YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-Chavero*: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Ruchy Yudkowsky   
in memory of Yehuda Yudkowsky z"l

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**Shiur #03: The Uniquely Jewish Elements of Morality**

In last week’s lesson, we established that moral and ethical impulses are divinely instilled in all of mankind, as part of the image of God (*tzelem Elokim*) implanted within us. One may wonder: what then is unique about the Jewish ethical system? What separates the Jew from the non-Jew? Are they equally bound by innate morality, or is there a difference between them?

In essence, one might formulate three basic questions that we will address over the next three lessons:

1. Is this “natural morality” expressed equally amongst all of mankind? Has the Jewish nation been given a calling or an education to ensure a heightened attention to ethical doctrine?
2. After the Giving of the Torah, is there still a need to adhere to one’s inner moral calling, or has the Torah become our conscience?
3. If we can derive so many of the interpersonal *mitzvot* from our innate sense of morality or logic, why is there the need for divine commandments?

**THE SPIRIT AND TRADITION OF AVRAHAM**

Innate morality is a direct outgrowth of the *tzelem Elokim* in which man was created. While all of humanity was endowed with this *tzelem,* there is something unique about the Jewish people, specifically in the area of morally-endowed behavior. To understand the unique tradition of Jewish ethical behavior, we must analyze the endowments of the first “father” of the Jewish nation, Avraham.

**The *Bechira* ofAvraham**

At the beginning of *Parashat* *Lekh Lekha* (*Bereishit* 12:1), the Torah states that a man by the name of Avram (who will later become our patriarch Avraham) is commanded by God to leave his homeland, his place of birth and his family in order to travel to the land that He will show him.

The verse in *Nechemya* (9:7), which is said daily in our prayers, is a little more explicit; Avraham is not just summoned by God, but also chosen by Him:

You are Lord, the God who chose Avram and brought him out of Ur Kasdim and made his name Avraham; and You found his heart faithful to You.

After God’s *bechira* (choosing, selection) of Avraham, he enters into two covenants with him: *Berit bein Ha-betarim,* the Covenant between the Parts (*Bereishit* 15:1-21), and *Berit Mila*, the Covenant of Circumcision (*Bereishit* 17:1-14). It is at the latter that God changes Avram’s name to Avraham (ibid. 17:5). These covenants speak of a difficult future, but also promise an eternal relationship between God and Avraham’s children. Unlike a promise or a vow, which is one-sided, a covenant is two sided. If the descendants of Avraham fulfill their part, then God will fulfill His as well.

Who is this individual Avraham, whom God chooses for this special relationship? The Torah’s discussion of Avraham’s early life is rather limited; the text of the Torah itself tells us little about his childhood and upbringing. We are told (*Bereishit* 11:27-32) that Terach has three sons. Haran dies, and the remaining two sons, Avraham and Nachor, take wives. Immediately thereafter, the Torah informs us of the Divine command, “*Lekh lekha*,” by which Avraham is called to leave his homeland, and everything he has, to go to the place God would show him; ultimately, the Land of Israel.

In fact, a literal reading of the Torah would lead one to wonder why exactly is Avraham chosen by God, and for what purpose? Why is he promised so much, merely for going to a new land, without being given any particular commandment or mission there? Although in later chapters the Torah informs us about Avraham’s outstanding acts of kindness (*chesed*) and his unique commitment to educate his progeny in God’s ways, we are given none of that background in the verses that introduce him. It is rather puzzling that God seems to, as it were, pick Avraham out of a hat — unlike Noach, whom the Torah identifies as “a righteous man, wholesome in his generations.” (*Bereishit* 6:9).

In fact, the Midrash (as quoted by the Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim,* Ch. 1) is far more explicit about Avraham’s uniqueness. It describes his childhood, his search for his maker and the difficulties he encounters as he refuses to capitulate to the leaders of his time and renounce God. Yet, while the Midrash tells us that Avraham is a remarkable individual who overcomes opposition and goes out to teach the world about God, the Torah chooses to hide this from us. Why?

The Maharal (Rav Yehuda Loew, 1520-1609) deals with these and other questions regarding Avraham in Chapter 11 of his work *Netzach Yisrael*. The Maharal explains that God’s *bechira* of Avraham and his descendants after him is essentially the choosing of the nation of Israel from amongst all the nations. Had the Torah informed us earlier of Avraham’s righteousness, we would have concluded that the selection of Avraham’s progeny is contingent on our continuing Avraham’s observance. The Torah specifically withholds the information about Avraham’s unique character in order to make it clear that the Jewish people will never cease to be the Chosen People, no matter what our actions. God has chosen us, and we are forever bonded to Him. The selection and chosenness of the Jewish people is eternally valid and independent of our behavior.

While the Torah hides the true nature of Avraham’s character when it introduces him, it subsequently describes Avraham’s righteousness and presents him as instilling a certain value system within his children. The Maharal himself notes (ibid.) that although the chosenness of the Jewish people is eternal, the way in which God treats them is based on their living up to the value system of Avraham and the other Patriarchs, the *Avot*. This he refers to with the Talmudic term *zekhut Avot*, the merit of the Patriarchs. The Jewish people will always be God’s children, but for that relationship to carry with it all its advantages, we must continue to follow the path and tradition of our forebears.

**The Unique Attributes Bequeathed by Avraham**

What exactly is this tradition of Avraham which has been transmitted to his descendants? The Torah itself informs us of Avraham’s unique nature, and the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 38-39) expands on this, stating that before God chose Avraham, Avraham also chose Him. From the Midrashic account, quoted succinctly by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim,* Ch. 1), it is clear that Avraham seeks to know his Creator from his youth, transforming his behavior into that one on a divine mission. Avraham achieves renown as a kindhearted, caring, hospitable individual. Avraham opens the four corners of his tent to welcome wayfarers and plants an *eshel*, which is not merely a tree, but an opportunity for food, drink and company for all guests (*Bereishit Rabba* 48, 54). Avraham’s uniqueness is not only apparent in his peculiar actions, but in his attempts to understand the Creator’s moral and ethical teachings and to transmit it to ensuing generations.

After reading the Torah’s description of Avraham, the Midrashic account of him is not surprising. In the Torah (*Bereishit* 18:1-5), we read of Avraham’s hospitality upon the arrival of three “men” to his home. Although he is in a weakened post-circumcision condition, he runs, fetches and tarries on behalf of these wayfarers. At this point, before the destruction of Sodom, we are given a glimpse into the Godly considerations, as it were, of the Divine mind, as to whether to inform Avraham of the impending destruction (ibid., vv. 17-19):

And God said, “Shall I hide from Avraham what I am doing, seeing that Avraham shall surely become a great nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him to **keep the way of God, to do righteousness and justice**, to the end that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken to him.

God decides to inform Avraham of his plans to destroy Sodom not only because of his uniqueness, but also because he will educate his children to live by *derekh Hashem*, the way of God, which involves righteousness (*tzedaka*) and justice (*mishpat*). Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (*Meshekh Chokhma*, ibid., v. 19) sees this description of Avraham’s imparting these values to his children as the source of the biblical requirement of *chinnukh,* education, for positive commandments:

The mitzva of educating one’s children in positive commandments is never explicit in the Torah, save for regarding the requirement to teach one’s child Torah… However, the real source for educating one’s children in positive commandments is in this verse regarding Avraham, who directs his children regarding God’s commandments…

Thus, the general requirement of *chinnukh* is to educate our children to walk in the footsteps of Avraham, following the *derekh Hashem*, the path of God, a lifelong mission of justice and righteousness. The Rambam (*Hilkhot De’ot* 1:7) explains that this *derekh Hashem* is the golden mean, the proper balance of character traits and values that constitutes the middle path. This is what Avraham imparted and transmitted to his children.

Indeed, the indelible imprint of Avraham on the Jewish people goes beyond his educational messages and affects the genetic makeup of his progeny. When God chooses Avraham, he promises to make him a blessing: that his character and behavior will also serve as a boon for all of humanity. In addition, Avraham’s children are to be given special benefits, although these are limited to some of his descendants. When Avraham must banish Yishmael, his eldest biological son, God reassures him, “Be not distressed over the youth… for in Yitzchak will your offspring be considered yours” (*Bereishit* 21:12). The Gemara (*Nedarim* 31a) expounds, “‘In Yitzchak’ — but not all of Yitzchak”. In essence, only through one of Avraham’s children, Yitzchak, and through one of his grandchildren, Yaakov, will the special blessing of Avraham’s offspring be realized*.*

**The “Genetic Inheritance” from the Forebears**

The relationship of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov to their progeny is not only of historical importance. The Gemara (*Berakhot* 16b) states:

Our rabbis taught: “Only three may be referred to as patriarchs, and only four may be referred to as matriarchs.”

What is the reason?

…up to this point they were [particularly] important, but beyond, they were not as important.

The Gemara, however, does not state what exactly makes the first three generations so important, nor does it detail the significance of the title of patriarch or matriarch.

In *Chiddushei Ha-Geonim*, we find an interesting explanation of this passage (printed in *Ein Yaakov* ad loc.), detailing the significance of these appellations:

It seems to me that the Sages have alluded here to the fact that our three *Avot* are the beginning, in essence expressing the [idea found in the] Midrash (*Tanchuma,* *Lekh Lekha* Ch. 12), that everything which happened to the ancestors recurs among their descendants. Anything that happened to our forebears is etched in their children’s history… Therefore, they are referred to as *Avot,* for they are our forebears in the formation of our makeup, and only they affect our future.

Thus, the life stories of the *Avot* constitute historical precedent, as well as forming the spiritual makeup of their children. Our forebears do not only serve as a source of blessing for their descendants, but also as a model of appropriate behavior. (See also Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:6 and 26:20.) In fact, there is reason to believe that Avraham, for example, is not only our “father”; he also exists, to a certain degree, within each of us. The Sefat Emet (*Toledot* 5632) explains that every Jew has a special *nekudda,* inner essence, of Avraham within them, and it is this that we include in our prayers by referring to God as “Shield of Avraham,” protector of this *nekudda* of Avraham in every Jew.

This can be further understood based on the description of the Ramchal (Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto), who composed a work entitled *Derekh Hashem*. There (II, 4), he explains that God created the world with different stages of mankind. After the ostensibly perfect Adam, the first man, lowers the status of mankind due to his sin, God decrees that there be an initial period of humanity to serve as “roots” for their progeny, founding the various nations of the world. These first twenty generations of mankind nourish and impart to future generations the levels of perfection that they themselves had been able to achieve. In the twentieth generation, that of Avraham, God creates the nations. As he writes:

God then scrutinized all mankind, observing the levels that were maintained in that generation’s members, according to their deeds. These qualities then became a permanent part of their nature, in their role as roots. It was thus decreed that they each should bear future generations, all possessing the qualities that befit their root ancestor.

This period ends with the Dispersion, at which time “the period when men could be considered roots came to a close.” The seventy ancestors become the roots of seventy nations.

At that time God looked around to see the level that the different individuals achieved. According to the Highest Judgment, it turned out that none of them deserved to rise above the degraded level to which Adam and his children had fallen as a result of their sin. [Not a single one had risen above it all.] There was, however, one exception, and that was Avraham. He had succeeded in elevating himself, and as a result of his deeds was chosen by God. Avraham was therefore permanently made into a superior, excellent tree, conforming to man’s highest level. It was further provided that he would be able to produce branches and [father a nation] possessing his characteristics.

This was the beginning of not only the chosenness of Avraham, but the inheritance of certain aspects of his personality by his children, the branches. What aspects of his personality did we inherit? The answer is seemingly explicit in the verse quoted above — keeping the *derekh Hashem*.

What is this *derekh Hashem*, which the Torah defines using the terms *tzedaka* and *mishpat*, righteousness and justice? The explanation can be understood by reviewing the Maharal’s words as quoted in the previous *shiur,* describing the importance of *derekh eretz.* This *derekh Hashem* imparted by Avraham to his descendants prior to the Giving of the Torah is the application of “*derekh eretz kadma la-Torah”* of the Jewish people. Before teaching His laws directly, God presents the model for proper conduct, the *derekh eretz* of the *Avot*, and imparts it to their descendants.

While the Maharal makes it clear that God chooses the Jewish people by virtue of our being descendants of Avraham, independent of our actions, he also stresses that to be worthy of z*ekhut avot*, we must walk in our ancestors’ path. The Jewish people will always share a unique relationship with God because there is a covenant which cannot be broken. However, to receive the benefit of our illustrious ancestors’ merit, we must walk in the path they trod - *derekh Hashem*, the path of God. Our eternal relationship with God and our divine right to the Land of Israel are eternal, but we must adhere to certain requirements in order to merit our inheritance. *Derekh eretz kadma la-Torah* is not only a defining characteristic of the Jewish people; it is also a mark of that which the *Avot* implanted.

The Rambam states that charity is an expression of the heritage of Avraham (*Hilkhot Mattenot Aniyim* 10:1):

We are required to be more careful about the mitzva of giving charity than about any other positive mitzva, for charity is the sign of the righteous descendants of Avraham…

*Derekh eretz* maintains its import even in our day, but it does not suffice. Indeed, the Gemara states that Avraham fulfilled all of the dictates of the Torah even before it was given (*Kiddushin* 82a). He realized that the Torah elevates people to a level which they are incapable of reaching on their own — even those of a character as unique as Avraham.

**The Three Defining Characteristics of the Jewish People**

Understanding that we have a model of *derekh eretz* imparted by our *Avot* while simultaneously needing the Torah to elevate our behavior allows us to unlock a fascinating Talmudic passage. The Gemara in *Yevamot* (79a) tells us that compassion (*rachamim*) is a distinguishing characteristic of the Jewish people. It gives us the background of King David’s decree forbidding the Gibeonites from marrying native-born Jews even after their conversion.

He said to them: “This nationhas three defining characteristics: they are compassionate, bashful (*baishanim*) and kindly.

“Compassionate — as it is written (*Devarim* 13:18), ‘And he will give you compassion and love you and increase you.’

“Bashful — as it is written (*Shemot* 20:17), ‘So that His awe may be upon your face.’

Kindly — as it is written, ‘To the end that he may command his children and his household after him’ (*Bereishit* 18:19), etc.

“Only one who has these three defining characteristics is fit to cling to this nation.”

The Gemara states clearly that the Jewish people are identifiable by three character traits representative of special moral tendencies, to the extent that those who fail to express this nature are unworthy of marrying within the Jewish community.

The Maharsha (ad loc.) explains that the sources brought in the Gemara for these three unique character traits are also representative of their nature.

Regarding compassion, the Gemara states elsewhere (*Beitza* 32b)… “Anyone who has mercy on God’s creations, it is known that he is a descendant of Avraham…”

Regarding *gemilut chasadim* (acts of kindness), the verse states, “For I have known him…” Even though the verse itself mentions only *mishpat* and *tzedaka,* the Gemara has also derived from this verse all *gemilut chasadim*, and it is included in “to keep the way of God.” *Gemilut chasadim* is referred to as *derekh Hashem* in that a person must emulate the attributes of God, as it is said (*Sota* 14a): “‘Follow Lord your God’ (*Devarim* 13:5) — Is it possible for a human to follow the Divine Presence*…* Rather, emulate His actions: just as he clothes the naked…”

In essence, the Maharsha seems to indicate that the natural tendency of a Jew pulls him or her towards *rachamim* and *gemilut chasadim,* as inherited from Avraham. The source of this calling is, in essence, a spiritual DNA that constitutes the natural state of Jewish awareness and action. We have been chosen as the children of our illustrious forebears.

However, our unique disposition also carries with it a challenge, as the Maharsha notes. Only two of the three defining character traits of a Jew are inherited from Avraham. The other, bashfulness, is in fact a state that can be achieved only through thorough Torah study. As the Maharsha (ibid.) points out, the Jewish people are known not for being bashful, *baishanim*, but rather for being the opposite (see *Avot* 5:20) *azzim* — shameless, prideful, obstinate. In fact, the Gemara in *Beitza* (25b) states: “Why was the Torah given to Israel? Because they are *azzim*.”

For this reason they are called *baishanim*: it is the Torah that counteracts their strong predilection and causes their hearts to be humbled, as Rashi explains there…

It is also evident from the Gemara in *Nedarim* (20a) that bashfulness is a trait which we acquired at the Giving of the Torah, for it states: “If anyone lacks bashfulness, it is clear that his ancestors did not stand at Mount Sinai.”

Avraham’s ability to stand up against the world and maintain his convictions required a certain amount of obstinacy. This obstinacy finds itself expressed in the Jewish people’s stiff neck (*Shemot* 32:9), and Reish Lakish (*Beitza* ibid.) refers to the Jews as the *azzim* amongst the nations, comparable to dogs and roosters. Our bashfulness is only a result of the Torah that we study; it transforms our personalities from prideful to bashful.

How can the Torah transform our personalities from *azzim* to *baishanim*? The ethical teachings of the Torah explicate the *derekh Hashem* that Avraham integrated into his being and instilled in his progeny. This *derekh* of the Torah is defined very significantly by King Shlomo, who declares, “Its ways are ways of pleasantness” (*Mishlei* 3:17). As explained in our first *shiur*, the Torah is *Torat chesed*, leading one on the proper path to true righteousness. Studying the Torah can truly edify us in finding the proper path, but how does it transform our characters? The secret is that learning Torah is, in essence, learning about oneself.

**The Torah and the Jew’s Innate Connection**

The Jew’s introduction to the Torah does not begin after birth. The Talmud (*Nidda* 30b) describes the joy-filled days of the Jewish fetus:

Rabbi Simlai expounded… “The fetus in the womb is taught the entire Torah… Its gaze penetrates the mysteries of the entire universe. As it is born and emerges into the air of the world, an angel taps it on the mouth, causing it to forget all the Torah which it has learned.”

The question is: why is it necessary to teach the fetus the Torah if it cannot possibly carry this knowledge over into its life? Why teach what will soon be forgotten? Rav Soloveitchik (*Reflections of the Rav* p. 61) explains what is to be gained from this prenatal education:

Rabbi Simlai is apparently saying that every Jew comes into the world with a natural responsiveness to Torah teaching. Every Jew begins with a share in Torah which was vested in him before his birth, and, though he is made to forget it, it is preserved in the deep recesses of his soul, waiting to be awakened by study and a favorable environment…

On the last day of his life, Moses, exhorting the children of Israel to be loyal to the Torah, said, “These commandments are neither hidden nor distant from you… but are very close to you, within your mouths and hearts” (Deut. 30:11, 14). When a Jew studies Torah, he finds it native to his spiritual personality and he responds to it readily. It is an act of recollecting, recapturing, bringing to the surface what was once learned and forgotten. The Torah did not impose upon the Jews some extraneous matter, foreign to their natures. Rather, Torah study and practice awaken the Jewish memory and we recall that which is inherent in the Jewish soul and is often reflected in the everyday folk wisdom of the Jewish people.

**The Light of God’s Countenance**

The Torah that a Jew learns is reawakens the inner nature, the spirit of Avraham and the Torah taught by the angel. This may be the explanation of the concluding blessing of our daily prayers*,* the blessing of *shalom*, peace. This blessing, coming after the priestly blessing, makes reference to a special radiance that God bestows upon the Jewish people, imparting both Torah and kindness.

For with the light of Your countenance, You gave us, Lord, our God, the Torah of life and a love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life and peace.

Beyond the Divine image common to all mankind, the Jewish people enjoy this special radiance. Part of this light manifests itself in the Jew’s connection to the Torah, but the first of these rays are our birthright as the children of Avraham, the great lover of kindness. Only recognizing and accepting this unique radiance allows us to ask God to establish peace and blessing upon the unified Jewish nation with this special light, as we request in this passage: “Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance.”

**Birth of a Nation: The Education of Bondage**

As descendants of Avraham, our inborn disposition towards *chesed* characterizes us as individual Jews. We can also see that God orchestrated the history of the Jewish people on a national level to receive an educational upbringing inculcating the need for *chesed* collectively. In order for the Jewish people to be the nation to educate humanity about this trait, we had to go through a rearing stage, that, though difficult, would prove essential for our mission.

Avraham is himself informed by God in *Berit* *bein ha-betarim* that his children will be enslaved in a foreign land before they will be able to return to Israel. The Egyptian enslavement was clearly trying, but in hindsight one can see some of the benefits that may have occurred as a result of the difficulty the Jews endured. On the simplest level, Rav Soloveitchik notes (ibid. p. 189) that the experience of Egypt “welded twelve tribal families into one nation through their shared suffering. They entered Egypt fragmented and emerged united.” It also “dramatically manifested God’s involvement in the birth of the Jewish people and demonstrated His concern with their destiny.”

However, the Torah provides another reason as well for the bondage, portraying it as “a necessary experience which molded the moral quality of the Jewish people for all time.” *Devarim* 4:20 states:

But you God took and brought out of Egypt, that iron furnace, to be His treasured people as you are this day.”

Rashi explains that the “iron furnace” here is a vessel used for refining gold. The suffering in Egypt apparently was intended to refine and cleanse the Jewish character, removing the dross of moral impurities and heightening the people’s ethical sensitivity. This metaphor is echoed by the prophet Yeshayahu (49:10): “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of afflictions.”

Whenever the Torah wants to impress upon us the *mitzvah* of having compassion and sympathy for the oppressed in society, it reminds us of our similar helplessness and lowly status during our bondage in Egypt. The most defenseless elements in society are usually the slaves, strangers, widows and orphans, and we are repeatedly enjoined by the Torah to be sensitive to their plight: “You shall not pervert the justice due a stranger or to the fatherless; nor take a widow’s garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt”…

For this reason, as the Talmud indicates, the Torah exhorts us in thirty-six Scriptural references to treat the stranger kindly (B. Metz. 59b)…

The Egyptian experience may therefore be regarded as the fountainhead and moral inspiration for the teaching of compassion which is so pervasive in Jewish Law. It sharpened the Jew’s ethical sensitivity and moral awareness. The Midrash has R. Nehemiah say this explicitly: “the Egyptian bondage was of great value for us, since it served to implant within us the quality of kindness and mercy.” (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai Ex. 13:3) Ours is a singularly ethical culture, which expresses itself through a heightened regard for human rights and dignity.

Compassion is a distinguishing characteristic of the Jewish people, but yet it is a natural expression of man’s being created in the Divine image, *tzelem* *Elokim*, an endowment which all mankind possesses in common.

*Tzelem Elokim* signifies only a capacity to love, not the necessity of loving. This capacity, which all people possess, can be and is frequently superseded, but when it becomes a necessity, it cannot be suppressed. It flows naturally and is indigenous to one’s character. The Egyptian experience sought to transform the Jews into a people to whom compassion would be a necessity, not merely capacity. (*Reflections of the Rav*, pp. 190-191)

The Jew and the Jewish people as a national collective are each endowed with a special temperament, nourished by the roots, our forebears, and simultaneously carried through the Torah’s tradition of educators who exhibit the angelic qualities of caring for one’s fellow Jew. However, beyond their disposition and education, we have also accepted upon ourselves a covenant to act on behalf of our brethren. The Giving of the Torah itself required a tremendous unity among the Jewish people (see Rashi, *Shemot* 19:2), but it become axiomatic in their acceptance of *arevut*, mutual responsibility (which will be discussed in a later lesson).

The next lessons will deal with the uniqueness of the Jewish covenant, focusing on the nature of the commandments in the interpersonal realm.