



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS *Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita*

As Pesach ends, we pick up our well-worn copies of Pirkei Avos. Come along with me and share in their holy thoughts and guidance.

Avos Perek 1 Mishna 2

As one gets older it seems medical science has an ever-increasing amount of pills on offer. Morning and night I juggle the ever-increasing array of mendicants in my hand before gobbling them down with water. There is one pill I have yet to be prescribed and I hope I never need to. It is a pill that has within it a camera, a light source and a small battery. The idea is that when swallowed this pill will beam out pictures of one's entire insides. Doctors will then be able to discern if there are any physical problems lurking within one's body.

I was fascinated by this, and it got me to wonder. Do you think they will ever find a pill that will be able to show us the insides of our minds, our hearts or, even more vitally, our souls? Not likely.

Our heart and soul is the one place where no human eye can invade - and this makes them much more vulnerable. Where no one can go, anything can find itself. With this in mind, let us look at the second mishna in the first chapter of Avos:

"Shimon Hatzaddik was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, 'The world stands on three things - on Torah, on Avoda, and on Gemilus Chassodim'.

The Maharal tells us that everything exists through Hashem - all existence flows from Him to this world at every moment. Our mishna reveals an astounding fact. Man is the link between this world and Hashem. Thus, the world relies on our deeds for its continued existence. Even more, it is through this existence that we as individuals become a world.

But how are we to combine those three facets so that each part blends with the other? In Torah study we have an axiom: "The last thing is the most important." The mishna places acts of loving-kindness last. We can therefore extrapolate that chessed is the

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ingredient that gives strength to the other two. Torah and avoda without the compassion found through chessed would do little in opening up one's true heart.

Unfortunately, there is a certain lack of understanding when it comes to acts of chessed. On one hand, no generation has seen so much chessed being done as ours. Huge amounts of time and effort are expended for the sake of the community. Vast sums of charity are given, making it possible to build and support as never before.

But there is another aspect to chessed, one which is more intimate and thus more difficult. It is acts of kindness shown to each other on a daily basis - the friendly hello, the smile on the street, standing up for elders - yes, even holding open a door for one another. It's called good manners, and it's as simple as saying "please" and "thank you." Yet if we're honest, we would admit that these everyday kindnesses are slipping away from our communal behavior. I've seen doors closed in others' faces neighbors being pushed aside in order to be first to a Kiddush, the absence of a simple "gut Shabbos" in the street. Young people have bad manners because they don't see better behaviour from their elders. We are taught 'Derech erez kadma laTorah' - One must have good manners before one can become a Torah scholar.

Every biography of our Gedolim is strewn with examples of their constant awareness of their fellow man's feelings. Each Gadol was a living sefer of chessed through daily caring. Torah and avoda that is permeated with chessed will reach into the soul and give of its special light.

Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk tells us, "Until the time of the Ari Hakadosh, the world stood on Torah. Now it stands on acts of kindness."

Among the students of the Baal Shem Tov was the tzaddik Reb Hershel Nedvornor. He, in turn, had a student by the name of Reb Shmuel Kamenka, who was renowned for his acts of chessed. He once related how all his efforts on behalf of others stemmed from a great lesson he once learned from his Rebbe.

At the age of seventeen, Shmuel came to the Rebbe's beis medrash, desperately searching for the wisdom and inspiration of a Torah life. At first, he didn't have much direct contact with the tzaddik. He sat and learned in the beis medrash, soaking up the words of the elder chassidim. They explained that to reach the highest realms of Shabbos observance, one should prepare for the holy day by saying Tehillim in its entirety on Friday. The whole group would all rise extremely early on Friday morning, and after immersing themselves in the mikve, they would begin their fervent Tehillim recitation.

At first, Shmuel found this difficult. To say the whole of Tehillim without interruption, without talking out even once - it just seemed impossible. Week after week he tried, each time coming a bit closer to his goal. Finally, one erev Shabbos, after rising particularly early, Shmuel was close to finishing. Just a few passages left to go... Suddenly the Rebbe's gabbai came running into the beis medrash. "Shmulik! The Rebbe is calling you!"

Such a privilege was rare indeed, but Shmuel wanted to finish his psalms. He motioned with his hand, "Nuch a minut." The gabbai understood and vanished.

A few seconds passed. Shmuel was almost finished when the gabbai returned out of breath. "Shmulik, the Rebbe said now!"

Shmuel figured the Rebbe must have something very holy to share with him. If not, why would he stop

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him just when he was about to finish his Tehillim?

“At that moment,” he later related, “I loved my Rebbe so deeply I would have done anything for him. I ran into his room - and what did I find? There stretched out on the floor, crying and out of control, was Moishele, the town drunkard.”

At this point, let me add a historical fact. In times of yore, especially in the small shtetlech of Eastern Europe, each community took care of its own problems. There were always certain characters that were tended to by the general community. Moishele was one of the most famous drunkards around - the joke was that he drank for the whole of Poland.

Reb Shmuel continued his story. “As I walked into the Rebbe’s room, the Rebbe called me over. ‘Shmulik, Moshe is crying because he has no money for Shabbos. His wife and family are destitute, and no one wants to give them money because they know Moshe will drink the money away. I want you to go around town and collect charity on his behalf. Give the money to his wife and let her and her children have a decent Shabbos.’

“I was stricken to the core. The Rebbe couldn’t let me finish my Tehillim before ordering me to waste my erev Shabbos collecting money for this drunkard? How could the Rebbe do this? I was so close, feeling so holy - and he knocks me down with such a low job. To tell the truth, I was resentful and hurt. In fact, that whole day, while I went door-to-door collecting for Moishele, I thought of only one thing - after Shabbos I would leave and seek another Rebbe.

“The whole Shabbos was tinged by my bitterness. Directly after Havdala, I went to pack my bags. Just as I was finishing, the Rebbe’s gabbai came knocking at my door. ‘Shmulik, the Rebbe wants to see you!’

“I went with him, determined to leave shortly. Before I could say a word, the Rebbe addressed my complaints. ‘Shmulik, do you really think I don’t know what you are feeling? But the truth is, Hashem didn’t need you to recite Tehillim as much as Moishele’s family needed you to collect funds for their Shabbos. Hashem has time, but a man as broken as Moishele has no more time.’

With these words, the great Reb Shmuel finished his tale.

Torah, avoda and gemilas chasadim meshed into one - then and forever.