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 in memory of   
Joseph Y. Nadler, z”l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi

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**Lesson 13: The Practicalities of Forbearance**

**Man's and God's Forbearance**

In last week's lesson, we began to discuss the lofty behavior of one’s being *maavir al middotav*, acting with forbearance towards those who have done him or her wrong. This principle, rooted in the *gevura* (heroism) exhibited by one who can withstand pain and insult, earns those who live by its code God's forbearance; their sins, measure for measure, are forgiven by virtue of their own forgiving behavior.

Living by this trait is essentially following God's lead. Among the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is “slow to anger” (*Shemot* 34:6), being longsuffering. Certainly, one who is upset by an unnatural occurrence that disrupts the schedule should endeavor to overcome his or her aggravation and maintain composure. This is an expression of the positive quality mentioned in *Avot* (5:11), "difficult to anger and easy to be appeased". However, what if someone is mistreated by another? Should one really expect or even view positively a poised response which doesn't express one's true displeasure with the situation?

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (in his *Tomer Devora*) provides a fascinating outlook on this divine attribute: at the very moment that God is providing bountiful kindness upon an individual, the individual is "spitting in the face" of God's kindness. Rav Cordovero expounds Mikha's words (7:18): “Who is God like You?”

“Who is God like You” — this attribute refers to the Holy One as a tolerant King Who bears insult in a manner beyond human understanding. Without doubt, nothing is hidden from His view. In addition, there is not a moment that man is not nourished and sustained by virtue of the divine power bestowed upon him.

Thus, no man ever sins against God, without — at that very moment — God bestowing abundant vitality upon him, giving him the power to move his limbs. Yet even though a person uses this very vitality to transgress, God does not withhold it from him. Rather, He suffers this insult and continues to enable his limbs to move. Even at the very moment that a person uses that power for transgression, sin, and infuriating deeds, the Holy One bears him patiently...

This, then, is a virtue man should emulate: namely, tolerance. Even when he is insulted to the degree mentioned above, he should not withdraw his benevolence from those to whom he bestows it.

Essentially, God's benevolence knows no bounds, for He continues to act with kindness towards us even as we simultaneously show our disrespect by transgressing His commandments. The significance of this understanding is not only in order to attain a greater appreciation of God's providing for mankind. In truth, the recital of God's attributes of mercy is not merely to state some magical remedy capable of erasing man's sins. Rather, it is supposed to act as a guide for our own actions. A number of sources indicate that mentioning the Thirteen Attributes serves to teach us about God's merciful behavior and inculcate it within our personality.

Thus, when one is *maavir al middotav* one may embrace the attribute of being slow to anger, striving to bring one's composure as close to the Godly attribute of continuing to bestow goodness on another even as the other persists in hurting one. By emulating God's relationship with His people, we may earn forgiveness for our sins.

Here is where the difficulty lies. God Himself is not silent forever. The Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 50a) quotes the statement of Rabbi Chanina: "Whoever says that God is easygoing, his life shall be easily gone." God holds His justice in abeyance in order to give individuals a chance to repent. This is an act of God of kindness, but can man, made of mere flesh and blood, realize the same greatness? How is mortal man supposed to be able to overcome natural urges, especially when they are permitted? How is one supposed to be silent and possibly even forgive the attacker if ever approached with honest repentance?

This is the challenge of one’s being *maavir al middotav*, but it is also the essence of its greatness. In fact, an essential part of the process of *teshuva*, repentance, is being able to train oneself to respond to others with the attributes modeled after God's forbearance. How may one do so? One of the major factors is coming to terms with one's natural personality and what makes one tick.

**Battling One's Natural Personality**

In last week's lesson, we touched upon the story in *Taanit* (25a) of the prayers of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva on behalf of the community for rain. The former is not successful, while the latter is, but a Heavenly voice explains that Rabbi Akiva is not greater, but rather he deserved to be answered because he was *maavir al middotav.* The commentators wonder: why wasn’t Rabbi Akiva's being *maavir al middotav* sufficient reason to consider him superior?

Last week we cited the Or Yisrael's explanation; however, Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen (*Peri Tzaddik, Parashat Ki Teitzei*) provides a new spin on the tale. He explains that the Heavenly voice should be understood literally; there was in fact no difference between Rabbi Akiva’s and Rabbi Eliezer's spiritual levels in any way, shape, or form. The distinction which the Talmud provides, that Rabbi Akiva was *maavir al middotav* and Rabbi Eliezer was not, refers to something else. Rabbi Eliezer had exceptional behavior just like Rabbi Akiva; however, he was born that way. His innate, ingrown personality was naturally drawn to do good to others and treat everyone with respect. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, was born with a much more negative personality. In fact, he strayed from the Torah way for much of the first forty years of his life. His exceptional personality, which made him such a successful transmitter of Torah, came only after a long and arduous journey of working on his personality and improving his character. This, explains Rav Tzadok, is the meaning of “*maavir al middotav”*. Rabbi Akiva's prayers are answered because his forbearing character was working against his natural grain, overcoming his natural *middot* and character.

The implications of this understanding of Rav Tzadok are far-reaching. Those who have the most to gain from working on improving their character are the individuals that find it hard to treat others with their due respect or are quick to retort to insults to their honor. God factors in the work and toil involved in character improvement.

In truth, in terms of the more classic definition of “*maavir al middotav”,* almost everyone must work hard on being willing to be silent or even forgiving in the face of insult. There is virtually nothing harder than forgoing one's rights when attacked by others. It may seem that forbearance requires superhuman abilities, but working to control one’s personality is an essential element of developing one’s commitment to self-improvement. The ultimate act of *gevura*, as the Mishna (*Avot* 4:1) states: “Who is mighty? One who conquers his desire.”

One of the greatest impediments to character improvement is the assumption that all individuals who exhibited these superhuman qualities were naturally inclined to do so. There are numerous storybooks, some even referred to as biographies, which speak of some of the great luminaries of the Jewish people, individuals known for their exceptional characters and superb interpersonal relationships, and present them as being destined for both intellectual and interpersonal greatness from childhood. Rav Yitzchak Hutner felt that such a work does a great injustice to the subject of the book, as well as to all of its readers.

In a powerful letter addressed to a student of his experiencing challenges in his attempts to maintain a certain level of devotion and feeling, Rav Hutner wrote:

It is a terrible malady amongst us that when we deal with the various kinds of perfection amongst our *Gedolim*, our great leaders, we deal primarily with them after they have already reached levels of perfection. Simultaneously, we fail to deal with and skip over discussing their inner battles they waged and their personal challenges. The impression of our discussions surrounding *Gedolim* might erroneously lead one to believe that these individuals were born directly into perfection and greatness. Everyone talks in amazement as they discuss the exalted level of purity of speech of the great Chafetz Chayim *zt"l*, but who really knows about all the wars, battles, impediments, and failures, and reversals which the Chafetz Chayim underwent in his battles with his evil inclination?

Rav Hutner continues by saying that the detrimental aspect of this approach is that those who struggle feel they are distant from God, not realizing that conquering one's evil inclination is an integral part of spiritual growth. In other words, one reaches greatness not by focusing on the Chafetz Chayim's greatness after he became the Chafetz Chayim, but rather by focusing on what he did to get himself to that level.

**The Root Causes**

Once one has analyzed one's personality and accepted the fact that character improvement will require significant effort, then one is ready to learn more about the issues associated with the trait one wishes to acquire. Understanding the personality traits that lie at the basis of forbearance, as well as practical ways of interacting with others more positively, is essential for acquiring this trait.

One may be *maavir al middotav* for a host of reasons, not all of which are positive. One might be silent when mistreated because one is fearful of the other's reaction or because one is waiting for the moment to take revenge.

Rav Chayim Shmuelevitz (*Sichot Musar,* p. 422) quotes a number of sources to support his assertion that it is only someone who is *maavir al middotav* due to humility that merits the blessings mentioned above. It is not the silence per say that is significant, but especially the outlook of the individual which can affect a person's responses and thereby merit success.

To this end, Rav Shmuelevitz suggests that one who wants to attain the ability to be *maavir al middotav* should work to attain the trait of humility. Humility is not mutilating one's own personality or feeling of self-worth; quite the opposite, it means understanding in a realistic way one's positive qualities alongside an appreciation of areas in which one needs improvement. Accepting the reality that one is not perfect is helpful in allowing one to be patient with others' expressions of their imperfect personalities as well.

**Noticing the Positive Qualities**

Rav Chayim Shmuelevitz (*ibid*. p. 429) identifies forbearance with the ability to focus on the positives in an individual’s character or actions, rather than noticing the imperfections in the person's character or actions. He explains that judging others favorably is something that even God can do, as it is not limited to giving another the benefit of the doubt when unsure of that individual's intentions. The main purpose of *dan le-khaf zekhut* is to be able to judge based on the meritorious parts of one's actions and not get bogged down in the negative aspects.

For this reason, one who is *maavir al middotav* is able to withstand the temptation to act harshly with those who have wronged him because he is able to focus on the positive parts of another's actions and look over the unpleasant parts. By the same token, one who evaluates others only by their positive aspects will be viewed similarly by the Heavens. It is all a matter of outlook.

**Rav Dessler's Practical Guidance**

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (*Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu*, p. 243) points out that familiarity with the various positive benefits that the Sages associate with one’s being *maavir al middotav* gives one greater motivation to develop the attitude necessary to allow one to act in this manner.

Developing an attitude which allows one to avoid growing angry in haste at those who have wronged him or her is at the core of all interpersonal activity. The essence, he explains, is to train oneself to form the proper outlook: rather than look at all events from one's own vantage point, one should start looking at others as they look at themselves. By doing so, one can replace knee-jerk reactions of anger with positive friendship-building emotions.

At this point, Rav Dessler begins to enumerate ten pieces of practical advice that can help a person achieve the outlook that will lead to this behavior. However, before listing these qualities, Rav Dessler points out that some of the advice he gives will seem at first to be *she-lo lishmah,* not for its own sake, i.e. based on ulterior motives and concerns. However, he continues, one who intends to achieve a positive purpose in his actions need not worry about this. (Our translation is taken from Rav Micha Berger’s work for the AishDas Society, available at: <http://www.aishdas.org/maavir.shtml>. As a result, the transliterations may vary slightly.)

Because of the importance of the subject of "*Ma'avir al Midosav*,” we will list here some practical additional actions that a person can habituate himself through them and trust that he will reach this level, and it will be good for him all his days. Even if some of them seem that they have an aspect of "not for its own sake,” this is not a flaw... Because in order to reach a complete change in middos and ways of thought, one must utilize the "not for its own sake." Since your intent is for the sake of heaven, to do the will of your Maker, there is no doubt that you will be helped to reach "from acting not for its sake, one comes to acting for its sake.”

He then proceeds to delineate positive outlooks and actions that can transform one's behavior.

1- Your interactions with other people should not be run only through the cool intellect, but constantly through in a "warm" manner, that is, with their middos.

2- Everyone thinks they are superior to you in some way; and in general they are right about it. Agree with him, and he will love you. [Remember the words of the Ramban in his Epistle: If you are wiser than him, remember that he is more righteous than you -- for he is acting through error, and you, intentionally. Etc...]

3- Each and every person looks more closely at his own needs than at yours. Therefore, show him that that which you need is also what he needs.

4- Don't only try to do, but also to want to do, and doing it will enrich you.

5- Be careful not to enter heated disputes with your friends. They will distance you from them and come between you.

6- Do not talk too much about yourself. Talk to your friend about your friend himself, and he will be interested in listening. (To most people, there is no word more beloved than "me" and nothing pleasanter than his name.)

7- Pay attention to the words of others. Make effort to remember their names and details, and they will love you.

8- Do not correct your friend in an explicit way, because he will only rebel more. All sinners, even the worst of murderers, do not admit to their crimes in the hearts.

9- When speaking to your friends, agree to the truth. For why should he hate you when he is right!

10- Remember what the wise doctors say: It is more important to understand the patient than to understand the disease. Because a large portion of every sickness, and sometimes the entire disease comes from the spirit of the patient. When you succeed in curing this through loving and befriending him more, the disease will pass.

Rav Dessler concludes with a final afterthought:

One who conducts himself in these ways, over time it will become easy for him to be *maavir al midosav*, since he already got used to looking at everything from his friend's point of view.

**The Source of Rav Dessler's Advice**

The footnote in *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu* notes that the source of this essay is a speech of Rav Dessler delivered to the illustrious Ponovezh Yeshiva in 1949. However, it is particularly interesting to note that a number of individuals have claimed that the original source of much of these ten pieces of advice is actually the well-known work *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Simon and Schuster, 1936) by Dale Carnegie. An article in *Hamaayan* (April 1992), entitled "Accept the Truth from He who Speaks It," notes striking similarities between Rav Dessler's advice and elements of Dale Carnegie's approach to successful interactions with others. The article's author spices his findings with an account of a personal discussion he had with Rav Dessler's student Rav Aryeh Carmel, who informed him that Rav Dessler had read a *Reader's Digest* summary of Dale Carnegie's book, though he never read the original.

In truth, the findings of the article are debatable: did Rav Dessler really incorporate Dale Carnegie's ideas into a program for improving one's interactions with others? However, the question is not only academic but significant for another reasons related to character development. The reason for this is that one thing is very clear; even if Rav Dessler truly accepted Dale Carnegie's advice and made use of it, he did so in a completely different manner than was originally intended, to the point that it often does not only not resemble Dale Carnegie but is categorically opposed.

For those who are unfamiliar with it, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is one of the first self-help books, aimed at teaching people how to get from others what they desire. It is loaded with very insightful behaviors on how to speak to people in a way that will enable one to win their friendship and exert influence in order to achieve one’s goals.

Dale Carnegie certainly expressed his wisdom as the Mishna (*ibid*.) states: “Who is the wise? One who learns from everyone.”

Dale Carnegie did this by learning from everyone who succeeded in attaining wealth and influence, including robber barons like Andrew Carnegie, whose success came on the backbreaking necks of his industrial workers. While this allowed Dale Carnegie to inculcate many successful practices in his book, he did so in a way that struck many as extremely disingenuous. His practices were aimed at allowing one to get ahead, often by presenting what others would want to hear even when not truly of that mindset oneself. Even he realized that baseless flattery was dangerous for achieving one's goals and, therefore, he repeatedly reiterated the need to be genuine, but only insomuch as otherwise one would not succeed in one’s endeavors. Though the book is almost universally acclaimed, some detractors note its manipulative nature. The idea of friendship, after all, is antithetical to taking advantage of others for financial or political gain. Carnegie was not a moral authority, but a salesman of the first order who was trying to churn out more pitchmen in his image.

This is particularly significant if Rav Dessler did incorporate Dale Carnegie's ideas, even if he did so from the *Reader's Digest* summary which removed most or all of the manipulative aspects. Rav Dessler was quite familiar with the Mishnaic dictum mentioned above. Rav Dessler, therefore, could pick up a work of someone who spent years identifying the useful characteristics of successful individuals' behavior. However, Rav Dessler would have taken advantage of the research to develop a plan not “to win friends and influence people" but to be a good friend and positively influence one's own behavior. Even to this end, Rav Dessler begins his tips by noting that some of the ideas have a little odor of *she-lo* *lishmah,* actions with somewhat of an ulterior motive, but Rav Dessler goes on to explain that if one is doing so for the sake of Heaven, then one need not worry.

Rav Dessler was keenly aware that these pointers could be misused by individuals to teach practices completely antithetical to the Torah's goals, focusing on flattery and manipulative practices aimed at maneuvering situations to orchestrate personal success. He was also aware that someone who imparts these ideas is liable to lose a personal sense of being genuine, realizing that a fake exterior helps one "get ahead". For this reason, Rav Dessler translates the ideas into a means of achieving just the opposite: one’s ability to ignore when others insult him or her and do the impossible of maintaining silence. The Torah requires that one actually treat people with sincere respect, not with the hope of getting something from them. (See Year 1, Lesson 24 of this series, in which we explained that the statement "Accept the truth from whoever utters it" requires that one follow the Rambam's lead, accepting the truth of the statement, but only the truth, and translating it according to the Torah's view of proper behavior.)

Rav Dessler therefore advised that one inculcate the successful practices espoused by those who have studied the subject but for a different purpose than the original authors’. One’s goal should not be to influence others and take advantage of them, but rather to shape one's own personality to the extent that one may remain silent in the face of insult by focusing on the positives of others. It is the genuine distillation of Dale Carnegie’s words. By the same token, any useful approach may be inculcated in one's personality, regardless of the source, for this pure purpose. Like Rav Dessler, one must often translate the ideas of others into an approach that attempts to treat people with their due respect, in a character-building manner, rather than adopting these practices disingenuously.

**The Hope That God Will Treat Us Similarly**

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdychev, so the story goes, once came to the verse prohibiting the affliction of the widow and the orphan and burst out crying. He turned to God and said, “Master of the Universe! On countless occasions the Torah prohibits in Your name the oppression of the orphan. We do our best to live by this principle, but what about You? After all, Scripture says (*Eikha* 5:1, 3), ‘Remember, God, what has happened to us… We have become orphans and fatherless; our mothers are like widows.’ God, don’t You care about Your people? Why don’t You obey Your own commandment and redeem Your orphan children from exile?”

At first glance, this statement of Rav Levi Yitzchak would seem to be extreme chutzpa*.* Yet interestingly, the Netziv in *Hamek Davar* (*Shemot* 22:21) references the commentary of the Ibn Ezra (see lesson #07), in which it is written that one who stands idly by and doesn’t come to the rescue of weak individuals who are being afflicted is considered to have afflicted them. He adds that this idea is explicitly stated by the prophet Yeshayahu, who says (64:11):

Concerning these will You restrain Yourself? Will You remain silent and afflict us so very greatly?

Remarkably, the classic commentators on the verse understand it according to its simple meaning (see Rashi, Radak and the Targum): the prophet Yeshayahu is holding God responsible, so to say, for allowing the mistreatment of others. (However, the Netziv might have understood it differently, see Cooperman edition, footnote 171.) If so, the prophet is crying out to God: how can You be silent in the wake of all the oppression which is visited upon unto us?

What actions would have the power to awaken a change in divine interaction that would be able to answer the prophet Yeshayahu’s accusations, echoed millennia later by Rav Levi Yitzchak? What could put into action the desire of God to punish those who afflict the underprivileged, specifically the Jewish people in times of exile? A story told regarding Rav Chayim Shmuelevitz (who, as we noted above, focuses on the benefits of one’s being *maavir al middotav*) may answer this question.

As recorded in *Ke-tzeit Ha-shemesh Bi-gvurato*, p. 221, Rav Shmuelevitz told of how, during the Six-Day War, he was sitting in the air-raid shelter of his Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, during intense enemy bombardments. The majority of individuals inside were reading *Tehillim* in frightened voices, but Rav Shmuelevitz was taken aback when he heard the personal prayer of a lonely and broken woman who had been deserted by her husband more than ten years before. She was praying aloud, and the rabbi could hear her saying: "Master of the Universe, I completely forgive my husband for all the sorrow, disgrace, and pain that he has caused me all these years. May You please also forgive all the sins of those who are sitting in this air-raid shelter, just as I forgive my husband with all my heart!"

During that very same bombardment, the Mir Yeshiva building sustained a direct hit which can still be recognized by the color of bricks in the building. Yet, miraculously, the missile did not explode, and no one was hurt.

After finding out about the miracle, Rav Chayim Shmuelevitz remarked, "Despite the many righteous individuals in the air-raid shelter, it may be that the entire community was saved only by virtue of this woman's expression of the superhuman character necessary to forgive the husband who abandoned her to poverty. Her willingness to forgive his terrible crime against her clearly tilted the scales in our favor!"

Evidently superhuman displays of one’s being *maavir al middotav* are possible; the trick is to train oneself to be capable of acting that way under all circumstances, even when not in the midst of being bombarded. Focusing on the necessary character traits and the practical means of dealing with others positively makes this goal achievable.