

What is a Good Jew?

The Thought of R. Aharon Lichtenstein & its Relevance to Elul

I. What is a *Frum* Jew?

1. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, By His Light: Developing a Torah Personality

When seeking to shape our personalities according to Torah values, we must relate to at least three levels of expectation and responsibility. These can be regarded as concentric circles, moving from the broader to the more specific:

1. the universal demands placed upon one simply as a human being;
2. the demands of a Jew;
3. the responsibilities of a ben-Torah, one who makes Torah study a central part of his life and embodies its values.

2. Genesis 2

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat;

2. ספר בראשית פרק ב

טוֹיַצְוֹ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל:

3. Menahot 99b

Rabbi Ami says: From Rabbi Yosei's statement we may learn that even if a person learned only one chapter of the Mishna in the morning and one chapter of the Mishna in the evening, he has thereby fulfilled the *mitzva* of: "This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth" (Josh. 1:8). Rabbi Yohanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: Even if a person only said the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening, he has fulfilled the *mitzva* of: "This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth." But it is prohibited to state this matter in the presence of ignoramuses. Yet Rava says: On the contrary, it is a *mitzva* to state this matter in the presence of ignoramuses.

3. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף צט עמוד ב

אמר ר' אמי: מדבריו של ר' יוסי נלמוד אפילו לא שנה אדם אלא פרק אחד שחרית ופרק אחד ערבית – קיים מצות "לא ימוש (את) ספר התורה הזה מפיוך." אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחי: אפילו לא קרא אדם אלא קרית שמע שחרית וערבית – קיים "לא ימוש" ודבר זה אסור לאומרו בפני עמי הארץ. ורבא אמר: מצוה לאומרו בפני עמי הארץ.

4. Mishnah Pe'ah 1:1

These are the things that have no definite quantity: *Pe'ah*, First-fruits; *Reayon*. The performance of righteous deeds; And the study of the torah. The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the world to come: Honoring one's father and mother; The performance of righteous deeds; And the making of peace between a person and his friend; And the study of the Torah is equal to them all.

4. משנה פאה פרק א משנה א

אלו דברים שאין להם שעור: הפאה, והבכורים, והראיון, וגמילות חסדים, ותלמוד תורה. אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא. כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו, ותלמוד תורה כנגד כלם:

5. Deut. 11:13

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul.

6. Mishnah Avot 1:2

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last of the men of the great assembly. He used to say: the world stands upon three things: the Torah, *Avodah*, and the practice of acts of kindness.

7. Rambam, M.T. Laws of Human Dispositions 3:2-3

A person must direct every single one of his deeds solely towards attaining knowledge of God. His sitting down, his standing up, and his speech should all be directed toward this goal. . . Even when he sleeps, if he sleeps with the intention of resting his mind and body so that he does not become sick – for he is unable to serve the Lord when he is sick – his sleep shall become a service of God. Concerning this, Our Sages commanded (Avot 2:12), “Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven.” That is what Shlomo said in his wisdom (Proverbs 3:6): “In all your ways know Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

8. Berakhot 28b

Upon his exit, what did he say? I give thanks before You, Lord my God, that You have placed my lot among those who sit in the study hall, and that you have not given me my portion among those who sit idly on street corners. I rise early, and they rise early. I rise early to pursue matters of Torah, and they rise early to pursue frivolous matters. I toil and they toil. I toil and receive a reward, and they toil and do not receive a reward. I run and they run. I run to the life of the World-to-Come and they run to the pit of destruction.

5. ספר דברים פרק יא פסוק יג

וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמַעְתֶּם תְּשִׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל־לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁכֶם:

6. משנה אבות פרק א משנה ב

שִׁמְעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מִשְׁיָרֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלוֹשֵׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוֹדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים:

7. מ"ת לרמב"ם הלכות דעות פרק ג

[הלכה ב] צָרִיךְ הָאָדָם שְׂיִכּוֹן לְבוֹ וְכָל מַעֲשָׂיו בְּלִם לַיָּדַע אֶת הַשֵּׁם בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּלִבָּד, וְיִהְיֶה שֶׁבָּתּוֹ וְקוֹמוֹ וְדַבּוּרוֹ הַכּל לְעַמַּת זֶה הַדְּבָר ... [הלכה ג] וְאִפְלוּ בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁהוּא יֹשֵׁן אִם יֹשֵׁן לְדַעַת כְּדִי שֶׁתִּנּוּחַ דַּעְתּוֹ עָלָיו וְיִנּוּחַ גּוּפוֹ כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יִחַלֶּה וְלֹא יוּכַל לְעַבֵּד אֶת ה' וְהוּא חוֹלֶה, נִמְצְאָת שְׁנָה שְׁלוֹ עֲבוֹדָה לְמָקוֹם בְּרוּךְ הוּא. וְעַל עֲגִין זֶה צוּוּ חֲכָמִים וְאָמְרוּ (משנה אבות ב יב) "וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ יִהְיוּ לְשֵׁם שְׁמַיִם". וְהוּא שְׁאָמַר שְׁלֵמָה בְּחֻכְמָתוֹ (משלי ג ו) "בְּכָל דְרָכֶיךָ דַּעְהוּ וְהוּא יַיִשֵּׁר אֶרְחוֹתֶיךָ":

8. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כח עמוד ב

בִּיצִיאָתוֹ מֵהוּ אוֹמֵר? "מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי שְׁשִׁמְתָּ חֲלָקִי מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי בֵּית הַמְּדַרְשׁ וְלֹא שְׁמַתָּ חֲלָקִי מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי קַרְנֹת. שְׂאֲנִי מִשְׁכִּימִים, וְהֵם מִשְׁכִּימִים. אֲנִי מִשְׁכִּימִים לְדַבְרֵי תּוֹרָה, וְהֵם מִשְׁכִּימִים לְדַבְרֵי בְטָלִים. אֲנִי עֹמֵל וְהֵם עֹמְלִים. אֲנִי עֹמֵל וּמְקַבֵּל שְׂכָר, וְהֵם עֹמְלִים וְאֵינָם מְקַבְּלִים שְׂכָר. אֲנִי רָץ וְהֵם רָצִים. אֲנִי רָץ לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא וְהֵם רָצִים לְבְּאֵר שַׁחַת".

9. Berakhot 17a

The Sages of Yavneh were wont to say: I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature. My work is in the city and his work is in the field. I rise early for my work and he rises early for his work. And just as he does not presume to perform my work, so I do not presume to perform his work. Lest you say: I [engage in Torah] a lot, while he only a little – it has been taught: whether one brings a substantial sacrifice or whether one brings a meager one, so long as his intention is to serve Heaven, they are equal.

9. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף יז עמוד א

מִרְגָּלָא בְּפּוּמֵייהוּ דְרַבְנָן דִּיבְנָה: "אֲנִי בְרִיָּה, וְחֻבְרֵי בְרִיָּה. אֲנִי מְשָׁכִים לְמַלְאכְתִּי, וְהוּא מְשָׁכִים לְמַלְאכְתּוֹ. כֶּשֶׁם שֶׁהוּא אֵינוֹ מִתְגַּדֵּר בְּמַלְאכְתִּי, כֵּן אֲנִי אֵינוֹ מִתְגַּדֵּר בְּמַלְאכְתּוֹ. וְשָׂמָא תֵּאמַר: אֲנִי מְרַבָּה, וְהוּא מִמְעֵיט — שְׁנִינּוּ: אֶחָד הַמְרַבָּה וְאֶחָד הַמִּמְעֵיט וּבִלְבָד שְׂיִכּוּיָן לְבוֹ לְשָׁמַיִם."

10. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, By His Light: Developing a Torah Personality

The *gemara* (e.g. Berakhot 28b) speaks of *yoshevei beit hamidrash* and of *yoshevei keranot*, those who dwell in the *beit midrash* and those who dwell at street-corners. What is a *yoshev keranot*? Someone who hangs around the candy store, the pub, or whatever the current equivalent may be. He is defined by merely hanging around, by being a loafer. It is possible for a person to be seated in the *beit ha-midrash* as a *yoshev keren*, and it is possible for a person working in a store to be the equivalent, in a sense, of a *yoshev beit ha-midrash*.

11. Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, Academic Talmud in the Bet Midrash (jewishideas.org)

But sometimes, lack of appreciation of realia stems from being unaware of how different their world was from ours. Takes for example the practice of *vatikin*, those who begin *shaharit* at sunrise, of which the Talmud speaks glowingly. Most contemporary students of Talmud assume that the greatness of those who pray with the sunrise is the fact that they awaken so early in the day. However, such an interpretation is almost certainly incorrect. In the preindustrial world, people generally went to bed shortly after dark and usually woke up well before sunrise. Most people were already at work in the fields by the time the sun rose. (In light of this point we understand the Mishnah in Berakhot [2:4] that speak of workers reading the *Shema* and praying while up on a scaffold or in a tree.) If anything, the greatness of those who prayed with the sunrise was that they delayed going to work until they could say the *Shema* and pray at the ideal time. Alternatively, one might consider the greatness of *vatikin* as having the good fortune to be able to time one's *Shema* to come out at sunrise—recall that they had no means of telling time the way we do today as there were no watches or clocks.