

# Pitchei Olam: 1 – Be Excellent

We have an important commandment in this week's parashah, Vaetchanan, contained in the verses of the Shema. It tells us, "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes." (Deut. 6:8 ESV)

What does this mean? How do you tie the commandments to your hand and wear it like head jewelry? We observe this through an item called tefillin. This sometimes gets translated as "phylacteries," but that doesn't help because nobody knows what that means except apparently Dungeons and Dragons players. Tefillin are boxes made of leather and painted black. Inside the boxes are hand-written scrolls with four passages of the Torah inside. These are then attached to the arm and the head using leather straps, although not on Shabbat. Today we typically only wear them during prayer, but in ancient times, people often wore them all day long. Yeshua and his disciples probably went through their entire day wearing tefillin. When you picture Yeshua and the disciples, do you imagine them with tefillin on their arms and heads?

Why on the arm and on the head specifically? The Torah could have told us to put them on our waist, on our feet, around our neck. But the arm and head seem important.

The Chassidic commentator Sefat Emet has a nice insight: the head represents knowledge, and the arm tefillin is inclined toward the heart, then representing both intention and action.

Furthermore, he points out an interesting connection. In the head tefillin, there are four chambers, each containing a separate scroll, with a different passage from the Torah. But in the arm tefillin, there is only one chamber, and the same four passages are all written on one scroll.

The Sefat Emet explains that the four scrolls in the head tefillin are like Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. They provide the raw knowledge we need. But those four books are all repeated and collected in one book, Deuteronomy, also known as the Mishneh Torah, the repetition of the Torah. And this repetition of the Torah was given just as the Israelites were poised to enter the land of Israel and put it all into action, and thus it corresponds to the combined single scroll of the arm tefillin, reflecting the hand and the heart.

The sequence of how you put on tefillin is important. First we put on the arm tefillin, and then we put on the head tefillin? Why? Because the Torah says, "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand" and then it says, "they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

But should the heart come before the head? Should deeds come before knowledge? Are we really to act before thinking?

This caught my eye as we have been studying a sequence of qualities handed down to us from the tzaddik Shimon Keifa.

If you recall and were with us back in April, the month of Iyar, during the counting of the Omer, I drew attention to a list found in 2 Peter 1, where the shaliach presented a sequence of spiritual progress, the goal of which is to arrive at the entrance of the eternal kingdom. Since entering the kingdom is what we are all about here, it seemed fruitful to take a close look at this list.

I showed how similar it is to mussar literature, and to other paths of spiritual progress the sages and rabbis have proposed since ancient times.

Then on Shavuot, I went into detail on the first item on the list, and that is faith, emunah. But I clarified that faith is not actually the first step, it's the starting point. Faith in the Biblical sense is not mere belief or assent to a creed. It is the realization that God intervenes. Not only does he exist, but he is intimately involved in this world and our lives.

From this vantage point, we can finally take our first step forward. But we immediately run into something confusing. Let's read the first two steps:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, (2 Pet. 1:5 ESV)

Wouldn't you want to start with knowledge? Don't you need to know what to do before you do it? Act first, think later?

Before we can understand this, we must first clearly define the first item on this list, which the ESV translates as "virtue." It sounds ambiguous. Couldn't all the items on this list be called "virtue"? Looking at other English translations, a common alternative translation is "excellence," channeling the energy of Bill and Ted, and while many translations supply the qualifier "moral excellence." NIV and NRSV keep it simple, calling it "goodness." Some less conventional translations include "integrity" and "worthiness."

Warning. I'm about to do a little language nerding. I'm going to show my homework a little bit so that you can see the research process. If you don't care and just want the conclusions, feel free to nod off for a little bit.

The Greek word here is ἀρετή. It's not your regular word for simple goodness. Let's try a few things to home in on its true meaning. If possible, we want to get into its native Hebrew, which opens up for us all sorts of connections. One approach to that is to consult some classic translations of the New Testament into Hebrew.

The Salkinson translation renders it as צדקה, which can be understood as righteousness, justice, or charity. But if this were the intent, there is another common Greek word we would have expected to see. Franz Delitsch, one of my favorite NT translators, attempts to add some nuance by rendering it as מעשה הצדקה, or "the doing of righteousness" or "doing charity." A bit clumsy, to be honest.

Another great translation comes from the Bible Society in Israel, although it's more modern. They give us the translation המעלה המוסרית, which is a quite contemporary way to say "moral virtue." It's similar to what our English translations give us, but it doesn't help nail down the meaning.

Another common way to unlock a Hebrew concept from Greek is to cross-reference the Septuagint. This is an ancient translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. If we can find the word ἀρετή there, we will just see what Hebrew word is used in that verse.

We're in luck because the word ἀρετή does appear in the Septuagint. However, not in the same context. Four times in Isaiah it is used to translate tehillah, referring to the praise and majesty of God. Two other times it is used for the word hod, referring again to glory and majesty. These do not appear to be the character traits Shimon intends for us to develop.

What if we just try exploring the meaning of the word as a Greek word, and then see if there is a Hebrew concept that fits?

Many languages have words that can't be translated into English. Well, it's not that they can't be translated at all, but just not succinctly. For example, there is the Hebrew word *titchadesh*, which you say to someone who just bought or received a new thing. It means, "May the new thing you just got spark revitalization and enjoyment in your life." There is the Yiddish word *shlemazel*, which means a person who suffers from chronic misfortune. There's the Italian word *culaccino*, which can mean the droplet left on the inside of a glass once the beverage is finished.

The Greek word ἀρετή is kind of like this. It is a big part of ancient Greek culture. It's best encapsulated by the old US Army recruitment slogan, "Be all that you can be." It started out in the days of the old Greek philosophers as encapsulating the virtue of fulfilling your role in civic life. To be a model citizen, a benefit to society and upstanding in the community. Later, it became more personalized, and the Greeks saw it as living up to one's personal potential. To be the best darned person you can be, as derived from your faculties of reason and human knowledge. It was considered the highest good possible, the goal of life, to say you've done your very best. If you were an athlete, you gave it your all on the track or the arena. If you were a craftsman, you mastered the trade and put your heart and soul into your work. This is where the translation "excellence" comes from. ἀρετή means you excel at what you do. If you're an accountant, you might even excel at Excel.

But is that really what Shimon Keifa is getting at? Greek ideals? Philosophy? This does not match the personality of Peter as we know him.

But what about other Jewish literature in Greek? How did they use the word? This is where we finally hit the mother lode. Josephus, the Jewish historian from the first century, uses the word ἀρετή almost 300 times in his works. Here is an example.

Josephus explains:

Moses deemed it exceedingly necessary, that he who would conduct his own life well, and give laws to others, in the first place should consider the Divine Nature, and upon the contemplation of God's operations, should thereby imitate the best of all patterns, so far as it is possible for human nature to do, and to endeavor to follow after it; neither could the legislator himself have a right mind without such a contemplation; nor would anything he should write tend to the promotion of [arete] in his readers; I mean, unless they be taught first of all, that God is the Father and Lord of all things, and sees all things, and that there he bestows a happy life upon those who follow him; but plunges such as do not walk in the paths of [arete] into inevitable miseries. (Ant. 1:20 JOE)

In other words, to Josephus, true arete is not something that comes from human reason as the philosophers claimed. It derives from the awareness that God rules over all and is involved in humanity—the exact definition of faith we saw before. And to Josephus, arete means to observe who God is and to seek to imitate his conduct; to walk in his ways.

Philo of Alexandria was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher—perhaps the first attempt to express Judaism through the lens of Greek philosophy, and he uses the term almost a thousand times in his works. And even as a Hellenist, his understanding of arete was not like the Greeks. Here is how he puts it:

God therefore implants earthly [arete] within humanity, as a mirror image of the heavenly [arete]. For, taking pity on humanity, and recognizing our susceptibility to countless hardships, he firmly planted earthly [arete] as a support and defense against of the ailments of the soul; This [arete] is an imitation of the heavenly primordial wisdom which he calls by various names. Now [arete] is metaphorically referred to as a garden, and the appropriate place for the garden is Eden, which means "delight." The ideal growing conditions for [arete] are peace, tranquility, and happiness, which embody delight. (Leg. 1:45 PHE)

That's more mystical than Josephus, but they share some things in common. To Philo, arete is the image of God planted in the human mind, which is our responsibility to cultivate like Adam was told to tend the Garden of Eden. Incidentally, Philo and the Rambam agree that "the image of God" means the capacity for rational thought. Just as God has rational thought, he created human beings in his image, meaning, with the ability to reason, unlike the animals. In any case, both Philo and Josephus see arete as living a life of imitation of our Creator, a life guided by the Torah.

This matches very well what we see in 2 Peter. Take a look at verses 3 and 4, which lead up to our list:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and [arete], by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (2 Pet. 1:3-4 ESV)

So Peter's concept of arete seems to line up with Josephus and Philo, that arete is the divine image within us that enables us to transcend animalistic impulses and thereby receive God's gifts.

Do you remember the Maccabees? They are the heroes of the Hanukkah story, the rebels in a time of intense persecution. They were anti-Hellenists, resisting assimilation at all costs. But ironically, their stories are preserved for us in the Greek language. And again, the books of the Maccabees use the word arete several times. And they give it a slightly different sense from both Josephus and Philo.

One sad story of persecution appears both in Maccabees and in the Talmud and Midrash, and it involves a woman whose seven sons were tortured to death by the tyrant before her very eyes. The sons would be set free if only they would deny God by eating pork. Not only did they refuse, but they taunted their executioners. Let me read you a section, the first son's response to being tortured:

"Most abominable tyrant, enemy of heavenly justice, savage of mind, you are mangling me in this manner, not because I am a murderer, or as one who acts impiously, but because I keep the divine Torah." And when the guards said, "Agree to eat so that you may be released from the tortures," he replied, "You abominable lackeys, your wheel is not so powerful as to strangle my reason. Cut my limbs, burn my flesh, and twist my joints. Through all these tortures I will convince you that sons of the Hebrews alone are invincible where [arete] is concerned." (4 Ma. 9:15-18 RSV)

In other words, you think you Greeks have mastered arete? You give it your all, conquering your animal impulses? There is perhaps no stronger animalistic impulse than to preserve one's own life, and through our faith and fear of God we have conquered even this. You Greeks have nothing compared to the invincible Jewish spirit.

Throughout the books of Maccabees, arete is submission to the service of God no matter what it may cost or what the temptation may be. It arises from our inviolable faith that there is a God who metes out justice and who will pay us what we deserve. If you truly believe that Hashem is real and rewards those who seek him, then the most rational thing to do is to serve him even in the face of overwhelming persecution and the cost of your life.

Wisdom of Solomon also uses the word arete in a similar way to Maccabees. Wisdom 4:1 says

It is better to be childless and yet have [arete], for in the memory of [arete] is immortality, because it is recognized both by God and by mortals. (Wis. 4:1)

This is another common theme of arete: it is acknowledged both by God and by man. This reminds me of an unusual saying in Pirkei Avot 2:1:

Rabbi [Yehuda haNasi] said: Which is the straight path that a person should choose for himself? Whichever path that is [tiferet] for the person adopting it, And [tiferet] to him from other people:

This is a strange use of the word tiferet, unique in all Jewish literature. It normally means beauty, majesty, glory, balance. Here it seems to mean something like virtue. Is tiferet here an attempt to translate arete? They even sound the same. And listen to the continuation of this saying from Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi:

And be careful with a light commandment as with a heavy one, for you do not know the reward for the fulfillment of the commandments. Also, calculate the cost of keeping a commandment against its reward, and the reward of a transgression against its cost. Apply your mind to three things and you will not come into the clutches of sin: Know what there is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book.

This whole mishnah encapsulates the idea of arete: combining unwavering faith and fear of God with our unique human gift of rational thought, resulting in our proper orientation on a path of goodness no matter what happens.

Arete is thus something that happens in your heart. Remember, in Jewish and Biblical symbolism the heart is the mind and will, not your emotional faculties. Arete gives you the will to do what is good and right because you recognize the benefit beyond this world.

I've been holding something out on you. There's another great Jewish source for understanding the meaning of arete. Paul uses it in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any [arete], if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil. 4:8 ESV)

This accords with the idea that arete is rooted in thought, meaning once again that our responsibility is to make use of our God-given rational mind, to take control of even our thoughts and impulses and subject them to God's will.

I think by now, the concept of arete has begun to crystallize for us, but we have yet to place it within a Jewish vocabulary. If this really is a Jewish concept, one would think we would be able to ditch the Greek word for something in Hebrew, and then see how the concept flows through Jewish literature.

Remember before how I mentioned that Philo, the Hellenist Jewish philosopher from the first century, and Rambam, one of the most significant Jewish thinkers of all time, who lived more than a thousand years after Philo, agreed that human reason is the image of God? Well Rambam, who was also influenced by Greek philosophy, might be the bridge we need to locate this concept within Jewish thought.

You remember Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers? It's a fantastic ancient text, perhaps the one rabbinic text I would want every Christian to read, let alone Messianic Jews and Gentiles. The Rambam wrote a commentary on Pirkei Avot, as well as an extensive introduction called Shmonah Prakim, or Eight Chapters.

In this introduction, the Rambam gets a bit science-y about the nefesh, the human soul, or the way he analyzes it, the psyche or the inner makeup of the human mind, which he divides into five components. He then explains that moral virtues and vices exist within the "appetite" component, the function that causes us to crave something or feel repulsed by it. This is where the middot, ethical character traits, exist, and in Rambam's view, these traits turn negative if they are either deficient or exaggerated.

He brings all this up in his commentary on one specific passage of Pirkei Avot, which I will quote to you in a second. The Rambam explains that philosophers and physicians all know that the appetite component of the nefesh exists within the heart. Whether that's literally, physiologically true is not important; but it provides for us a link between the concept of arete and how it is expressed in Judaism. And here is the passage from Pirkei Avot that the Rambam associates with virtue:

Pirkei Avot 2:9 (or 13, depending on version):

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai (by the way, a contemporary of the apostles) instructed his disciples, "Go out and see which is the straight path to which a person must hold."

What is the straight path? You might notice that this is the exact same question in the quote I brought up previously, where Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi answered "tiferet" and it sounded a lot like arete. But this time it is Yochanan ben Zakkai asking his disciples. In the version of this Mishnah cited in Avot DeRabbi Natan, Yochanan ben Zakkai says, "Go out and see which is the good path that a person must hold to enter the World to Come." What is the entrance to the eternal kingdom? Let's look at the answers his disciples gave.

Rabbi Eliezer said, "A good eye," (that is to say, generosity and goodwill toward others). Rabbi Yehoshua said, "A good friend." Rabbi Yosei said, "A good neighbor." Rabbi Shimon said, "Anticipating the outcome," (meaning, realizing the result of your actions). Rabbi Elazar said, "A good heart." Their master Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said, "I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over the rest of your words, because your words are included in his words."

And there we have it. Arete is best articulated as having a good heart. *Lev tov*. A good heart is the source of all proper behavior, including generosity, friendly connection, considerate neighborliness, and long-term vision. A proper heart is a consistent theme throughout the scriptures. This week's parashah

instructs us to love God with all your heart, which the sages take to mean, not only with your spiritual impulses, but you must even convince your animalistic impulses to love God. And the next verses tell us that these words must be on your heart.

Later, the Torah promises Israel that he will circumcise their hearts. Ezekiel prophesies that God will take out Israel's stony heart and replace it with a heart of flesh. King David prayed that God would create in him a lev tavor, a pure heart, and he told us that ascending the hill of the Hashem and standing in his holy place requires being pure in heart. Proverbs 4:23 teaches, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23 ESV).

Our master Yeshua taught extensively about the importance of a good heart. Luke 6:43-45:

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

In other words, if your deeds and words are like fruit, then your heart is like the tree. Just as there is no separation between a tree and fruit, but they are both the same plant, there is no separation between the heart and deeds, because the heart is where your impulses, faith, and rational mind compete to determine what you are going to do. Our Master taught in Matthew 5:19, "For *out of the heart* come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander (Matt. 15:19 ESV).

Corresponding to this connection between thoughts and deeds, to wear tefillin properly, the tefillin on the arm must incline inward toward the heart. The arm represents a person's deeds, and yet it also represents the heart, because a person's heart ultimately drives his hands.

This helps us understand why the good heart must come before knowledge. It gives that knowledge context and direction. Pirkei Avot records a saying from Chanina ben Dosa:

Anyone whose fear of sin comes before his wisdom, his wisdom will endure. But anyone whose wisdom comes before his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure. (Pirkei Avot 3:9 or 3:11)

True wisdom existed before we were born. But there is a proper sequence in developing our character, which may be why even though Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers come before Deuteronomy, we still equip ourselves with arm tefillin first before our head tefillin. Our fear of sin, our faith, and our good heart provide context for the knowledge we hope to gain.

How can a person cultivate a lev tov, a good and pure heart? There are a few practical steps we can take:

First, follow the model of King David, who offered a sincere prayer of teshuvah, of repentance, when the flaws in his heart became clear to him. He prayed in Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10 ESV). The Kotzker Rebbe derives from this verse the idea that anyone who thinks he already has a pure heart certainly does not. The words of Jeremiah 17:9 seem to confirm this: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9 ESV) So go ahead and pray that God would transform your heart. It's a promise of the New Covenant, so let Hashem know that it's something you want today.

Another piece of advice you can take to develop a good heart, is offered by the Chiddushei HaRim, who said that "A good heart can only exist when a person has no attachment at all to this world." That means that to develop a good heart, you must remain focused on the kingdom. Don't be clingy to the physical aspects of this world. It's not your home. Let your rational mind combine with faith to help you see beyond the immediate temptation of gratification.

A final piece of advice is to learn mussar. Mussar is the area of Jewish teaching that focuses on personal improvement and spiritual growth. This is what we are doing right now, so good job, keep it up. But don't limit it to these sessions. This is a lifelong practice. Don't just passively wait for mussar lessons to come your way. Actively seek out knowledge in this area. Read a book. Engage in study. Own it for yourself, it's your life, and your mission to transform yourself and enter the kingdom.

I want to bless you all, and I'd ask you to bless me in return that God would grant each one of us a pure heart, a good heart, producing good fruit, good thoughts, deeds, and actions, that are pleasing both in the sight of God and in the sight of everyone we encounter. Shabbat Shalom.