like a son who cares only for Hashem's honor. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin teaches that if we understand that the true purpose of prayer and service of Hashem is to reveal Hashem's greatness in this world, thus bringing it to its ultimate perfection and rectification, and this is our only intention, our service is that of a son. This is so even if we lack knowledge of the profound Kabbalistic meaning of the prayers and the commandments (see *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Bet*, Chapters 11-12).

He discusses the prayer of Hannah, the prophet Shmuel's mother, as an example of prayer directed solely towards Hashem's honor. Our Sages cite the verse, "And Hannah prayed to (literally "on") Hashem' (I *Shmuel* 1:10). They explain that "she flung words at Heaven" (*Berachot* 31b). Understood literally, this means that Hannah expressed herself in harsh terms, saying that her creation as a woman was pointless if she had no children. The *Gemara* goes on to say that the prophet Eliyahu also flung words at Heaven (I *Melachim* 18:37), and that Hashem conceded to him (*Michah* 4:6). Apparently, "flinging words at Heaven" is not disrespectful; otherwise, our Sages would not have told us that Hashem responded positively when Eliyahu did so.



The *Nefesh HaHayyim* offers a novel insight into the meaning of Hannah's prayer. While Hannah indeed suffered great anguish over her barrenness, she did not pray for a child to fulfill her own maternal longings. Instead, she "directed her words to Heaven." She prayed for the sake of Heaven, relating her pain to Hashem's pain, as it were. Her suffering caused suffering to the Al-mighty, a consideration that superseded her own sorrow. She beseeched Hashem for a child not for herself, but to end the suffering of the Divine Presence engendered by her suffering.

When we pray, we should not be wrapped up in our own wants and needs. If we are suffering, Hashem suffers along with us, and *His* suffering should be the focus of our prayers. A Jew's degradation is a desecration of Hashem's Name, and that should be what pains us most. We ask that He grant us salvation not for ourselves, but for His sake, in order to reveal His great Name in this world.

The *Nefesh HaHayyim* explains this concept with a parable. He describes an irresponsible youth who drinks too much and takes a life-threatening fall while drunk. He is seriously injured, and his parents look on in agony as the doctors examine their unconscious son. Eventually he comes to and his eyes flicker open. He sees the look on his parents' faces and his heart breaks at their grief. "Hashem," he prays, "I know that I deserve everything You have done to me. But please, have mercy on me, not for my sake but for the sake of my parents' misery. Heal me, not for me, but for them."

The same should be true of us. We too, like this reckless young man, get ourselves into trouble, resulting in terrible suffering. When that happens, we urgently beg Hashem to save us and help us and deliver us, and it is proper for us to do so. However, if we are true sons to the Al-mighty, and not merely servants, we will not think only of ourselves when we pray. We will understand that when we suffer, the Divine Presence suffers along with us, as it were, and that will be what really matters to us. We will ask Him to end our suffering not for ourselves, but because our salvation ends His suffering as well, elevating His honor

Prayer motivated by the desire to bring greater honor to the Al-mighty elevates our Divine service to the level achieved by profound Kabbalistic intents. This one thought – that we pray for Hashem's increased honor, rather than exclusively for our own needs – uplifts the entire concept of prayer to a different, lofty realm.

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