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 Joseph and Phyllis Eisenman
in honor of Judah L. Eisenman

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**Shiur #01: *Chesed* and Interpersonal Mindfulness**

**Introduction**

After spending a year investigating the principles upon which the Torah’s ethical philosophy stands, we hope to spend this year identifying the practical aspects of interpersonal conduct that are shaped by this philosophy. The goal of these lessons is to utilize ethical dilemmas that can highlight the guidance the Torah’s interpersonal *mitzvot* provide for weathering the crises in our quest for the Torah’s heightened moral perfection.

The difficulties raised by these dilemmas are often particularly troubling for those who strive the most for ethical excellence. While some may define righteous behavior as “being a nice guy,” it is the ethically-minded person who realizes that distinguishing right from wrong is not always easy. For instance, if one notices another individual doing something suspicious, the caring individual might give him the benefit of the doubt. On the other hand, what if the suspect behavior is liable to endanger others? Here, the individual who is not quick to judge his friend is troubled, while another, less careful about not falsely accusing another, will not be troubled by levying an accusation that may prove false.

To better understand the source for many of these dilemmas and why they predominantly affect ethically-minded individuals, it is worthwhile to investigate the nature of the basis of *chesed*.

**The Centrality of *Chesed* (Kindness)**

At the heart of one’s interpersonal interactions stands the Jewish principle of *gemilut chasadim*, performing acts of kindness. The centrality of *chesed* is reflected in the *mishna* (*Avot* 1:2) which lists it as one of the three pillars upon which the world stands, and it is echoed in the *mishna* recited daily (*Peia* 1:1) which lists *gemilut chasadim* as one of those meritorious pursuits for which there is benefit in this world that does not detract from one’s reward in the World to Come.

With this in mind, a clearer codified definition of the concept of *chesed* should be very helpful in enabling us to clearly understand its importance and its implications for personal interactions. After all, God is referred to as “*rav chesed*,” abundant in kindness (*Shemot* 34:6), and we are bidden to emulate His ways.

In most instances where the word *chesed* is mentioned in the Torah, it seems to be in keeping with its ostensible definition, as expressed in Eliezer’s plea to God while searching for a wife for Yitzchak. There the Torah states:

And he said, “Lord, God of my master Avraham, may you arrange it for me this day that you do *chesed* with my master Avraham.” (*Bereishit* 24:12)

However, in a few instances, the classic translation of the word *chesed* seems out of place, and in at least one case, even impossible. One gets the impression that these usages imply not only a unique expression of the term, but force us to take a deeper look into the overall meaning of the concept of *chesed*, and may even compel us to redefine this all important term.

**The *Chesed* Involved in a Forbidden Union**

The most unique use of the word *chesed,* in a context totally unrelated to kindness, may be found in the Torah’s list of forbidden unions. The verse states (*Vayikra* 20:17):

If a man takes his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, it is a *chesed,* and they shall be cut off in the sight of the members of their people; having uncovered the nakedness of his sister, he shall bear his iniquity.

Here the Torah refers to an incestuous relationship with one’s sister as *chesed*, while mentioning that one who does so shall be cut off from the Jewish people. If we define *chesed* as kindness, the prohibition would seem to be baseless, but if we do not define it as kindness, then what is *chesed* all about?

The various commentators on the Torah take steps to explain this rather out-of-the-ordinary use of *chesed*. Rashi points out that *chisuda,* the Aramaic cognate of *chesed*, means “disgrace”, which would seem to be the meaning of the term here, describing the incest as disgraceful.

The Ramban states that though other commentators understand *chesed* in this context as shame, he is of the opinion that this is not so. He explains that he feels that *chesed* here refers to one who is supposed to act towards his sister with tremendous kindness and instead violates her.

It is interesting to note, though, as Rashi and the Ramban point out, that *chesed* only sometimes refers to kindness; at other times, its meaning is just the opposite, disgrace or shame. A number of commentators reflect on the fact that indeed, the attribute of kindness has two sides to it, and uncontrolled *chesed* is actually dangerous; this is why the term has dual meanings. The Radak explains that the word *chesed* can mean either disgrace or kindness. The two are related because the disgrace of immorality is the product of overindulgence, being too quick to satisfy one’s desires and uncommitted to discipline.

With this understanding, one can see how *chesed* may be dangerous if left uncontrolled. Avraham Avinu is legendary for his *chesed*, yet two relatives who had close contact with him, Lot and Yishmael, choose to live their lives very differently than he. In fact, one may even notice in these individuals a lack of appreciation of true *chesed,* to the point of devastating consequences. Lot has a warped sense of *chesed*, preferring to protect his guests while sacrificing his daughters. Yishmael, Avraham’s child, is deeply involved in illicit relationships, an outgrowth of uncontrolled *chesed*.

Rav S.R. Hirsch similarly expresses the difficulty of the classic understanding of *chesed* in this context and explains that the particular distinction of *chesed* depends on whether it describes one who gives oneself up to another (when not required to do so) or one who acts upon another.

Since *chesed* generally denotes the highest kindness, the meaning of the term here is difficult to comprehend.

The basic meaning of *chesed* is personal devotion, giving of oneself. Where the term characterizes the action of one who acts with *chesed*, it denotes the highest devotion to the welfare of another… but where the term does not characterize the one who acts, but rather characterizes an action whose object is another person, then the term denotes the complete abandonment of the other person. To be “*chassed”* means to completely abandon another.

Essentially *chesed* is characterized by overflowing, by disregarding boundaries. The benefits of *chesed* are expressed in the idea of a person’s desire to give to another unlimitedly, in a selfless manner. However, uncontrolled *chesed* can be devastating, as it allows a person to lose his appreciation of the proper purpose of boundaries. For this reason, an illicit, even incestuous, relationship can be referred to as an act of *chesed*, as it is an outgrowth of unbounded behavior.

***Chesed* and *Yira*: Noticing Others**

Understanding the deeper aspects of *chesed* may help us make sense of an interesting usage of *chesed* in the Gemara. In a rather remarkable way, the Gemara (*Sukka* 49b) seems to link *chesed* with *yira*, loosely translated as being in fear and awe of God. But what do kindness and being awestruck have to do with each other? Are they not a twosome which at first glance seems completely inexplicable?

A deeper look at the passage may help shed some light on this subject:

Rabbi Elazar said: “Anyone who performs charity properly is regarded as though he has filled the whole world with *chesed*…”

Perhaps you will say that whoever attempts to leap to this lofty status may leap and he will be successful? Scripture therefore states “How precious is your kindness, God” (*Tehillim* 36:8). I might think that this also applies to one who has *yira* of God? Scripture therefore states: “But the kindness of God is eternal upon those who fear Him.” (*Tehillim* 103:17)

Why would the Gemara assume that the difficulties in performing *chesed* should be identical with the troubles encountered by those who display *yira* (fear or awe) of God? What could *chesed* mean in this context?

Rav Shlomo Wolbe (*Alei Shor* I, page 91) explains that after deeper analysis it becomes clear that there is a shared foundation that lies at the root of these two attributes, *chesed* and *yira*. They both center on the following question: Where does a person focus his eyes? What does one notice? They challenge a person to decide whether he or she is aware that he or she is not the only one in this world and act accordingly. As he writes:

There is one root in the soul to both of these attributes. There are those who see beyond themselves, and there are others who do not see anything beyond themselves. The one who sees only himself is only able to feel that which he is lacking, and therefore he lives only for his own benefit. One who doesn’t notice others is incapable of seeing a person in need, nor will he take note of his Creator.

He compares the individual who is completely self-absorbed to one who is sitting in a dark room, unable to see anything. The second one opens a window and light comes in, one may see numerous things. So too, a person who is self-absorbed is unable to see anything but oneself. Only after one is able to open up can one see the other, notice the other’s needs and experience the other’s pain. One’s ability to respond to the needs of others is the very definition of *chesed*. In a similar vein, an egocentric individual is unable to notice God. However, if one is willing to recognize the other, one will also become capable of recognizing God, this recognition being the root of *yira*, fear and awe of the Almighty. It is for this reason that the Gemara connects the concept of *chesed* to the concept of *yira*; both are attributes that may only be embraced by those who see beyond themselves.

The idea that the focus of *chesed* is upon noticing and identifying others’ needs is expressed in the mitzva of *tzedaka*, charity. The Torah speaks of the mitzva of *tzedaka* as being to provide abundantly for another in need. It is not merely writing a check or giving cash for food, but looking at what the other is lacking, putting oneself in the shoes of the other who might have just lost a fortune and is in need of dignity, not only money. *Chesed* involves being active, noticing, and providing in a way that is truly beneficial to the recipient.

Rav Wolbe adds that this is expressed in Rashi’s explanation of the above-cited passage in *Sukka*. Rashi explains the Gemara’s query:

Perhaps you will think that opportunities for charity and kindness will come effortlessly, yet this is not so: for one must devote himself with great effort to achieve the ideal fulfillment of this mitzva.

The mistaken presumption is that by merely “jumping” into the situation, one will be supplied with plenty of deserving people; however, Rashi explains, *chesed* is not merely providing physically for another, but rather putting oneself in another’s position and truly identifying the other’s needs. For this reason, *chesed* is not always easy, and the desire to provide alone is insufficient.

One may provide endless sums to charity but still not perform *chesed*. *Gemilut chasadim* is accomplished by one who really notices another, identifying other’s needs and doing the utmost to provide them and then some.

This is the expression of proactive *chesed*, above and beyond that which is necessary and called for, providing abundantly. In order to become a *baal* *chesed*, a true practitioner of kindness, one must expand one’s purview, taking note of others and putting oneself in their shoes.

**The Beit Ha-Levi’s Recognition of Others**

A fitting example of this outlook may be found in a well-known story of the Beit Ha-Levi, Rav Yosef Dov Ha-Levi Soloveitchik *zt”l* of Brisk. Close to Pesach, he was asked by a woman if she could use milk for the Four Cups at the Seder, as she had no access to wine. The Beit Ha-Levi explained that for the Four Cups, one must have wine, but that the lady needn’t worry, as he would provide her with a sum of money ample to cover wine for the Seder.

Those around the Beit Ha-Levi noticed that the sum he gave this woman was significantly more than what would be necessary to purchase wine, and they asked why this woman merited to receive such a large amount of *tzedaka*.

The Beit Ha-Levi’s response showed not only his wisdom, but his tremendous care for others, as a man of *chesed*. He explained, “It is very understandable that this simple woman would not know that one needs wine for the Four Cups and not milk. However, it is impossible that she not be aware that it is forbidden to have milk and meat together at the same meal. If she is asking whether she is permitted to use milk, this means that she certainly lacks meat, and probably the rest of the Seder necessities. Therefore, I provided a sum that could adequately cover all her basic Seder needs.”

**Deeper Connection of *Chesed* and *Yira*:**

Looking beyond oneself, as we have seen, lies at the foundation of both *chesed* and *yira,* but they may be connected for a different reason as well. What will determine whether the attribute of magnanimity will allow one to succeed in developing an ethical personality or will breach all one’s limits and boundaries as it degenerates into negative qualities? It would seem to be that only an attitude of *chesed* merged with *yira* will allow one to successfully cultivate a sophisticated moral character.

The Gemara (*Yevamot* 79a) teaches that one of the marks of a Jew is the trait of bashfulness, deriving this from the verse “So that the fear of God be impressed upon your face so you do not sin.” (*Shemot* 20:17). The ethical perfection the Torah strives for requires the consciousness of an ever-present God. The God-conscious individual is capable of formulating a sense of balance, pinpointing where his “outpouring of *chesed*” might actually be hurting the other.

If one’s consciousness of another individual is in sync with his consciousness of God’s presence, then one can hone his *gemilut chasadim* and deal with the various dilemmas that arise.

The basic Torah approach to ethical conduct is predicated upon and grows from an ever-present God consciousness. An individual who cultivates this knows that there is no time for forgetting one’s interpersonal obligations, as man is truly never alone.

**The Attitude of *Chesed***

The Beit Ha-Levi’s grandson, Rav Yosef Dov Ha-Levi Soloveitchik *zt”l* of the United States, points out (*Festival of Freedom*, p. 18) that in Kabbalistic thought, there are “two movements which the Almighty engaged when he created the world: *hesed* and *gevura*”, might. The Rav goes on (ibid. 18-19) to describe the dialectical movement required of man, who is bidden to embody these two elements as well.

*Hesed* surges forward, rushing toward parts unknown, vistas invisible, horizons enveloped in the haze of the morning…. *Gevura* denotes *tzimtzum*, contraction, and there are two phases of the movement. First, *gevura* is a movement of recoil, away from the outside into oneself; it represents human flight from society into the private recesses of oneself… Second, when man begins to withdraw from positions won, he finally ends up fleeing from his own self…

Sometimes man must reach out to others and implement the art of *chesed*, while at other times he retreats from the community into himself. In fact, *chesed* is important for the individual, but it also pushes the community as a whole to create a society of *chesed*. What exactly is this *chesed*?

The community of the forward moving of *hesed* …introduces something that the world of beasts does not know. *Hesed* denotes, in practical terms, the vastness of kindness, contributing more than one’s capacity, giving away more than one had a chance to store, accommodating more than one’s narrowly bounded existential area will permit. In short, *hesed* means compulsive kindness, spontaneous sympathy. One is impelled to give away, to let others share his possessions, to invite strangers to partake of whatever he has. *Hesed* does not depend upon the actual size of one’s possessions, upon numbers and figures. It is, rather, a spiritual attitude, a subjective experience that whatever I have (even though my means are less than moderate if seen from an objective viewpoint) is too much for me.

The focus upon *chesed* is expressed in the Jewish conception of breaking bread. At the times of the year when there is a mitzva to consume a festive meal, the Torah (*Devarim* 12:7, 12) requires that man share his food with those less fortunate. Rav Soloveitchik explains (ibid. p. 20) that this serves as a means of inculcating within man this mindset of *chesed*.

Judaism says that man must eat, not alone, but within the community. However, in contrast to Western philosophy, it insists that the community which transforms primitive automatism into dignified activism, a natural process into a spiritual experience, consist… of *hesed*-experiencing, *hesed*-thinking, *hesed*-oriented, and *hesed*-questing people who cannot enjoy their food because they feel and experience the other person’s hunger, who turns their meals into occasions for their practice of great *hesed*…. The meal is basically a rendezvous with *hesed*—or with God Himself, who is *rav hesed,* abounding in *hesed*—and as such the meal is transposed into an exalted service.

**Freedom through Torah**

*Chesed* does not only consist of taking note of others; through it, one may discover the power to liberate oneself.

The Mishna (*Avot* 6:2) contains a cryptic teaching regarding freedom:

There is no truly free individual other than one who is involved in Torah.

The commentators explain the deep understanding of freedom expressed in this dictum about the Torah’s powers of emancipation. However, going beyond the classic understanding, there is certainly an element of interpersonal freedom that one may achieve through the Torah’s teachings.

In *Festival of Freedom* (p. 22), the Rav describes the essence of the unique Seder meal: the eating of the paschal lamb, which requires that man join with others in his festive meal. The Rav explains how this is an essential lesson of God’s guiding man to realize that leaving bondage and the world of slavery requires a new mindset with *chesed*. This is the Jewish freedom that the Torah teaches.

The ceremonial of the Passover meal, centered around the paschal lamb, aims at the emergence of the new *hesed* community, for *hesed* is the characteristic mark of the free man. The bondsman is not spiritually capable of joining the *hesed* community, because he is too concerned with himself, too insecure, too fearful as regards the morrow, too humiliated to think of someone else, too frightened and too meek….

God did not need the paschal lamb; He had no interest in the sacrifice. He simply wanted the people—slaves who had just come out of the house of bondage—to emerge from their isolation and insane self-centeredness into the *hesed* community, where the little that man has is too much for himself, where whatever he possesses transcends his ability to enjoy.

It is this *chesed* community, taking notice of others with a desire to share with them, which defines the Jewish concept of *chesed*. Though it is not always easy, it is our glorious tradition.

**The Challenges of *Chesed***

One who notices others is often confronted by challenges. It is sometimes easier to lock oneself away, not concerning oneself with others, lest one be put in uncomfortable situations. At the moment one uses his outlook of *chesed* to take note of others, challenges must be dealt with. What if one’s fellow is performing an action that looks to be forbidden; must one judge him favorably, or is one obligated to reproach him? May or must one hate his evil neighbor?

A *baal* *chesed* cannot live by the credo of “live and let live,” and such a person will ultimately be faced with interpersonal dilemmas. However, the same Torah which urges one to live a life of *chesed* details how one is to deal with the questions that arise in a social setting. This series of *shiurim* will be devoted to the various interpersonal *mitzvot* that guide one’s behavior and develop one’s character amidst the host of social quandaries that arise.

**In the first year, we attempted to focus on the philosophical background of the unique Jewish tradition of *chesed*. In this year’s series, we hope to focus on the specific unique *mitzvot* and to see how each one fits into the overall mindfulness of the Creator which the *baal* *chesed* must display.**

We live in what has been called by many the “me” generation. In Judaism's view, the focus on the “I”, in a way that does not allow for the recognition of the other, is an expression of the slave mentality. The freedom that the Torah teaches us is inherently rooted in a mindset of *chesed*.

Hopefully, the study of these laws will enable us to practice the *chesed* of freedom.