YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #21: Loving God (XI): Two Types of Self-Sacrifice**

**Self-Sacrifice for the *Mitzvot* – In the Land of Israel**

 The *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael* states:

R. Natan says: “Of those who love Me and keep My commandments” – This refers to Israel who dwell in the land of Israel and give their lives for the sake of the *mitzvot*. “Why are you being led out to be killed?” “Because I circumcised my son.” “Why are you being led out to be burned?” “Because I read the Torah.” “Why are you being led out to be crucified?” “Because I ate the *matza*.” “Why are you receiving a hundred lashes?” “Because I took the *lulav*.” And it says, “From being beaten in the homes of my friends” (*Zekharya* 13:6) – these wounds caused me to be beloved of My Father in heaven. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Masekhta Ba-Chodesh* 6)

This passage expresses the essence of one who loves God: a person who lives in the land of Israel and gives his life for the sake of the *mitzvot*.

 It should be emphasized that all the *mitzvot* listed in the passage are positive commandments, none of which are among the severe transgressions for the sake of which one is obligated to sacrifice his life. This matter requires scrutiny.

Ramban writes in his commentary on the Torah:

“Those who love [Him]” – these are the ones who sacrifice their lives for Him, for they are the ones who acknowledge only the Glorious Name and His divinity and deny all strange gods, refusing to worship them even if they are in mortal danger. They are called “those who love [Him]” because this is the kind of love that we have been obligated to observe even at the sacrifice of life, just as He has said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5), meaning that you should give your very life because of your love of Him, that you should not substitute Him for another god, nor join Him together with a strange god. It is for this reason that it is said of Avraham, “seed of Avraham My beloved” (*Yeshayahu* 41:8), since he risked his life in order not to worship the idols in Ur Kasdim… Thus, R. Natan explained that the love [of God] means the sacrifice of life for the sake of the *mitzvot*. Now **the verse here certainly refers to** **idolatry, for it is with reference to it that we are obligated** at all times forever **to suffer death rather than transgress [the law]**. But [R. Natan] **broadened the matter to include all the *mitzvot*, because in the time of religious persecution, we are obligated to suffer death for any of the *mitzvot* [rather than transgress them]**, as derived from the other verse, “You shall not profane My holy name” (*Vayikra* 22:32). (Ramban, Commentary on *Shemot* 20:6)

In this commentary, Ramban follows the approach that Rambam advances in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, which we examined in the previous *shi’ur*. However, Ramban does not clarify R. Natan’s statement that “those who love me” refers to those who “**dwell in the land of Israel** and risk their lives for the sake of the *mitzvot*.” It seems that Ramban did not consider this statement particularly noteworthy, since he only comments on the matter of sacrificing one’s life.

 This makes sense according to Ramban’s position, since from a strictly halakhic perspective there is no difference between the land of Israel and the rest of the world with regard to sacrificing one’s life. However, it may be that the *midrash* reflects the teaching of R. Akiva that we examined in the previous *shi’ur*. This approach, considered a “pious teaching” – one that possibly only pertains to an elite few – accords great value to settling the land of Israel, a land that is compared to a king’s sanctuary. One whose soul longs to draw closer to the king’s inner sanctum will let no obstacle get in the way of achieving his goal; he will give his life for the sake of the *mitzvot*.

 From the moment that one senses that his goal – his life’s aspiration –is within reach, he will pursue it with full force. It is like the darling who seeks out her beloved in *Shir Ha-Shirim*; the moment she finds the object of her soul’s desire, she grabs onto him and does not relent.

**Two Types of Self-Sacrifice: Physical and Spiritual**

 What is the self-sacrifice that constitutes an expression of the love of God that exists within a person’s heart? On the simple level, this refers to sacrificing one’s body. However, it may be that there is a supremely lofty expectation that one will sacrifice his soul, and not merely his body.

 The first tier of self-sacrifice refers to a person who is asked to violate his religion through one transgression or another. As we saw in the *midrash* cited above, this scenario includes even a case in which one is asked to neglect a positive commandment. In such a case, a person is expected to sacrifice his life in this world for the sake of his life in the World to Come; he must sacrifice his physical, ephemeral life for the sake of the eternal life of the sweetness of souls and the delight of spirits. He will merit this eternal life because the moment he dies while sanctifying God’s name, he will draw intimately close to God, gazing upon His unique beauty that is reserved for those who love Him and keep His *mitzvot*.

 One who loves God knows well that his very life depends on a deep and intimate connection to the source of that life. As Moshe said, “You, who held fast to the Lord your God, are all alive today” (*Devarim* 4:4). When such a person is forced to decide, in the moment of truth, if he should preserve his life in this world when that life would be divorced from its source, he knows that what lies at the heart of that decision is a choice between a false version of life and the true life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 This notion becomes all the more clear in light of what we have seen in the previous *shiurim*. Since a person’s soul is a part of God Himself and was placed within him by God Himself, the knowledge that God resides within one’s heart pulsates within one’s being. As David, the sweet singer of Israel, said: “In Your behalf my heart says: ‘Seek My face!’ O Lord, I seek Your face” (*Tehillim* 27:8). As *Chazal* commented on the *midrash* above, and as Rashi comments on this verse, a person’s heart is God.

 According to this approach, when a person is asked to give his life for the sake of observing the *mitzvot*, it becomes clear to him that the dilemma that he faces is not between preserving his life and clinging to God, since without intimacy with God there can be no life at all. Rather, the question is if there exists the possibility of life without a soul, life without man’s “superiority over beast.” Such a life, one comes to understand, is no life at all.

 But as we have said, an even loftier form of self-sacrifice is demanded of a person. He is not merely asked to surrender his physical, ephemeral life, the breath of his lungs and the beating of his heart, but his spiritual life as well. One must sacrifice the principles in which he believes – his personal divine service.

 This kind of self-sacrifice is what God demanded of Avraham when He instructed him to bind Yitzchak to the altar. Avraham’s driving purpose throughout his life was to found a nation that would call in God’s name. Avraham’s life’s work was, “There Avram invoked the Lord by name” (*Bereishit* 13:4), and his goal was always to establish a nation from his own seed that would continue his work, in his path.[[2]](#footnote-2) To his surprise, Avraham received the command to bind his son and, for the sake of God’s command, sacrifice the entire essence of his life’s work – his very connection to God.

 Rambam writes in *Moreh Nevukhim* about one of the primary purposes of the narrative of the binding of Yitzchak:

First, it shows us the extent and limit of the love and fear of God. Avraham is commanded to perform a certain act, which is not equaled by any surrender of property or by any sacrifice of life, for it surpasses everything that can be done, and belongs to the class of actions which are believed to be contrary to human feelings. He had been without child, and had been longing for a child; he had great riches, and was expecting that a nation should spring from his seed. After all hope of a son had already been given up, a son was born to him. How great must have been his delight in the child! How intensely must he have loved him! And yet because he feared God and loved to do what God commanded, he thought little of that beloved child, and set aside all his hopes concerning him, and consented to kill him after a journey of three days. If the act by which he showed his readiness to kill his son had taken place immediately when he received the commandment, it might have been the result of confusion and not of consideration. But the fact that he performed it three days after he had received the commandment proves the presence of thought, proper consideration, and careful examination of what is due to the divine command and what is in accordance with the love and fear of God. There is no necessity to look for the presence of any other idea or of anything that might have affected his emotions. For Avraham did not hasten to kill Yitzchak out of fear that God might slay him or make him poor, but solely **because it is man’s duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment**. We have repeatedly explained this. The angel, therefore, says to him, “For now I know” (*Bereishit* 22:12), that is, from this action, for which you deserve to be truly called a God-fearing man, all people shall learn how far we must go in the fear of God. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:24)

The extent of the love and fear of God is a person’s willingness to sacrifice all of his beliefs – his entire existence – for the sake of the love of God.

**The Chariot is Subordinate to its Rider**

The key principle of the matter is rooted in the approach that we have outlined in the past: the declaration that “there is none beside Him.” Only God contains the true, extant reality, while all living beings only exist because of the truth of God’s own existence. Therefore, God’s command obligates everyone, under all conditions and in every situation, with no limitations whatsoever, since He is the only thing that exists in all of existence.

 As Rambam puts it in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

If one would imagine that none of the entities aside from Him exist, He alone would continue to exist, and the nullification of their [existence] would not nullify His existence, because all the [other] entities require Him and He, blessed be He, does not require them nor any one of them. Therefore, the truth of His [being] does not resemble the truth of any of their [beings].

This is implied by the prophet’s statement: “But the Lord is truly God” (*Yirmiyahu* 10:10) – i.e., He alone is true and no other entity possesses truth that compares to His truth. This is what [is meant by] the Torah’s statement: “There is none beside Him” (*Devarim* 4:35) – i.e., aside from Him, there is no true existence like His. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:3-4)

This can be compared to a chariot, whose purpose is to serve its rider. It is clear that the chariot has no significance, nor would its existence have any meaning, without the rider.

Thus write the Sages in *Bereishit Rabba*:

R. Shimon ben Lakish said: The patriarchs are, in fact, the chariot, as it says, “God went up from Avraham” (*Bereishit* 17:22); “Then God went up from him” (*Bereishit* 35:13); “There above it stood the Lord” (*Bereishit* 28:13). (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Vayetze* 69).

Just as a chariot is subordinate to the will of its rider, since the purpose of its very existence is to serve its rider, so too were the patriarchs. Every one of their limbs and appendages, and indeed their very existence throughout their lives, was an existence of sanctity and separation from worldly matters. All of their priorities were directed solely toward fulfilling God’s will. They lived a life of total subordination to the supremacy of God’s will.

 Of course, it should be obvious that when God’s command would arrive, they would answer Him no matter what, without even a modicum of doubt regarding their absolute obligation to follow God’s will – the only relevant will that exists.

**Love of God Among Avraham’s Descendants**

 The descendants of the patriarchs, members of the nation that they founded, continue to invoke God’s name as they did. They represent the flame of God’s presence in the world. They are the nation that acts as a chariot for the *Shekhina*, as the *midrash* in *Bamidbar Rabba* describes at great length:

“Camped on the front, or east side: the standard of the division of Yehuda” (*Bamidbar* 2:3). Thus it is written: “The Lord founded the earth by wisdom” (*Mishlei* 3:19). The Holy One, blessed be He, created four cardinal directions in the world – East, West, North and South…. Now in the same manner as the Holy One, blessed be He, created the four cardinal directions of the world, in like manner did He set about his throne the four *Chayot* and above them the Throne of Glory. Corresponding to these was the order of the standards which the Holy One, blessed be He, communicated to Moshe.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “Moshe! On the eastern side, from which light goes forth unto the world, shall be Yehuda from whom will issue royalty,” as it is said, “Camped on the front, or east side: the standard of the division of Yehuda.” “And next to him the tribe of Yissakhar who was the custodian of the Torah,” as it is said, “Of the children of Yissakhar, men who knew how to interpret the signs of the times” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 12:32). Therefore Scripture says, “Camping next to it: the tribe of Yissakhar” (*Bamidbar* 2:5). Next to him Zevulun…. “The total enrolled in the division of Yehuda… these shall march first (*rishona*)” (*Bamidbar* 2:9). As the Torah is called “first (*rosh*)”: “In the distant past I was fashioned, at the first (*me-rosh*)” (*Mishlei* 8:23). It also says: “For to be in the shelter of wisdom is to be also in the shelter of money” (*Kohelet* 7:12). It also says: “Their king marches before them, the Lord at their head (*be-rosham*)” (*Mikha* 2:13)…

From the south go forth dews and rains that bring blessing into the world; let therefore the tribe of Reuven be stationed there, for he was penitent, and penitence is a good characteristic, and the compassion of the Holy One, blessed be He, goes out to mankind when they show penitence. Therefore, it is written, “On the south: the standard of the division of Reuven” (*Bamidbar* 2:10). Next to him Gad, who commands many troops, as it is said, “Gad shall be raided by raiders” (*Bereishit* 49:19). Reuven, then, with his penitence, and Gad with his strength had Shimon between them in order to make atonement for him. Therefore it is written: “Camping next to it: the tribe of Shimon… and the tribe of Gad…. The total enrolled in the division of Reuven…. These shall march second” (*Bamidbar* 2:12-16), for penitence is next to Torah.

These two standards having set forward, the Levites moved next with the *Mishkan*; therefore it is written: “The Tent of Meeting, the division of the Levites, shall move” (*Bamibar* 2:17).

The west, where are the storehouses of snow and of hail, of cold and of heat – on that side shall be Efrayim, Binyamin, and Menashe. For who can withstand the snow and the hail? Efrayim, Menashe, and Binyamin, as it is said: “At the head of Efrayim, Binyamin, and Menashe! Rouse Your might and come to our help!” (*Tehillim* 80:3). The Divine Presence, also, is always in the west, in the territory of Binyamin, as it is stated: “Of Binyamin he said: Beloved of the Lord, he rests securely beside Him” (*Devarim* 33:12). Thus it is written: “On the west: the standard of the division of Efrayim, troop by troop…. Next to it: the tribe of Menashe… and the tribe of Binyamin; and the chieftain…. The total enrolled in the division of Efrayim…. These shall march third” (*Bamidbar* 2:18-24). A fine adjunct to Torah and to penitence is power, for a man should exert his powers in acquiring Torah and in mastering his evil inclination.

The north is the region whence darkness issues forth into the world, and on that side shall be the tribe of Dan. Why? For it was that tribe which darkened the world with idolatry, when Yerovam made the two golden calves…. “And he placed the other in Dan” (*Melakhim* I 12:29). For this reason the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded that he should pitch his camp in the north. Hence it is written: “On the north: the standard of the division of Dan” (*Bamidbar* 2:25). And next to him the tribe of Asher, lighting up the darkness, as it is stated, “And of Asher he said: Most blessed of sons be Asher… may he dip his foot in oil” (*Devarim* 33:24). Therefore Scripture says: “Camping next to it: the tribe of Asher” (*Bamidbar* 2:27). Next to him was Naftali, with the blessing of ample sustenance, as it is written: “O Naftali, sated with favor” (*Devarim* 33:23). Therefore Scripture says, “And the tribe of Naftali…. The total enrolled in the division of Dan…. These shall march last, by their standards” (*Bamidbar* 2:29-31). It teaches that all who worship idols go backward and not forward.

It is therefore stated: “The Lord founded the earth by wisdom; He established the heavens by understanding” (*Mishlei* 3:19). As the Holy One, blessed be He, created the four cardinal directions and four standards corresponding to them, so also did He set about His throne four angels – Mikhael, Gavriel, Uriel, and Refael. Mikhael, at His right, corresponded to Reuven.... Uriel, at His left, corresponded to Dan, who was on the north side…. Gavriel, in front of Him, corresponded to the kingship of Yehuda and to Moshe and Aharon who were on the east side…. Refael corresponded to Efrayim… who was on the west. (*Bamidbar Rabba* 2)

By achieving a deep recognition that “there is none beside Him,” the entire nation – and each and every one of its members – sacrifices all its faith and all its hope for the sake of the will of God, the one true entity in existence.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. Compare to *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Kohelet* 989. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)