

Pirkei Avot 3:10

God or Others – Which Comes First?

He (Rabbi Chaninah Ben Dosa) would also say: One who is pleasant with his fellow men, is pleasing to God. But one who is not pleasing to his fellow men, is not pleasing to God.

Rabbi Chaninah Ben Dosa teaches us that people's reaction to a particular person is the litmus test for whether or not God is pleased with that person. As the commentaries on this *mishnah* write, "A person who is beloved on earth, it is a known fact that he is beloved Above" (*Rashi* and Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura). Once, [\[1\]](#) the Ba'al Shem Tov exited his room and simply recited this *mishnah* to his holy disciples without adding a thing. The disciples found it wondrous. The teaching penetrated deep into their souls and awakened "self-movement" within them. The Ba'al Shem Tov was able to affect this because a *tzaddik* speaks the words of Torah in an illuminating manner, which infuses his words deep into the hearts of his listeners.

From this we learn that the primary service of God is specifically between man and his fellow. This should be the starting point. Be sure that you are even-tempered and calm with your fellow man. This does not mean to falsely say or do things to please others, but rather to have a pleasant demeanor and to approach others in an equitable manner. If your conduct is pleasant with others, you can be sure it is pleasant to God, as well.

This is the secret of the name "Noah," which is the same word as "even-tempered" (נָח). When the Torah first mentions him, it repeats his name twice in succession, "These are the deeds [or, annals] of Noah; Noah [was...]." According to the *midrash*, the seeming repetition (caused by the structure of the complex statement made in the verse) refers below and above: "Noah was pleasant to himself, pleasant to the world, pleasant to parents, pleasant to children, pleasant above and pleasant below." Because he was pleasant to his fellow men, he was pleasing to God above. [\[2\]](#)

By contrast, from the verse, "And you shall be clean [from suspicions] before God and before Israel," [\[3\]](#) we learn that first, we must be unblemished before God and only then before other people, and if we cannot be considered unblemished by both then we should prefer to be unblemished before God. [\[4\]](#)

For example, it is written in the Talmud [\[5\]](#) that if a rabbi is beloved by his entire congregation, it is a sign that he does not reprimand them appropriately. Naturally, the rabbi does not want members of his congregation to dislike him, but because he should be primarily concerned with upholding his duty before God, inevitably there will be members of his congregation who will dislike him.

Another example of this principle is found in the following description,

The scrupulous (lit., clean of intellect) men of Jerusalem would act in the following manner: they would not sign a document unless they knew who was signing with

them, and they would not sit in judgment unless they knew who was sitting with them, and they would not join a meal unless they knew who was eating with them.^[6]

This might be considered an example of extreme cleanliness, careful of any hint of dirt which may promote a sense of keeping one's distance from others. We can sum up by saying that one should be pleasant to other people and then pleasant towards God and yet, one should first be clean before God and only then clean before other men. So, which comes first? How can we reconcile the two different recommendations?

The way out of the confusion begins by realizing that being pleasant is associated with loving-kindness, the *sefirah* of *chessed*, which lies on the right axis of the *sefirot*. *Chessed* causes influx into the world, from above to below. It is associated with the right hand that draws others close. Thus, its focus is first and foremost on others. By acting in a pleasant manner with other people, one merits to find favor and be pleasing to God. This principle also applies to the *mitzvah* of love, which acts through the right axis. The Alter Rebbe teaches that the *mitzvah* to love our fellow Jew is greater than *mitzvah* to love God because when we love our fellow Jew, we love one whom our beloved God loves.^[7] The consummate love of God is thus best expressed by loving others.

On the other hand, serving God through cleanliness acts through the left axis. It is the service identified with might and the *sefirah* of *gevurah*, related also to fear of Heaven. The left hand, identified with the *sefirah* of might serves to distance others. Cleanliness before God is a dynamic that distances oneself from others while being pleasing to others leads to closeness.

We must simultaneously practice both dynamics—loving-kindness associated with the right axis and might associated with the left axis, with the purpose of achieving interinclusion between them. This is the secret of the Binding of Isaac, when Abraham, whose soul is archetypical of the right axis, the man of loving-kindness, and of drawing others close to God interincluded with Isaac, the man of might and cleanliness. The numerical values of pleasant (גַּת) and “clean” (נִקְיִי) together equal “smell” (רִיחַ), implying that the ultimate purpose of working with both dynamics—the right and the left together—is to offer up a sweet smell before God.

^[1] See the *sichah* of *Simchat Torah* 5705.

^[2] *Bereisheet rabbah* 30:5. See also *Zohar* 1:58b.

^[3] Numbers 32:22.

^[4] *Mei Hashiloach*, *Vayeshev*, “*Vayehi Er.*”

^[5] *Ketubot*

^[6] *Sanhedrin* 23a.



Gal Einai

Revealing the Torah's
Inner Dimension

[\[7\]](#) Luach Hayom Yom 28 Sivan.