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 Abe Mezrich

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**Shiur #05: The Need for a Divine Command (Part 2 of 2)**

In last week’s lesson, we started to develop an understanding of the need for divine commandments in the ethical realm. We indicated that reason alone is not sufficiently binding and that proper conduct can often be rationalized away’ leading to the creation of a society with a corrupted sense of morality. In this week’s lesson, we will add more reasons for commandment being necessary, and we will further elaborate on the concepts we have developed by analyzing Avraham’s encounter with Avimelekh.

**Balance of Values**

Another motivation for divine ethical dictates is that reason can enable us to develop many values, but it often falls short in determining the relative strength of those values. For instance, the prohibition of causing *tzaar baalei chayim,* pain to animals, is clearly substantial in Halakha (See *Shulchan Arukh OC* 305:20), but it pales in significance when compared to providing essential human needs and saving human lives. An animal-lover’s disregard for human pain is a perfect example of how an ethical doctrine can go haywire, if not rooted in some deeper, divine system of thought.

Unfortunately, not too long ago, the Jewish people experienced the most heinous of crimes against humanity at the hands of a society that considered itself to be highly cultured, ethical, and humanitarian. The stories told of many wicked individuals who viewed themselves as caring and decent are mindboggling and painful, and they express the need for a divine code of ethics.

Many of the Nazi leaders who spent their days killing humans en masse were great lovers and protectors of animals. [Deputy Führer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deputy_F%C3%BChrer) Rudolf Hess, of cursed memory, was a mass murderer, but he was also a vegetarian and a member of an animal rights society. His care for animals was born after when he saw a calf being led to the slaughter and could not bear the pleading look in the eyes of the animal, which sensed its impending doom. Similarly, SS head Heinrich Himmler, of cursed memory, penned a letter describing his love and care for animals, “creatures grazing at the end of the forest — innocent, helpless, unsuspecting creatures…”

Indeed, years before Hitler came to power, the story goes, the *rosh yeshiva* of Slabodka, Rav Moshe Mordekhai Epstein, of blessed memory, was on a trip to Germany, and he saw a woman sitting on a bench kissing her dog. In shock, he predicted: “They will be slaughtering people in this country one of these days, for it says in the verse (*Hoshea* 13:2), ‘Butchers of people will kiss calves.’” If care for animals leads one to see animals as human, then one has failed to recognize the dividing line between man and animal, a phenomenon which may lead to the utmost cruelty toward one’s fellow man.

George Steiner, in the preface to his book *Language and Silence*, expresses the disillusionment of the rationalists themselves in the post-Holocaust era:

We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding, or that his ear is gross, is cant. In what way does this knowledge bear on literature and society, on the hope, grown almost axiomatic from the time of Plato to that of Matthew Arnold, that culture is a humanizing force, that the energies of the spirit are transferable to those of conduct?

A divine set of moral dictates ensures that one can maintain balance in interpersonal behavior. A higher authority directs each person as to how to balance different values.

**The Torah’s Definition of Truly Moral Behavior**

Even setting aside the limitations of an ethical system based on reason alone, there is another fundamental element of the need for commandment in the ethical realm. The Torah, with all of its understanding of the natural morality of the divine image of man, and even with all of its awareness of the Jew’s natural disposition to kindness, feels the need to define proper behavior. Judaism redefines man’s natural sense of virtue, and its definitions determine truly moral behavior.

Rav Chayim of Volozhin, in his work *Ruach Chayim,* comments on the *mishna* in Tractate *Avot* (1:2) that teaches “The world stands on three things: Torah, serving God and acts of kindness.” He explains that these foundations only existed as independent variables prior to the giving of the Torah. However, the revelation at Sinai made worship and kindliness meaningless when they are separate from the Torah. After Sinai, behaving in a seemingly virtuous manner that is not consonant with Torah dictates is improper.

Torah is first on the list (of foundations of the world), for if there would be one moment without Torah study, the entire world would revert to the chaos of the first day of creation. Moreover, Torah defines divine service and kind deeds… Lending money with interest was permitted and considered *chesed* before the giving of the Torah. The Taz (*Yoreh Dea* 160) notes that most businesses depend on loans in order to raise capital and consider it a favor if such loans are granted, even if they are charged interest. After Sinai, loaning with interest not only ceases to be *chesed*; it becomes forbidden, punishable by exclusion from the resurrection of the dead.

The Torah often not only transforms our innate sense of obligation to fulfill a commandment; it also provides the guidelines for proper performance, defining the parameters of that obligation. Rav Chayim of Volozhin provides another example in his commentary (ibid). He cites the anecdote of Rabbi Akiva, as a young student, coming across an abandoned corpse, a *meit mitzva,* which Jewish law demands be buried with all due haste. Thinking it appropriate, he picks the corpse up and carries it several miles to the nearest village for burial. Rav Akiva is told by his masters that despite his noble intentions, the law states that the greatest act of kindness for an abandoned body is to bury it right where it is found; every step of his had been, in fact, a sin (*Semachot* 4).

The story demonstrates that even when one intends to act properly and kindly, their rational approach may be deficient, illustrating the need for a greater authority to dictate correct behavior. Certainly divine input is also necessary in specific situations, where there can be a clash of values that lead to confusion as to the proper mode of conduct. Ethical dilemmas, such as the question of the propriety of stealing in order to save a life, can only be solved through great study of the parameters of the interpersonal *mitzvot.*

**Divinely-Mandated Goodness**

Beyond all the reasons given above, the simplest explanation for God’s commanding us to follow *mitzvot* in the interpersonal realm is that it is His will that we be kind and ethical, not just for natural moral reasons, but also for supernatural ones. God wants to ensure that we create a society of *chesed*, rooted not only in our love for man, but also in our love of God. God shows that it is important to Him as well that we treat others with respect. It is through the ethical commandments that God teaches us that an immoral individual cannot be considered a religious Jew.

The society we live in, while championing the importance of ethics and virtue, is also often marred by selfishness and outlooks which focus on the individual, to the exclusion of others. As people focus on their own needs, and personal ambition is often accepted as ample reason for hurting another, refocusing on the Torah’s interpersonal ideals becomes all the more important.

The Torah chooses to combat hypocrisy and provide a balanced sense of morality, rooted in the divine mandate to elevate our behavior to that of a true “kingdom of priests” (*Shemot* 19:6).

**Case in Point: Avraham’s Encounter with Avimelekh**

The story of Avraham’s encounter with Avimelekh, Philistine King of Gerar, explores the deficiencies of a society rooted in reasoned morality. The Torah tells us, at two different points that Avraham feels the need to hide the true nature of his relationship to his beautiful wife Sara and to portray their association as merely that of siblings. The first incident, in the kingdom of Egypt (*Bereishit* 12:13 ff.), is very understandable. Egypt is the capital of immoral behavior at the time, and there is no doubt that Pharaoh might have killed the husband of a beautiful woman to be able to take his wife. The society of Gerar, on the other hand, is known to be extremely ethical, with upstanding behavior and values, yet Avraham chooses to conceal the fact that Sara is indeed his wife once again, when he stays there (ibid. Ch. 20; all subsequent citations are from there unless otherwise noted). One might ask: why is Avraham so afraid to be honest in Gerar?

In fact, this question is posed directly to Avraham by Avimelekh himself. Working off the assumption that Sara is Avraham’s sister, Avimelekh chooses to take her to the palace. Avimelekh is taken to task by God:

And God came to Avimelekh in a dream by night, and He said to him, “Behold, you are to die because of the woman you have taken, for she is a married woman.” (v. 3*)*

Avimelekh, who had been told originally that Sara was Avraham’s sister, complains to God. God responds that he knows what Avimelekh believed, but Avraham is nevertheless a prophet, and if Avimelekh is interested in being healed, he needs to return Sara.

The next morning, Avimelekh rises early and summons his servants, telling them the truth. He then confronts Avraham with extreme anger. He explains that as king, he stands at the helm of an ethical society, and therefore who could insinuate that he, of all people, would want to steal another man’s wife?

Avraham responds duly, with a rejoinder that deserves much analysis. Avraham counters (v. 11) “For I said, ‘Surely the fear of God (*yirat Elokim*) is not in this place; indeed, they will kill me over my wife!’”

Avraham’s rejoinder seems to be very straightforward: without *yirat Elokim*, one cannot rely on any moral code of behavior to prevent people from committing even the most heinous of crimes, bloodshed and adultery. Though the society of Gerar might not be as openly corrupt as that of Egypt, the lack of a moral code rooted in divine commandment cannot hold its weight against temptation.

Avraham then continues his response to Avimelekh (v. 12), “Moreover, she is indeed my sister, my father’s daughter, though not my mother’s daughter, and she became my wife…” Avraham’s justification of referring to Sara as his sister is seemingly a further rebuke to Avimelekh’s system of ethics: if Avimelekh wants to live according to a system based upon the letter of the law and not its spirit, based upon the fine print and circumventing the true intent, than by his own rules, Avraham’s act is morally defensible. In a moral society not predicated on *yirat Elokim*, any activity can be justified by finding a technical loophole or creating it in times of necessity.

The Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 92a) states that in fact Avraham is explaining to Avimelekh in this exchange that the twisted morality that he has observed in Gerar has the potential to be more deadly than the openly lustful behavior of Egypt. In a supposedly moral society, in order to enable the king to seize the most beautiful, albeit married, woman, her husband would have to be killed. It is specifically because the moral code forbids a relationship with a married woman that so-called morality would require taking the life of another human.

The Talmud phrases Avraham’s challenge to Avimelekh’s sense of values thusly: “If a stranger comes to town, one asks him about matters of food and drink. Does one ask him about his wife?” This first question posed to a visitor expresses the deadliest form of misdirected morality. As God tells Avimelekh, Avraham is a prophet, and his penetrating outlook is not based on mere fear, but on a deep understanding of the nature of a society not anchored in divine standards. Avraham explains that rational morality is often skin-deep (see *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu* Vol. 1, p. 72). The Malbim, in fact, expressed this idea in his commentary to these verses:

If we see a person who is a great philosopher, who is just in his ways and has accustomed himself to act properly based on his intellect, we still cannot trust that person, for at a time of passion he may act evilly, and the same is true of a nation… Rather than having one’s intellect dominate one’s passions, the fire of passion may burn for a desirable woman, for the wealth of another. In such circumstances, even one’s intellect will be led astray — to murder, to engage in adultery or to commit any other evil act. There is only one force in man’s soul which can guarantee that he will not sin, and that is the characteristic of *yira* which is planted in his soul, which comes down to one thing: *yirat Elokim*.

In contemporary modern society, we often see a civilization that has many admirable values, including a sense of morality and compassion for humanity. However, double talk and hypocritical behavior often reveal the true face of the most supposedly moral individuals.

**Two Necessary Conclusions for Divine Morality**

By commanding morality, God in essence obligates us to develop in two other areas in order to become an ethical individual. The command defines the parameters of morality and insures that one does not lose balance or rationalize immoral behavior. Only one who is familiar with the divine definitions of kindness and who feels bound by them under all circumstances can truly be ethical.

*The Need for Studying the Ethical Commandments*

Rav Chayim of Volozhin expands his argument (cited *infra*.) of the necessity to view morality as a mitzva, emphasizing the importance of learning how to perform *chesed* in order to become a truly kind person (*chasid*). He explains that the question of the relative importance of focusing one’s efforts on Torah study or the performance of *mitzvot* (*Kiddushin* 40b) is in fact related to this thesis.

“Your Word is a candle for my feet, a torch for my path” (*Tehillim* 119:105). The Torah serves as both torch and candle, defining the *mitzvot* and their details in order to lead us on the path of life. The *mishna* (*Avot* 2:5) tells us: “An ignoramus cannot be a *chasid*”…

Even with the best intentions, one cannot properly fulfill the commandments without knowing the laws very well…. The question [regarding whether Torah study or mitzva performance takes precedence] has been resolved in the following manner: without Torah study, none of the other commandments can be performed properly… for one cannot perform a mitzva without knowing all of its detailed rules…

Torah study is not just one of the three pillars that support the world; it shapes and defines the other two, serving God and acts of kindness, as well.

Hopefully, the lessons in this series will enable us to learn the divine parameters of *chesed*, to know how to act properly. However, knowledge is only useful for the one who is committed to living according to knowledge, even when circumstances complicate the execution.

*The Need to Develop Fear of God*

We saw earlier how Avraham tells Avimelekh that he had felt the need to lie about the true nature of his relationship with Sara because he witnessed a lack of *yirat Elokim*, fear of God, in Gerar. Avraham evidently feels that *yirat Elokim* is essential for living a moral life. However, this gives rise to a question. Usually, we downplay the necessity of fearing God, focusing on the mitzva of loving God, which has more positive associations. Why would Avraham stress the seemingly secondary element of fearing God as a necessity for a moral society, instead of pointing out the Philistines’ deficiency in loving God?

We may understand this by examining another teaching of Rav Chayim of Volozhin. Rav Chayim points out that people often denigrate the importance of fearing God’s punishment. For that reason, we are told that one should not perform *mitzvot* with the intention of receiving a reward (*Avot* 1:3) and that one should serve God out of love and not fear (Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva,* Ch. 10)*.* In most instances where *yira* is expressed in positive terms, we understand it not as fear, but as awe — achieving an extremely elevated level of standing in total reverence and astonishment at the omnipotence of God.

However, Rav Chayim, in numerous places, expresses his strong conviction that while simple fear of God is certainly not the goal at the highest level of divine service, it is an essential element of any religious commitment and should not be disparaged. With his characteristic realism, he states that one who tries to serve God only out of love and never out of fear will not succeed; one who does so will ultimately experience a spiritual downfall. He understands the *mishna* (*Avot* 2:1) that states, “One should be as scrupulous with a minor mitzva as with a major one” in the following way: “Even when performing a mitzva with ulterior motives, so that the value of the mitzva is diminished, one must still be very scrupulous, for even so its value is tremendous” (*Ruach Chayim* 2:1). The fear or trepidation at the thought of committing a prohibition and the understanding of the divine reward for the fulfillment of a mitzva keep one on track even when one is not in the mood to be nice. (See also *Milluim Le-Ruach Chayim,* Ch. 8).

The *yirat Elokim* that Avraham describes to Avimelekh is the same fear of Heaven that Rav Chayim praises. It is this *yira* that remains strong when reason attempts to guide us to sin in the name of morality and all our lofty goals subside; it keeps us on the high road. Working on our fear of God helps us remain committed to morality even when doing the right thing is not so easy; succeeding in acting properly even under trying circumstances is a true accomplishment. As Avraham teaches us, fearing God is an essential part of being nice, another bridge between the ritual and the ethical commandments.