

Week 6: *Chesed and Eiyen Tova*

Loving-kindness and Generous Eye

Supplemental Study Texts

I. **Pirkei Avot 2:9 and Rabbeinu Yonah Commentary**

אמר להם, צאו וראו איזוהי דרך ישרה שידבק בה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר, עין טובה...

He [Rabban Yohanan] said to them [his students]: Go out and observe which is the straight/righteous path to which a person should cling to? Rabbi Eliezer said, “a good eye...”

Rabbeinu Yonah:

איזו היא דרך ישרה שידבק בה האדם. בכל המדות טובות והישרות יש לאדם להדבק בהם ר"ל להדבק במדה אחת להיות שלם בה כי טוב לאדם לאחוז במדה אחת בשלמות ונקל אליו להשיג ממנה אל כל המדות החשובות מהיותו בן כמה מדות ואינו שלם באחת מהן. וזה שאמר ר' אליעזר עין טובה. ר"ל מדת הנדיבות שהיא מדה נאה ומשובחת ואחר היות בתכלית הנדיבות על כל פנים ישיג אל המעלות האחרות.

What is a straight path that a person should cling to: A person should cling to all of the good and straight paths, [here, however,] he means to say to cling to one trait, to be complete [*shalem*] with it. As it is better for a person to grab one trait in full - that through it, it becomes easy for them to reach all of the important traits - than to be one who [attempted mastery of] many traits and is not complete in any one of them. And on this Rabbi Eliezer said, A good eye: He means to say the trait of generosity, which is a fine and praiseworthy trait. And once one is at the peak of generosity, they will certainly reach the other virtues. A person like this is fit for every good trait.

Rabbeinu Yonah explains the trait of eiyen tova as generosity. Other explanations of eiyen tova from classical commentaries to the Mishnah include:

- **Rambam:** being content (*histapkut*) with what one has
- **Machzor Vitri**¹ and **Meiri**²: one who takes pleasure in the good [attributes] and success of others. **Seforno**³ adds that when one is not taken by jealousy, one's heart is open to what is truly good in the world.

¹ Rabbi Simchah ben Samuel of Vitry (died 1105) was a French Rabbinical scholar of the 11th and 12th centuries, pupil of Rashi, and the compiler of *Machzor Vitri*. He lived in France.

² Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon Meiri or Ha'meiri lived from 1249-1315 and was a famous rabbinical scholar and author of "Beit HaBechira" "The Chosen House" (a play on the Temple of Jerusalem), which is an extensive commentary on all parts of the Mishnah and Talmud.

³ Rabbi Ovadyah ben Yaakov Seforno (lived app. 1475-1550) was an Italian rabbinic scholar who wrote commentaries to the Bible and other parts of Scripture.

- **Chassid Ya'avetz**⁴: compassion

Which of these explanations for a “good eye” resonate most? What might be a connection between the various explanations?

II. **Bridging the Gap**, Excerpt from ch. 18,⁵ by Avi Fertig

Eiyen Yafah⁶

The sensitive person will realize that learning about *middot* from the behavior of others is indeed very precarious work because we tend to avoid observing our own negative *middot*, while we naturally crave seeing them in others. The danger of focusing on the others' weak areas is so great that the enormous benefit from this aspect of our spiritual work stands to be completely lost. Everything is on the line.

With this awareness, let us listen attentively to the words of Rav Yisrael Salanter.

...Study the *middot* of people, and their behavior, with an **Eiyen Yafah**, and then look internally to your specific *middot*. Over time, you will see where to invest your efforts regarding *middot*, according to what is needed for self-improvement and helping others...⁷

The most immediate danger of working on *middot* is that of becoming a critical person. Many who have entered into the realm of Mussar practice have fallen into this terrible trap. The critical person learns nothing about themselves. One's natural *middah* of *kavod* (honor) is often fueled by arrogance which is easily generated in those “working on themselves.” One is likely to savor seeing negative *middot* within others but will not see those same dangerous traits in themself. *Kavod* is a strong force within us, causing us to belittle others in order to build our own egos. As we continue working in the area of *middot*, and as our observation skills improve, we will constantly witness *middot* “in action” by others. People are full of negative *middot* to one who is sensitive to them. Without a strong defense system, we run the risk of intensifying our own negative *middot* instead of detecting and eventually improving them. What are we to do?

⁴ Rabbi Yoseph ben Chaim Yavetz (15th-16th century) was a Spanish rabbinic scholar and mystic who wrote numerous Torah works. He is most well-known for his masterful commentary to *Pirkei Avot*.

⁵ Slightly edited for this program from the original, pages 245-247. The chapter is called, “Learning from the world around us,” and discusses how in Mussar practice one is to observe and learn from all aspects of the world. The specific issue dealt with here is learning from people by observing their actions and their *middot*. This practice is one aspect in which cultivating the *middah* of *Eiyen Tova* is of great importance.

⁶ Literally, a pleasing or beautiful eye. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, from whom we take this term, apparently preferred *eiyen yafah* to the expression used in the Mishnah of *eiyen tova*.

⁷ *Ohr Yisrael*, letter 20.

Elul 5782

Tzelem Elokim - The Likeness of God

In two words Rav Yisrael provides the answer. *Eiyen Yafah* means a pleasing and non-critical eye. In the year 5683 (1922), Reb Yerucham⁸ returned to the Yeshiva in Mir after being away for about five years. In his absence the Yeshiva had grown to the size of three hundred students. Most of the students had enrolled in the Yeshiva while Reb Yerucham was away. Nevertheless, just three months after his arrival, Reb Yerucham remarked that he knew *all* the natural strengths of *every* one of the students and he knew the weaknesses of a few.⁹

That is the meaning of having an *Eiyen Yafah*. When observing the *middot* of others, we first look at their positive *middot* and natural strengths. Witness how another acts with truth - even when it is a sensitive situation, and then immediately internalize that lesson. "Perhaps I, too, can act with truth even in situations that are difficult." This is the necessary first step of learning about *middot* from others. Over time, as our skills improve we can hope to go to the next level.¹⁰

This same *Eiyen Yafah* is needed regarding observing our own behavior and progress. Being overly critical will hamper our growth. We must be honest with ourselves, but we must also maintain a generosity of spirit. We should first concentrate on observing our natural strengths. Only at a later stage, should we begin to observe our deficiencies and the *middot* that need improvement.

Observing our own *middot* is difficult and becomes even more difficult when we try to be aware of our failings. Only after we are accustomed to witnessing our positive *middot* will our skills be proficient enough to move to the next level. We must also learn to value every minor step, every minor change, and every time our spiritual work touches us. This will provide the necessary energy for the difficult journey.

1. *Do you agree that the tendency of most people is to observe negative middot in others rather than positive ones? Why?*
2. *How might you cultivate an attitude of being inspired by the positive traits of others?*
3. *Why is it so important to cultivate this same generosity of spirit towards your own middot, and focus on your positive middot?*

⁸ Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, *mashgiach ruchani* (spiritual advisor) of the Mir Yeshiva in Poland. He died in 1936.

⁹ *Kuntras Ha'adam B'ykar*, page 15. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (the author) doesn't recall the original source. Reb Yerucham had taken leave from the Yeshiva during the First World War in order to be with his family.

¹⁰ Where we observe and learn from the negative *middot* of others.