PIRQE ABOT: Who wants to be a Hasid?

כי ידוע הוא שהמעלה הגדולה אשר אין אחריה מעלה היא שיהיה האדם
טוב לשמים וטוב לבריות

מגן אבות לרשב”ץ, הקדמה

Rabbi Shimon Duran (Rashbets, 1361-1444) explains in his commentary to Pirqe Abot that the reason we study this treatise of the Mishna before Shabuot is to reach the level of “Hasid”. “Hasid” is usually translated by pious, or devoted Jew. Or more popularly as “ultra-religious”. Let’s see now how Rabbi Duran understood the concept of “Hasid” 600 years ago.
The Hasid stands at a level above that of the Tsadiq, the righteous man. Rabbi Duran quotes the Gemara in Qiddushin 40a that says that a person could be a “non-righteous tsadiq” . For instance, if someone is very meticulous in his relationship with God, but does not behave well towards people, or vice versa. Rabbi Duran explains that “the highest level of religious observance, above which there is no other level, is when a Yehudi is simultaneously good to HaShem and good to other people.” If one of these two dimensions does not exist, religious observance is incomplete. The Hasid is the Yehudi who observes the commandments toward God, and he also behaves correctly, with love and concern for others. This idea is based on two texts of the Gemara where the concept of “Hasid” appears.

In the Gemara Berakhot the Rabbis said that the “First Hasidim” (that is, the epitome of the role model individuals of the Jewish people) use to pray for three hours, three times a day. In other words, they spent most of the day praying to God. From here we see that one can not be a Hasid if he or she does not maintain a deep and close relationship with HaShem.

On the other hand, another Gemara mentions the Hasidim

Rishonim, those who were praying nine hours per day, in a different scene, as role models of a strict moral behavior. The example that the Gemara brings is incredibly modern. These Hasidim, the Gemara in Baba Qama 30a says, were very careful in the way they disposed of their garbage. If they had to get rid of broken glass or thorny branches, they would dig a hole three feet deep and threw this type of garbage there, so that no damage would occur to anyone, not even to someone who years later would be plowing that parcel of land.

This selfless love for people, which translates into the desire to avoid causing harm to others, is what earned them the name of Hasidim (remember that the word “Hasid” comes from “Hesed”, which means “kindness”, “doing good deeds for other people”).

In this way, rabbi Duran says, the Gemara gives us a complete and full picture of what it means to be a “Hasid” . On the one hand, whoever wants to be a Hasid must build and maintain a very close connection with HaShem. And on the other hand, he or she must love people and be very careful in dealing with others, doing everything in his power to help and to avoid causing harm to another human being, directly or indirectly.

Rabbi Duran now concludes: Why studying Pirqe About as a preparation for receiving the Tora? Because this Mishna contains the words of the Rabbis as to how to become a Hasid, in other words, how to be a good Jew with God and with our neighbor.