PIRQE ABOT: The ideal Jew

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 introduction to the commentary of Pirqe Abot, Magen Abot, that the reason we study this Mishna before Shabuot, is to prepare ourselves to reach the level of “Hasidut”.

“Hasid” is translated today as pious, or is usually associated with a movement of followers of a prominent rabbinical figure. We will see now how Rabbi Duran defined the concept of “Hasid” in his book. Rabbi Duran quotes the Gemara in Qiddushin 40a saying that we might find a man that is a “tsadiq”, a righteous man, but not a good man. For example, when someone is very scrupulous in his relationship with God, but does not behave well towards his or her peers. Rabbi Duran explains that “the highest level, above which there is no other level, is when a person is good toward HaShem and good toward other people. And when a Yehudi reaches this ideal level he is called “Hasid”. “Hasid”, in other words, is the highest level a Jew should aspire to reach.

Let’s see now how Rabbi Duran describes in detail the characteristics of a Hasid.

1. CONNECTION WITH HASHEM

The ideal Jew must be in permanent contact with God. Since you’re up in the morning until you go to bed at night, you must have the name of HaShem in your lips. Praying three times a day, reciting the berakhot every time you eat, and studying Tora during throughout the day and at night. Rabbi Duran mentions that the epitome (the highest level, the almost “utopian”) connection with HaShem was reached by the “Hasidim Rishonim”, the “old Hasidim” mentioned by the Mishna Berakhot. They used to meditate at length in their prayers, a task that took nine hours of their day. The first element that you must develop in order to be a Hasid is a very strong relationship with God. Having HaShem constantly in your heart, mind and lips. However, if a Jew only dedicates to cultivate his or her relationship with God, he is NOT considered a Hasid, an ideal or complete Jew. There are two other dimensions to be developed to achieve this ideal.

2. INTEGRITY

The Gemara in Baba Qama 30a tells us that the "Hasidim Rishonim", the same Jews who prayed nine hours a day, were also very scrupulous in their ethical behavior. These Hasidim, the Gemara says, were extremely careful not to steal or to cause any harm to anyone. The example mentioned by the Gemara, incredibly modern, illustrates how did the Hasidim Rishonim get rid of their broken glass or branches with thorns. While normal people would simply hide this type of waste superficially with a little soil, the Hasidim Rishonim dug a hole of at least 1 foot deep, and would placed there the broken glasses and thorns, to avoid causing any harm, even to those who perhaps years later might be working that parcel with their plow. These Hasidim were extremely careful in avoiding any direct or indirect harm or injury to others.

3. GEMILUT HASADIM

The third element that characterized the Hasidim Rishonim was "kindness", hesed, acts of goodness. Do not forget that the word "Hasid" comes from the word "Hesed". Hesed means my predisposition to help other people, even if they have not asked for my help. Sometimes Hesed consists in helping others with financial assistance (tsedaqa). Many other times, people need a different type of assistance, which cannot be bought or replace with money: for example, visiting a sick person, encouraging him, and bringing a word of encouragement and hope, is not something you can do with money, but with your "presence"and with your time. The same can be said of *nihum abelim*, comforting the relatives of someone who has just died. What brings comfort to the bereaved is our presence. Something similar happens when we invite people to our house for dinner on Shabbat, etc, *hakhnasat orehim*, we do not offer money but company, sharing time together. We do acts of Hesed, goodness, either with our money (tsedaqa) or with our presence and our time (gemilut hasadim).

Rabbi Duran gives us a good definition of what does it mean to be a role-model Jew. On the one hand, building and maintaining an ongoing relationship with HaShem, and on the other hand, being extremely honest, caring and above all generous and sensitive, doing everything in our power to help others, with our means and with our time.

Rabbi Duran concludes: Why should we study Pirqe Abot? Because

this treatise of Mishna contains the advices of our sages to become a real “hasid”, the best possible Jew with HaShem and with one’s peers.