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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Dedicated by Michael and Patti Steinmetz  
in memory of Shmuel ben Elimelech z”l

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**Shiur #09: *Ahavat Ha-ger***

**Loving the *Ger***

In last week's lesson, we began to analyze the unique prohibitions related to the *ger* — literally “sojourner” or “stranger”, but primarily referring to the *ger* *tzedek*, the righteous convert. Aside from these injunctions, the Torah also formulates, in two separate instances, a positive commandment of *ahavat ha-ger*, loving the *ger*. The commandment is rather strange; isn’t there an obligation to show love (*ahava*) to every Jew? What is added by a specific commandment to love the *ger*, and what is its unique message?

In order to understand this mitzva we have to analyze the unique predicament of the *ger.* Our analysis will take us beyond the realization that the *ger* is unique in the way we must treat him; the situation of the *ger* teaches a profound lesson to all those born Jewish, how we are to look at ourselves and Judaism in general.

The obligation to love the *ger* first appears in *Vayikra* 19:33-34, alongside the prohibition of *onaa*:

Ifa sojourner sojourns amongst you in your land, you shall not wrong him. A sojourner who sojourns amongst you shall be for you like a citizen from among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt; I am Lord your God.

The Torah also provides the reasoning discussed in our last lesson: "for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt".

This obligation to love the *ger* is repeated in *Devarim* (10:17-19):

For Lord your God is the God of gods and Lord of lords, the great and mighty and awesome God Who shows no favor and takes no bribe. He does justice to the orphan and widow and loves the sojourner, providing him food and clothing. You shall love the sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

It is interesting to note the different contexts of these two mentions of the obligation to love the *ger*. (See the Virtual Beit Midrash article by Rav Tzvi Shimon, entitled "Love of the *Ger*", which points this out and provides a very detailed outlook of the Torah passages discussing love of *gerim*). The verses in *Devarim* group *gerim* with orphans and widows. This seems to indicate that there is a fear that *gerim* might be mistreated, as they are usually in a similar position of vulnerability. However, the verses in *Vayikra* group the *ger* not with the unfortunate, but with the lofty members of society, who are worthy of special treatment.

You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old, and you shall fear your God; I am God. Ifa sojourner sojourns amongst you in your land, you shall not wrong him… (*Vayikra* 19:32-33)

The juxtaposition of the *ger* here with the elderly, rather than with the orphan and the widow, that he is often grouped with, suggests an additional element to the obligation to love the *ger*.

In fact, in the Midrashic exposition of these verses also seems to capture the same duality. On the one hand, there is the difficulty of the decision to follow in the footsteps of Avraham, leaving one's family and homeland to follow God; on the other hand, there is the privilege earned by the personal affirmation of God's authenticity and the desire to follow in His path. The commandment to love *gerim* and not just to refrain from mistreating them indicates that the Torah does not merely seek to stop those who might take advantage of *gerim*; it wants us to recognize something great in them as well.

**The Need for a Command**

In last week's lesson, we questioned the need for an additional mitzva requiring us to love *gerim*, as they should be subsumed under the general obligation to love one's fellow Jew. We pointed out that the commentators often respond to questions such as these by explaining that one might have thought that the given obligation would not apply or one might have been negligent in fulfilling the responsibility. Alternatively, the commentators clarify that there is, in fact, no repetition at all: the mitzva is not being repeated, for though a given command may seem familiar, it introduces an additional element.

A careful reading of the Rambam's words indicates that he clearly sees the obligation of loving the *ger* as providing an additionally significant element beyond the general mitzvaof loving all Jews. The Rambam (*Hilkhot De'ot* 6:4) points out that by loving *gerim,* one fulfills two *mitzvot*: the general commandment 'You shall love your fellow as yourself' (*Vayikra* 19:19) as well as the specific "You shall love the *ger*."

However, the Rambam continues with a very startling statement:

God has commanded us concerning *ahavat ha-ger* just as He has commanded us concerning loving Himself, as it states: "You shall love Lord, your God” (*Devarim* 11:1). The Holy One, Blessed be He, Himself loves *gerim*, as it is stated: "and loves the *ger*" (*ibid.* 10:18).

The Rambam similarly remarks in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (Positive 207) where he explains that though *gerim* are included in *”Ve-ahavta la-reiakha kamokha,”* still there is a separate mitzva to love them as well. Here, the Rambam explicitly adds that the mitzva to love *gerim* requires a heightened form of love:

Because he adopted our Torah, God enjoined more love for him, and added a special commandment regarding him, just as in the case of the admonition against wronging him… In many Midrashic sources, it is pointed out that God has commanded us regarding the *ger* similar to the way He has commanded us regarding Himself, by saying "You shall love the Lord, your God” and “You shall love the *ger*."

According to the Rambam, *gerim* require love beyond that necessary for every being, akin to the love necessary for one to display towards God.

The Mahari, in his commentary on *Sefer Ha-mitzvot,* explains that just as one's love of God must be unlimited, so too one must have boundless love for *gerim*.

The Midrash Tanchuma (*Vayikra* 2) connects the love God has for the convert to the obligation upon mortal man to do the same:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, states: "It is sufficient that he left idols behind and came to live among you. I adjure you to love him, for I love him."

God loves the *ger* because of something special in his personality; He enjoins all Jews to follow suit. The Mekhilta (*Shemot* 22:20) states:

Rav Shimon bar Yochai says: “We read (Shofetim 5:31): ‘But they that love Him are like the sun rising in its glory.” Now who is greater, he who loves the king or he whom the king loves? You must say that is he whom the king loves, and it is written, "And loves the *ger*."

Each Jew’s *ahavat ha-ger* is following God's lead (“*Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*”), by loving those whom God holds dear. However, one must wonder: what is so special about *gerim* that earns them such unique love from God and accords them singular treatment from all Jews?

**Rav Hutner's View**

Rav Hutner offers a fascinating explanation for the Rambam's comments regarding love of *gerim*. The connection to the love of God is not only in the amount of love, but rather in the reason for the love. He explains that these *mitzvot* require the proper internal emotional motivation. For this reason, loving one’s fellow Jew must be motivated by the other’s status as a *reia*. By this token, one might have thought that the emotional awareness necessary for *ahavat ha-ger* is analogous to the sensitivity required for orphans and widows; because they are vulnerable and often mistreated. In fact, Rav Hutner points out that the Ramban in his commentary on the Torah would seem to understand the issue in this way. However, Rav Hutner explains that the Rambam takes pains to clarify that the necessary motivation for loving *gerim* is very different.

Rav Hutner explains that the Rambam's comparison of one’s love for the *ger* to one’s love for God has nothing to do with the weak and disadvantaged status of *gerim*; rather, it is due to our admiration for them. Just as we do not love God because He is in need of our assistance, we must also love *gerim* due to their greatness, not weakness. Rav Hutner adds that the Rambam must have understood the reasoning provided by the Torah, "for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt," not as a rationale for identifying with the *ger's* pain but rather as a proclamation recognizing the nobility of his decision. The *ger's* willingness to undergo difficulty and leave his or her natural community due to dedication to a cause is reminiscent of the Jewish people in Egypt, who remained distinct and identifiable. The Torah is teaching us that we should similarly recognize the greatness of the *ger's* decision to join another people and be close to God, even if it may separate him from his natural cocoon. This, Rav Hutner says, is essential in order to fulfill the mitzva. One must love the *ger* because of his greatness, recognizing his love for God regardless of the personal costs.

To gain a better understanding of the special responsibilities towards *gerim*, let us analyze the nature of *gerim* and the Torah's brilliant exposition of their character.

**As a Newborn Child**

In a number of contexts (e.g. *Yevamot* 97b), the Talmud states that after conversion, a person is viewed as if he or she has just been born:

One who converts has the status of a newborn child.

The ramifications of this principle are that a *ger* is not viewed as related to his or her biological family. (See Chatam Sofer, *Avoda Zara* 64a, who searches for the biblical source for this principle.) Beyond the questions of familial relationships, the *ger* is born again, a *beriya chadasha,* a new creation.

While our rabbis tell us that *gerim* must still honor their birth parents (see *Yevamot* 22a), the connection is almost non-biological at this point. The Torah recognizes the care and concern the parents had for their child while raising him or her, but the *ger* enters a new religion and becomes a new person. In fact, the act of conversion clearly disconnects this individual from the past, from the full family ties to the *ger*’s biological family. In this regard, every *ger* is in fact an orphan; therefore, *gerim* should already be included in the specific prohibitions regarding the mistreatment of orphans. Evidently, the need to mention *gerim* in the context of a specific mitzva adds an entirely new dimension.

The Alshikh takes notes of this Talmudic concept in his commentary on the Torah (*Shemot* 22:20)*,* giving a fascinating explanation as to the rationale of the two different *mitzvot* focused on not mistreating the *ger*. He explains that although idolatry is so repugnant that one might be tempted to find fault in a *ger* for previous idol worship, one must not do so. It is for this reason that the Torah presents the reason one may not mistreat the *ger* as "for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt."

For you too lived in Egypt, where you worshipped idols; only later did you embrace the true faith. Just as God did not look down on you for having worshipped idols and did not withhold His Torah from you for that reason, you should not look down on the convert. He is no worse than you, for one who converts has the status of a newborn child.

One chapter later (23:9), he takes the concept of the *ger's* rebirth one step further when explaining the additional prohibition:

Do not be prejudiced against him when he appears in a lawsuit with a born Israelite and take it for granted that he must be in the wrong on account of his idolatrous origins. That is why the text adds: “You shall not oppress a *ger*, as you know the soul of the *ger*” — he is regarded as newly born, cancelling out all of his previous life. His soul has been renewed as perfectly as if he had just been born. Were you not *gerim* in Egypt? There you were idol-worshippers; you converted and became holy through the paschal blood and your circumcision. Remember that the soul of the *ger* is immaculate in heart and soul. Why should you regard him as a cheat?

The rebirth of a *ger* removes any taint of past wrongdoing. The *ger* is a *beriya chadasha*, having undergone a personal experience not much different than the spiritual rebirth of the Jewish people upon their leaving Egypt and accepting the Torah.

**The Power of *Gerim***

Taking a quick glance at Jewish history, one notices that some of the great scholars of the Mishna were all *gerim* themselves or descendants of *gerim*: Shemaya and Avtalyon, the predecessors of Hillel the Elder; Rabbi Akiva; and Rabbi Meir (see *Yoma* 71b, *Gittin* 56a). The great Davidic dynasty which will be rededicated with the coming of the Messiah is rooted in the heroine Rut, whose decision to join the Jewish people is recognized in a book of *Tanakh* named after her.

There is a clear lesson here: the reborn *ger* can often achieve more than those who were provided with the best Jewish education from birth. The *ger's* convictions and intellectual honesty provide a great background for extremely successful living.

In a world where *yichus* (lineage) plays such a fundamental role in the eyes of many, determining eligibility to enter certain circles, the Torah's commandment of *ahavat ha-ger* ensures that our familiarity and preferences for our own should not come at expense of *gerim*. There is no rule that states that one born in the faith is preferable to the *ger;* history surely teaches that us that is not always the case.

What determines greatness is not one’s ancestry but one's personal accomplishments. The *Midrash Ha-chadash* (cited in *Torah Sheleima*) states:

“Shall be for you like a citizen from among you" — Rabbi Alexandri said: “How beloved is the *ger* in the eyes of God, Who commanded regarding him in forty-eight instances. He is like a deer that joins a shepherd's herd and is favorable in his eyes. [God] says, ‘In this one I have not invested from its birth but it joined my sheep; therefore, I love it.’ Such are the righteous proselytes. God says, ‘Since he came under my wing, he shall be for you like a citizen from among you.’”

Rav Tzvi Shimon explains that the merit of the convert lies in joining the people and the faith of Israel out of free will. The convert is like a wild deer that has always roamed free; the *ger* then takes upon himself or herself the duties and responsibilities of God's herd. The voluntary choice to worship God elevates the convert to the level of the most righteous.

However, as we will see in the view of the Rambam, the significance of *gerim* lies not only for who they are and what they have given up in order to join the Jewish ranks, but in what they symbolize and can teach us about ourselves.

**Who is the Family of the *Ger*?**

The question left to be asked is the following: if, in fact, the *ger* is born again, from whom is he or she born? Does the *ger* have a past or only a future?

Let us consider the Mishna’s ruling (see *Bikkurim* 1:4), which requires that a *ger* skip the declaration for one who brings first-fruits to the Temple, as he is unable to refer to himself as a son of Avraham. After all, by not being a blood descendant of Avraham it would be dishonest to use the formulation that Avraham is his father. Furthermore, how could he thank God for taking him out of Egypt when his ancestors were never there in servitude, toiling and mistreated?

The Rambam, in a fundamentally important response to a contemporary by the name of Ovadya (translated in *A Maimonides Reader*, edited by Isadore Twersky, West Orange: Behrman House, 1972), explains why this ruling is not accepted as halakhically definitive. He offers an unequivocal yes to Ovadya's query of whether a *ger* should include the phrase "Our God and the God of our fathers" in his prayers:

Pronounce all prayers as they are written and do not change anything. Your prayer and blessing should be the same as that of any other Israelite, regardless of whether you pray in private or conduct the service. The explanation is as follows: Abraham our Father taught mankind the true belief and the Unity of God, repudiating idolatry; through him many of his own household and also others were guided “to keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19). Thus, he who becomes a proselyte, and he who confesses the unity of God, as taught in the Torah, is a disciple of Abraham our Father. Such persons are of his household. Just as Abraham influenced his contemporaries through his word and teaching, so too does he lead to belief all the future generations through the testament he gave to his children and to his household. In this sense, Abraham is the father both of his descendants who follow his ways and of his disciples and all the proselytes.

You should therefore pray: “Our God and the God of our fathers,” for Abraham is also YOUR father. In no respect is there a difference between us and you… Keep in mind, that most of our ancestors who left Egypt were idol worshippers; they mingled with the Egyptian heathens and imitated their ways, until God sent Moses our Teacher, the master of all the prophets. He separated us from these nations, initiated us into the belief in God, us and all the proselytes, and gave us one Law.

Do not think little of your origin: We are descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but your descent is from the Creator, for in the words of Isaiah: 'One shall say: I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob' (Isaiah 44:5).

The Rambam introduces a fascinating understanding which is evidenced in his other writings. (See *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim,* Ch. 1.) This is not agreed to by all. (Rav Yehuda Ha-levi in *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* takes a different approach.) The uniqueness of the Jewish people is rooted in their following in the footsteps of Avraham and accepting God. The Rambam also recalls the Jewish people's own "conversion" from being idolaters in Egypt to receiving the Torah.

The Rambam would seem to indicate that the special laws regarding the treatment of *gerim* are designed, at least in part, to raise our awareness to the experience of Egyptian bondage. Beyond the explicit reason provided by the Torah, "for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt," even the use of the term *lachatz* is reminiscent of the only earlier mentions of that term in the Torah specifically used in the context of the Egyptian bondage:

I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. (*Shemot* 3:9)

Understanding the Egyptian bondage is a daily part of our existence, not only in regards to our interactions with *gerim*.

In fact, one might offer a rationale for this whole understanding based upon an insightful comment of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

**The Education of Bondage**

The Egyptian bondage, the period of living as *gerim* in a foreign land, had a great impact on the Jewish people. God caused the Jewish people to receive a national education inculcating the collective need for *chesed*. 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.

Rav Soloveitchik notes (*Reflections of the Rav*, p. 189) that the Torah provides a reason for the Egyptian 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 mitzva 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 (proselytes), 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-R. Shim’on ben 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 period during which the Jewish people were *gerim* in Egypt left an indelible imprint on the Jewish character. Seeing the modern *gerim* allows the Jew to reconnect with his past, while admiring their commitment to following the call of truth.

**Remembering the Exodus**

There is an interesting rule of the *Seder* night that one must begin the story of the Exodus by recalling our “shame”, and only then may one conclude with the “praise” of our being set free.

There is a difference of opinion in the Talmud (*Pesachim* 116b) as to what this “shame” is.

What is “with shame”? Rav says, “Originally our forefathers were idolaters,” and Shmuel says, “We were slaves.”

The opinion of Shmuel is understandable. We feel the need to mention the terror of our servitude, and the tribulations we encountered. The opinion of Rav, however, is troubling. He requires that we go back further in history, to the humble beginnings prior to Avraham's finding God. In so doing, we recall our own wandering, when Avraham had to act like the modern *ger*, leaving his family and homeland to follow God, refusing to change his course based on what was easy.

However, though on the *Seder* night we tell the in-depth story (*sippur),* we have a daily recollection (*zekhira)* of the bondage and our miraculous departure. Once a year we learn and tell in-depth the story of our exit from bondage to freedom, from our humble beginnings to our glorious exodus. However, it is not sufficient to focus on this just once a year, as we are human and prone to forget. It must become rooted in our consciousness through daily reminders.

One way of doing so is through our relations with the contemporary *ger*. All descendants of Avraham are actually *gerim*, and it is the way in which we treat the modern *ger* which may be compared to our love of God; one who really loves God views himself as a *ger* as well and cannot help but love the modern Avrahams of our time as well. As the Rambam says, the *ger* has joined the glorious tradition in the same way that Avraham did long ago, and we hopefully acknowledge this same commitment daily anew.

While it is easy to mistreat the *gerim* of the world and focus on *yichus* when sizing people up, we must remind ourselves of the identity symbolized by the name Avraham (*Bereishit* 17:4-5) —“*av hamon goyim*,” “father of a multitude of nations,” responsible for all of mankind. It is this that we are supposed to recognize through *ahavat ha-ger*. It is not merely an obligation directed towards a type of person; rather, this mitzva reconnects us to a moral value. We care for those who embody the commitment we are supposed to have. On a similar note, everyone individually, when examining his or her past, knows of certain characteristics that it would be ideal to "convert" and alter. The way in which we treat *gerim*, the extra compassion and love, hopefully may transform our own religious commitment and convert our own personality. This idea is partly presented by the Chinnukh (Mitzva 431):

At the root of the precept lies the reason that God chose the Jewish people to be a holy people for Him… He guided them in the ways of kindness and compassion and adjured them to adorn themselves with every desirable character trait… It is such loving-kindness to do good for someone who has left his nation and family to come under the shelter of God, showing his affection for God and his preference for truth… As we attain these good character traits, we find favor in the eyes of God, who will cling to us… as good spreads to good persons and the opposite to evil ones.