

"MEMAAYAN HACHAIM"

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

The Essence and Breadth of Torah is Rooted in its Connection to the Trait of "Goodness"

In tractate Menachos (53b), the Talmud cites a series of Aggadic statements by the Tanna R' Ezra, all of which follow a similar homiletic pattern. One of these says:

Let the good one come and receive the good from the Good for the good ones. He explained: **Let the good one come; this good is Moshe Rabbeinu, as it is written about him: "And when she saw him that he was a goodly child" (Exodus 2:2). And receive the good; this good is the Torah, as it is written about the Torah: "For I give you a good doctrine; do not forsake my Torah" (Proverbs 4:2). From the Good; this is referring to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is written: "The Lord is good to all" (Psalms 145:9). For the good ones; these good ones are the Jews, as it is written with regard to them: "Do good, Hashem, to the good ones" (Psalms 125:4).**

We see from here a wondrous insight: that the essence and breadth of Torah is rooted in its connection to the trait of "Goodness". The aforementioned Aggada of R' Ezra stresses that every aspect connected to Torah—the transmitter, the Giver, the nature of Torah itself, and its recipient, all must be seen as an aspect of Goodness. Thus, just as with any item which all of its components reflect a particular trait, we must assume that item possesses an essential aspect which also reflects that trait, so too we have a foundational understanding to the inner nature of kabbolas hatorah: in order to merit receiving the Torah' it is incumbent on a person to forge an all-

encompassing bond with the feature of being "good". Just as the Torah and all aspects associated with it are imbued with every type of good, we must understand that this trait is a necessary prerequisite for the fulfillment and acceptance of the Torah as well.

However, we also see that in discussing Torah, everything revolves around the concept of "Goodness". Who can receive the Torah? Only the good man, for the Torah itself is a manifestation of Goodness. As we see in Sefer Tehillim (125:4), "Do good, Hashem, to the good ones", any involvement with the Torah is perforce an action of good, for only thus can one receive the Torah. Therefore, R' Ezra tells us "Let the good one come and receive the good from the Good for the good ones": only he who possesses a manifestation of Goodness can merit to receive the Torah—the Ultimate Good, to be in its proximity, and to attain this characteristic requires purifying intimate spiritual effort.

The Gemora in Nedarim (38a) offers us another step towards a deeper understanding of the true nature of Kabbolas HaTorah. - **Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: The Torah was given initially only to Moses and his descendants, as it is stated: "Write for you" (Exodus 34:27), and it is also stated: "Hew for you" (Exodus 34:1), meaning: Just as their waste is yours, so too their writing is yours.** However, **Moses treated the Torah with generosity and gave it to the Jewish people. And about him, the verse says: "He that**

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has a bountiful eye shall be blessed, as he gives of his bread to the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).

From this passage we sharpen our discernment of the profound principle we have been discussing. Not only must our being be permeated by the trait of “Goodness” in order to merit to receive the Torah for now and into the future, but the entire experience of Kabollas HaTorah at Sinai only occurred as a result of the character trait of generosity (tov ayin Heb. – trans.) which Moshe Rabbeinu used with to the Jewish people, by transmitting to us the Torah and not retaining it for only his progeny. As such, we must likewise endeavor to plant this trait of generosity towards each and every member of Klal Yisrael deeply into our psyches. The trait of “tov ayin” was the singular merit why we possess the Torah in our generation, today.

To focus this point even more, we need to recognize that the generosity Moshe Rabbeinu possessed was not only the reason why the Torah was transmitted to Klal Yisrael. Even more, such a mida of goodness was the fundamental reason why Moshe merited to be the Lawgiver in the first place. Receiving Torah from heaven and passing it forward to the Jewish people could only happen through an individual who, suffused with goodness, expresses it in all of his ways. Only such a person can have the merit that the Torah can come down from heaven through him. The trait of goodness is the fundamental aspect of everything which pertains to Torah. Only he who is a man of goodness can truly learn Torah and transmit it to others who likewise have goodness absorbed in their souls.

With this understanding, we have a new insight into the sin of the students of Rabbi Akiva. They were, according to the Yerushalmi, suffering with the trait of “stinginess” (Heb. “tzar ayin”- transl.) one to another, or according to the Bavli, with the trait of not conducting themselves with requisite honor for each other. In these behaviors, they shattered the vessels which they could have used

for transmitting the Torah. As we have learning, the entire essence of Torah is goodness, generosity; if you don’t have these, you have nothing! What’s more, without these, you have no part in learning Torah, or in giving it over to the next generation. In order for a person to merit to be a part of the mesoras haTorah, he must excel in the trait of generosity and become a “good man”. This is the depth behind the midas hadin, the heavenly judgement which was focused on Rabbi Akiva’s students, for they were lacking in the mida fundamental to Torah, the mida of goodness. This affected their portion in Torah and their ability to transmit it. For this reason, they were judged with such a serious death.

I remember during my days learning in the Mir Yeshiva, the Gaom R’ Nochum Partzovitz zt”l. could offer no greater praise for a person than to refer to him as “ah guteh mensch”, a good man. To R’ Nochum, there was no more inclusive title of character development. Unfortunately, today we live in a generation afflicted by a “inflation” in the value of personal descriptions; even an eminent, fundamental title does not carry with it the proper value and respect. We need to recognize the all-encompassing significance of the idea—“good character”. The concept truly inherent in the descriptor “good” is nothing but—Torah, as in **The Lord is good to all**” (Psalms 145:9) and **“For I give you a good doctrine; do not forsake my Torah”** (Proverbs 4:2). When we approach the holiday of Shavuot to receive the Torah, this descriptor, this mida must fully become a part of our being, “goodness” and “generosity”. Such a “good person” will merit to learn Torah to the greatest extent and even to transmit it to others, as “good” in this sense includes all other positive character traits.

However, I want to share with you a unique thought written by the Alter from Kelm for his students based on something he heard from the founder of the Mussar Movement, R’ Yisrael Salanter zt”l. (cited in Chochma Umussar p. 26):

I think it appropriate to reveal to you what has been my deep secret for over 20 years, even close to 30 years when I was in Zager. The Rebbe (R' Yisrael, zt"l.) was there, and it was Rosh Hashana, and we arranged a private minyan. He said to me at that time something that I had never heard from him before, and I do not know if anyone had ever heard from him! It seems that he felt it was not something to be discussed in public because the broader group of students would not understand it, and indeed, would not be able to fulfill it. However, perhaps because he had heard about me that I learn mussar and that I held a position of dean in the Yeshiva, and that he wished to insure that I not stray into delusions of grandeur—he wanted to make clear to us that the essence of mussar is perfection of one's character (Heb. "middos, transl.) Therefore, he said to me an awesome thought, which could only be said by someone as great as he.

The Alter of Kelm continues: He explained: we know that the Torah is not predetermined from heaven, but rather it is given to the Sages of every generation, dwellers on this earth, to determine the calendar for the holidays, to establish punishments of excision for serious sins and the four capital punishments. All of these halachic pronouncements are all determined by the Court in this world, and based on these temporal decisions the law is determined in heaven as well. The earthly judge only has what is apparent to his eyes, what is understood to his portion of wisdom. Being the case, the judge must initially work to perfect his midos, and then, his vision will not be distorted by the "bribe" of bad character. He will truly have "eyes to see". On the other hand, if the judge does not perfect himself in his midos first, he is not fit to be a judge; even if he might once connect to the truth in his decision, his Torah **is not Torah whatsoever!**

Torah is not determined in heaven—"It is not in heaven" (Devarim 30:12)—and I have tried to explain this at some length because the Rebbe spoke to me in a very terse fashion. Extremely powerful words.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zt"l., the founder of the Mussar Movement, provides us with the innovative thought that the core of the study of mussar is the perfection of character. And since "we know that the Torah is not predetermined from heaven, but rather it is given to the Sages of every generation . . . and based on these temporal decisions the law is determined in heaven as well. The earthly judge only has what is apparent to his eyes"... that is, the laws of the Torah are today given over to the judges, and therefore, R' Yisrael tells us, there is an obligation on every judge to initially work to perfect his midos", to insure that "he will have eyes to see". If the judge does not perfect his character, even if he is successful in determining the halacha according to the truth of the Torah, "his Torah **is not Torah whatsoever!**"

With this approach, we learn a profound lesson—besides the fact that a person must work on perfecting his midos in order that his Torah "will be Torah", from a detailed analysis of this thought it appears that the actual format of the halachic decisions will depend on the level of character growth of the judge himself, as we see in the phrase, "the judge only has what his eyes see". Torah is transmitted only through the nature of a person himself, and only through his character and his personality will it be possible to transmit to future generations his accurate halachic renderings. How great, then, is the obligation to perfect our midos, how great, as learners and teacher of Torah, is our obligation to be infused with the mida of "goodness", the diadem of all quality traits, as R' Ezra tells us: **Let the good one come and receive the good from the Good for the good ones.** Indeed, why do we learn Torah, if not to delve into Hashem's wisdom and to determine the halacha to practice in this world, for "It is not in heaven". The only preparation for growth in Torah is toil in character development and mussar.

To put a finer point on this idea, I have found some supporting texts. In Tanach, there are 2 prophets who merited to receive a vision of "the Divine Throne" in their lifetimes. The first is Yechezkel,

who writes at length with great excitement about that which we know as “the Visions of Yechezkel” (cf. chap. 1-3). The second is the Prophet Yeshayahu, who also describes these same visions, but in a completely different way—terse, cryptic. We can ask: both Prophets saw the same vision, and yet one waxed euphoric, one was curt. Why the difference?

The Gemora in Chagiga (13b) answers: § **Rava said: All that Ezekiel saw, the prophet Isaiah saw** as well, but the latter did not find it necessary to describe his vision in such detail. **To what may Ezekiel be compared? To a villager who saw the king** and is excited by all the extravagances of the king’s palace and everything it contains, as he is unaccustomed to them. **And to what may Isaiah be compared? To a city dweller who saw the king.** Such an individual focuses on the encounter with the king, and is oblivious to all the distractions.

Rashi adds: Yeshayahu didn’t concern himself with details because “he was of royal lineage and grew up in the palace of the king”; as a resident of the palace city he wasn’t overwhelmed and didn’t feel the need to explain the details.” We see, that while Yeshayahu saw the same vision as Yechezkel, his expression of what he saw as royalty had a kingly value, and hence, he could describe the vision with patience and a lack of wonder. Yechezkel, on the other hand, was a village dweller, unaccustomed to the quality of the visions of the royal throne. Therefore, he articulates the vision with wonder and amazement, delving into the details of what we recognize that the “Visions of Yechezkel”.

Whom are we discussing? Prophets of Hashem, who are seeing a vision of the Divine Throne! Yet, we see that each Prophet sees, and writes, only through the prism of his own character, his own

personality. According to the qualities of his soul can he give over his prophetic vision. We see from here that Torah, and even Prophecy, can only be transmitted through the nature of the individual, his qualities and his soul. How much does this insight demand from us to sharpen ourselves with mussar and good character traits so that Torah and halacha which we learn can pass through us to those we teach in a pristine pure way.

We need to understand that during these days of “Matan Torah” in order to merit true Kabollas haTorah, we must prepare by purifying our character to be worthy of the Torah. The key principle is to refine and accept within ourselves the mida of “goodness”, for the Torah and all aspects associated with it are imbued with every type of good. This is the fundamental inherent nature of Torah. This is the meaning of R’ Ezra’s aggada-- **Let the good one come and receive the good from the Good for the good ones**—only one who possesses in depth the mida of “goodness” can merit to receive Torah and transmit it to others who also possess this trait. “The judge only has what his eyes see”—if a person is bribed and is disgusting in his character development, how can he have “eyes to see”? Torah and even Prophecy can only pass through the soul of a person, according to his nature and character, and so too the halachic decisions of the judges can only pass on to the next generation.



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

The next Essay for the month of Tammuz will be published the week of Parashas Chukas



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