

6:6

גְּדוּלָהּ תוֹרָה מִן הַכֹּהֲנָה וּמִן הַמְּלָכוֹת, שֶׁהַמְּלָכוֹת –
 בְּשִׁלְשִׁים מַעֲלוֹת, וְהַכֹּהֲנָה – בְּעֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבַּע,
 וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְנִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמוֹנֶה דְּבָרִים: בְּתַלְמוּד,
 בְּשִׁמְיעַת הָאָזָן, בְּעִרְכַת שְׁפָתַיִם, בְּבִינַת הַלֵּב, בְּשִׂכּוּלֹת
 הַלֵּב, בְּאִימָה, בְּיִרְאָה, בְּעִנּוּהַ, בְּשִׁמְחָה, בְּשִׁמוּשׁ חֲכָמִים,
 בְּדְבוּק חֲבָרִים, בְּפִלְפוּל הַתְּלַמִּידִים, בְּיָשׁוּב, בְּמִקְרָא,
 בְּמִשְׁנָה, בְּמַעֲוֵט שָׁנָה, בְּמַעֲוֵט שִׁיחָה, בְּמַעֲוֵט תַּעֲנוּג,
 בְּמַעֲוֵט שְׁחוּק, בְּמַעֲוֵט דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ, בְּאֶרֶץ אֲפִים, בְּלֵב טוֹב,
 בְּאַמוּנַת חֲכָמִים, וּבְקִבְלַת הַיְסוּדִין, הַמְּכִיר אֶת מְקוֹמוֹ,
 וְהַשְׂמַח בְּחֵלְקוֹ, וְהַעוֹשֶׂה סִיג לְדַבְּרָיו, וְאִינוֹ מַחֲזִיק טוֹבָה
 לְעַצְמוֹ, אֲהוּב, אֲהוּב אֶת הַמְּקוֹם, אֲהוּב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת,
 אֲהוּב אֶת הַצְּדָקוֹת, אֲהוּב אֶת הַתּוֹכָחוֹת, אֲהוּב אֶת הַמִּי
 שְׂרִים, מִתְרַחֵק מִן הַכְּבוֹד, וְלֹא מְגִיס לְבוֹ בְּתַלְמוּדוֹ, וְאִינוֹ
 שֹׂמֵחַ בְּהוֹרָאָה, נוֹשֵׂא בְּעַל עִם חֲבֵרוֹ, וּמְכַרִּיעוֹ לְכַף זְכוּת,
 וּמַעֲמִידוֹ עַל הָאֵמֶת, וּמַעֲמִידוֹ עַל הַשְּׁלוֹם, וּמְתִישֵׁב
 בְּתַלְמוּדוֹ, שׁוֹאֵל וּמְשִׁיב שׁוּמֵעַ וּמוֹסִיף הַלְּמִיד עַל מִנַּת
 לְלַמֵּד, וְהַלְּמִיד עַל מִנַּת לְעֹשׂוֹת, הַמְּחַכִּים אֶת רַבּוֹ, וְהַמְּכַוֵּן
 אֶת שְׁמוּעָתוֹ, וְהַאֲזִינֵנוּ דְּבַר בְּשֵׁם אֲזִינֵנוּ. הֵיא לְמַדְתָּ שְׁכַל
 הַאֲזִינֵנוּ דְּבַר בְּשֵׁם אֲזִינֵנוּ מִבִּיא גְּאֻלָּה לְעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
 וְתִאֲמַר אֲסִתֵּר לְמַלְךְ בְּשֵׁם מֶרְדֵּכִי (אֶסְתֵּר ב:כב).

Torah is greater than priesthood or royalty; for royalty is acquired along with thirty prerogatives, and the priesthood with twenty-four [gifts], but the Torah is acquired by means of forty-eight qualities, which are: study, attentive listening, articulate speech, intuitive understanding, discernment, awe, reverence, modesty, joy, purity, ministering to the sages, closeness with colleagues, sharp discussion with students, deliberation, [knowledge of] Scripture, Mishnah, limited

business activity, limited sexual activity, limited pleasure, limited sleep, limited conversation, limited laughter, slowness to anger, a good heart, faith in the sages, acceptance of suffering, knowing one's place, being happy with one's lot, making a protective fence around one's personal matters, claiming no credit for oneself, being beloved, loving the Omnipresent, loving [God's] creatures, loving righteous ways, loving justice, loving reproof, keeping far from honor, not being arrogant with one's learning, not enjoying halachic decision-making, sharing one's fellow's yoke, judging one favorably, setting one on the truthful course, setting one on the peaceful course, thinking deliberately in one's study, asking and answering, listening and contributing to the discussion, learning in order to teach, learning in order to practice, making one's teacher wiser, pondering over what one has learned, and repeating a saying in the name of the one who said it. For you have learned this: Whoever repeats a word in the name of the one who said it brings redemption to the world, as it is said: "And Esther said to the king in the name of Mordechai" (Esther 2:22).

AS WE APPROACH the end of *Pirkei Avot*, the Rabbis return to the essence of Jewish pedagogy: engaging with the timeless wisdom of the Torah. Indeed, the most beautiful aspect of Torah engagement is that it is never complete. It requires a lifetime of study, a lifetime of dedication, which foster a lifetime of character development. This mishnah lists so many "qualities" needed for spiritual growth because learning is neither mere intellectual activity, nor an automatic route to enlightened bliss. It mirrors the rest of life—sometimes tedious and grueling, always arduous. One stays true to one's purpose through the necessary engagement with one's need to grow in one's spiritual self.

Torah study and self-improvement are not just ends in themselves, but are also the means to supporting others. We prepare ourselves for moral decisions yet to be made. The late Professor Steve Covey, best known for his work *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, attributed

much of his thinking to a quote⁴⁵⁹ that he believed Viktor Frankl to have written; the source of the quote has been up for dispute,⁴⁶⁰ but its message still resonates. Indeed, this thought that the “moral moment” is the one between stimulus and response is a powerful reminder that our actions have tangible consequences on the world around us. The quote reads in part: “In that space [after a stimulus] is our power to choose our response . . . [and] in our response lies our growth and our freedom.” While other animals have predictable responses to particular stimuli, humans are blessed with the capacity to pause and think before making choices, moral or immoral. Through education, experience, and knowledge, people learn to make decisions with the hope that they land on the moral side of each choice.

Self-improvement is an ongoing project. Learning Torah, supporting Israel, helping the Jewish poor, funding Jewish day schools—there seem to be endless specifically Jewish concerns. How can one justify giving time to more-universal social justice issues? Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook writes:

There are some righteous individuals who are very great and powerful, who cannot limit themselves to *K'neset Yisrael* [the Jewish community] alone, and they are always concerned for the good of the entire world. . . . These *tzaddikim* [righteous people] cannot be nationalists in the external sense of the term because they cannot stand any hatred, or iniquity, or limitation of good and mercy, and they are good to all, as the attributes of the Holy One of Blessing is good to all and God's compassion is over all of God's works.⁴⁶¹

There are some who will give their holy energy largely to their family, and others who will prioritize building the Jewish community and Israel with all of their might. These are wonderful and necessary endeavors. But Rabbi Kook, a pluralist attuned to the diversity and complexity of souls, teaches that there are righteous others who cannot remain parochial, but need to go beyond the Jewish community.

Too many leaders, both in Jewish social justice movements and beyond, feel marginalized from the Jewish community. Some even describe themselves as bad Jews. The opposite is true. Those dedicating themselves to supporting the poor, sick, and alienated are model Jews,

even if they are not religiously devout in other ways. Abraham was chosen precisely because he was committed to *tzedakah umishpat*, pursuing justice. Lurianic Kabbalah teaches that our role in this world is to find hidden sparks, liberate them from their evil shells (*k'lipot*), and elevate them. Social justice activists who support the vulnerable do exactly this.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Musar movement, teaches that there are two steps to controlling negative desire: *kibush hayetzer*, conquering and controlling one's desire, and *tikkun hayetzer*, repairing/fixing one's desire. Desire is difficult to control, so we rely on both steps in the midst of moral challenges. By contrast, Chasidic thought suggests that we channel our negative desire toward the good, without losing any of its energy or force.

Let's examine moral courage at a time when the stakes were high. Raphael Benjamin West, mayor of Nashville from 1951 to 1963, was content with the status quo in this "Athens of the South"—a city that prided itself on institutions of higher learning and classical architecture. This façade, however, masked the ugliness of Nashville's racial segregation. In early 1960, after the lunch counter sit-ins began in the South, Fisk University students began their own. Black students waited in vain to be served, while their white peers asked that their black companions be served first. At first, Mayor West was placid, milquetoast. When white gangs attacked the protestors, police arrested and jailed those being attacked. Mayor West offered separate black and white lunch counters, which was rejected by the students. Then the home of Z. Alexander Looby—a prominent black lawyer and civil rights leader—was firebombed; students led twenty-five hundred protesters in silence to the steps of City Hall. Student leader Diane Nash asked the mayor, "Do *you* feel it is wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of their race or color?" Mayor West later recalled:

I found that I had to answer it frankly and honestly—that I did not agree that it was morally right for someone not to sell them merchandise and refuse them service. . . . If I had to answer it again I would answer it in the same way again because it was a moral question and it was one a man has to answer and not a politician.⁴⁶²

Mayor West surprised everyone by replying, "I appeal to all citizens to end discrimination, to have no bigotry, no bias, no discrimination."⁴⁶³ Nashville became the first city in the South to desegregate lunch counters. Diane Nash later served on a presidential commission to promote the passage of the Civil Rights Act and worked for social justice causes for decades.

Many Jews also took up the cause of civil rights with fervor. While Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is usually the first name that appears in the popular conception of Jews marching with Martin Luther King, there were many other Jewish leaders and clergy putting themselves in harm's way to stand up for what was right. As just one example, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, of The Temple in Atlanta, one of the most vibrant Reform synagogues in the South, made it well known that he was on the side of equality for all people. In response to his activism voice against bigotry, The Temple was bombed in 1958. But Rabbi Rothschild did not give in to fear and was soon back to advocating for what was right. When Martin Luther King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, Rabbi Rothschild organized a banquet in his honor.⁴⁶⁴

Moral leadership requires quick decisions in uncertain, cacophonous, and often hostile environments. Once there is moral clarity, we must move quickly. To pursue the good, Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto teaches that we must run to seize the opportunity:

Alacrity consists of two elements: one that relates to the period prior to the commencement of a deed, and the other that relates to the period that follows the commencement of a deed. The former means that prior to the commencement of a mitzvah a person must not delay (its performance). Rather, when its time arrives, or when the opportunity (for its fulfillment) presents itself, or when it enters our mind, we must react speedily, without delay, to seize the mitzvah and to do it. We must not procrastinate at this time, for no danger is graver than this. Every new moment can bring with it some new hindrance to the fulfillment of the good deed.⁴⁶⁵

One must first know the good, and then one must be ready to run with full force toward completion of the good. Many obstacles, even from well-intentioned people, are sure to arise.

Even in the midst of terrible tragedy, individuals can make moral choices. In January 2015, terrorists went on a rampage, killing innocent people who worked for the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. An associate of these terrorists split off to find victims from among the Parisian Jews. He found them at a kosher supermarket, where people were getting last-minute items before Shabbat. Lassana Bathily, a Muslim native of Mali who immigrated to France as a teen, worked at the market. When the Islamic terrorist broke into the store and murdered four people, Bathily guided Jewish customers to refuge and survival in the store's freezer. After this incident, 420,000 people signed a successful petition for the French government to grant Bathily citizenship. Bathily said, "Yes, I helped Jews get out. We're brothers. It's not that we're Jewish or Christian or Muslim, we're all in the same boat. You help so you can get through this attack."⁴⁶⁶

To demonstrate *z'rizut*, "alacrity," run fast to do what's right when the opportunity presents itself. Some live their lives this way, and we should find these remarkable human beings and cling to them. Receive their light, and channel it to others. When they are attacked, stand at their side, even if it's difficult. Watch these moral models who operate with higher consciousness and consistent commitment to serving others.

When tempted to do wrong, lengthen the pause between stimulus and response, to reflect and steer closer to the moral direction. On the other hand, when presented with the opportunity to do good, shorten that pause, and simply run toward the good.