



Volume 10. Issue 43

OBVIOUS OPPOSITES

The second *perek* of *Avot* discusses the question asked by *Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai* to his *talmidim* when seeking advice for the appropriate *middot* a person should strive to attain. His *talmidim* provide him with a range of answers including a good eye (*R' Eliezer*), a good friend (*R' Yehoshua*), a good neighbour (*R' Yossi*) and realising the consequences of one's actions (*R' Shimon*). *R' Elazar* though, gives the best advice in the eyes of his Teacher with his suggestion of a good heart, which as the *Mishnah* points out, includes all the other answers.

This exchange is followed by a discussion where *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai* asks his *Talmidim* the opposite question, i.e. what are the *middot* that a person should distance himself from, and all his *talmidim* seem to give the converse answer to their original suggestions.¹

Why does *R' Yochanan* ask them about the negative *middot* when it seems quite obvious and logical that it should be the opposite of the good *middot* that one should strive to attain?

Rabbeinu Yonah suggests that it is not so evident that the opposing trait of each of the positive traits would be considered negative. There are a number of positive traits that exist where the opposite of that trait is not necessarily negative. For example, the *middah* of *chasidut* (saintliness) is usually demonstrated when one goes beyond the letter of the law. The opposite of *chasidut* would be where one behaves exactly as the Torah mandates. This is not a negative trait to have and should rather be the minimum expected in fulfilling *avodat Hashem*. It is for this reason and that the Rabbis were required to explicitly mention each *middah*, as it is not certain that the opposite of a positive *middah* necessarily equates to a negative trait. This is demonstrated in our *Mishnah* where the opposite of an "*ayin tovah*" is intuitively someone who is stingy (an *ayin ra'ah*), which is not necessarily against the strict letter of the law, and thus must be called out by *R' Eliezer* as a negative *middah*.

The *Magen Avot* states that *Rabban Yochanan* needed to ask his *Talmidim* the opposite question because the

achieving of the positive *middot* may be viewed as a goal that only a *gadol* and *talmid chacham* must strive to attain. These *middot* are all quite challenging to achieve and 'regular' laypeople may not be on the level required to reach these *middot*. Therefore, he asks his *talmidim* for their suggestions that people should distance themselves from - which is a more achievable task for the whole nation.

The *Lev Avot* explains that *Rabban Yochanan* wanted to demonstrate and make it clear to his *talmidim* the harm that can come to a person who displays bad *middot* and chases evil. Therefore, he made them articulate each of the positive attributes, and then reinforce the negative attributes in order that they should be aware of them explicitly, despite their inferred nature.

The *Lev Avot* adds that there are two requirements that allow a person to improve his *middot*. Not only must he work on his actions in a positive manner, he must also distance himself from all evil and negative attributes that may be blocking him from achieving spiritual growth. Therefore even though there may be many negative attributes that may influence a person, *Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai* asked his students to provide him with the most extreme examples that a person should ensure distances himself from. It is these examples that are mentioned and which each *talmid* distanced themselves from, in order to assist in reaching the optimum opposing positive attribute.

This explanation of the *Lev Avot* follows a similar theme to that found in *Tehillim Perek* (34) which states "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days to see goodness?... Separate from evil and do good". It is not enough for a person to only work on only the positive attributes and to ignore the opposing negative traits, and vice versa. It is only by distancing from evil traits, and then working on the positive that true sustainable spiritual growth can be achieved. Perhaps, this is the lesson that *Rabban Yochanan* wanted to stress to his *Talmidim*, no matter how simple it may seem.

Yehuda Gottlieb

¹ With the exception of *R' Shimon* who seemingly provides an answer unrelated to his first suggestion, however some commentators including

the *Rambam* seem to say that even this answer is the converse of his original answer.

Revision Questions

אבות ב' ד': ג' א'

- Complete the following statement: (בי: ד')
 עשה רצונו כרצונך, _____
 בטל רצונך מפני רצונו, _____
- What five statements did *Hillel* make beginning with *אֵל*? (די: א')
- What did *Hillel* say regarding: (ה: ה')
 - *A boor*?
 - *An am ha'aretz*?
 - *A bayshan*?
 - *A kapdan*?
 - One who increases in business?
- What did *Hillel* say when he saw a skull floating in the water? (בי: ו')
- Complete the following statements? (ז: ז')
 - מרבה בשר מרבה _____, מרבה נכסים מרבה _____;
 - מרבה עבדים מרבה _____, מרבה שפחות מרבה _____;
 - מרבה נשים מרבה _____, מרבה תורה מרבה _____;
 - מרבה ישיבה מרבה _____.
 - קנה שם טוב, קנה _____;
 - קנה דברי תורה, קנה _____.
- Complete the following statement of *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai*: (ח: ח')
 אם למדת תורה הרבה _____, _____
- Who were the five student of *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai* and how did he describe each of them? (ח: ח')
- What did each of them think is the "straight path" to which one should attach themselves and with who did *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai* agree? (ה: ט')
- What did each of them think is the "evil path" which one should avoid and with who did *R' Yochanan ben Zakkai* agree? (ה: ט')
- What were the "three" statements of *R' Eliezer ben Hurkanus*? (ב: י')
- According to *R' Yehoshua* what three things "remove a person from the world"? (ב: י"א)
- What are the three statements of *R' Yosi*? (ב: י"ב)
- What three things did *R' Shimon* say regarding *tefillah*? (ב: י"ג)
- What three things did *R' Elazar* say regarding learning? (ב: י"ד)
- Complete the following statement of *R' Tarfon*: (ב: ט"ו)
 היום _____, והמלאכה _____, והפועלים _____,
 והשכר _____, ובעל הבית _____
- What else did *R' Tarfon* say regarding work? (ב: ט"ז)
- What three things does *R' Tarfon* say regarding the reward for learning? (ב: ט"ז)
- According to *Akavya ben Mehalalel* if one looks at what three things will he not sin? (ג: א')

Local Shiurim

Melbourne, Australia

Sunday -Thursday
 10 minutes before *Mincha*
Mizrachi Shul
 Melbourne, Australia

Friday & Shabbat
 10 minutes before *Mincha*
Beit Ha'Roeh
 Melbourne, Australia

Efrat, Israel

Shiur in English

Sunday -Thursday
 Rabbi Mordechai Scharf
 9:00am
Kollel Magen Avraham
 Reemon Neighbourhood

ONLINE SHIURIM

Rabbi Chaim Brown
www.shemayisrael.com/mishna/

Rav Meir Pogrow
613.org/mishnah.html

Rabbi E. Kornfeld
Rabbi C. Brown
<http://www.dafyomi.co.il/calendars/myomi/myomi-thisweek.htm>

SHIUR ON KOL HALOSHON

Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss
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Next Week's Mishnayot...

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | שבת קודש |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 8 th December ה' טבת | 9 th December ו' טבת | 10 th December ז' טבת | 11 th December ח' טבת | 12 th December ט' טבת | 13 th December י' טבת | 14 th December י"א טבת |
| Avot 3:2-3 | Avot 3:4-5 | Avot 3:6-7 | Avot 3:8-9 | Avot 3:10-11 | Avot 3:12-13 | Avot 3:14-15 |

