YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero*: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

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**Shiur #15: *Chasidut* and *Chesed***

In earlier lessons, we spoke of the act of performing *chesed* and detailed the Rambam’s two sources for *gemilut chasadim*. True *chesed* is more than an assortment of actions; as we saw within the Rambam’s conceptualization of walking in the ways of God, it is also a personality. Beyond the personality of a *tzaddik*, who is involved in the *tzedek* and *tzedaka,* as we have discussed previously, there is the character of one who not only performs but embodies *chesed:* namely, a *chasid* (plural: *chasidim*). *Chasidut* is the lifestyle represented by such a person. Although they have a common root, *chesed* is usually translated as kindness and *chasidut* as piety. What connects them?

The Talmud is replete with stories of individuals characterized as *chasidim* and the noble acts they perform. We often find the phrase: “It once happened with a particular *chasid*…” (See *Berakhot* 30b, *Nedarim* 10a, etc.) Behavior which is ideal but not obligatory for all is referred to as *middat* *chasidut* (*Shabbat* 120a, etc.), and certain laws which are binding upon the pious are known as *mishnat* *chasidim* (*Yerushalmi* *Terumot,* Ch. 8). What is the basic connection between all of these uses of the root *chasid*?

An analysis of the various terms indicates that their usage is not arbitrary; rather, it is rooted in varying definitions of positive personalities. A *tzaddik* is not identical to a *chasid*, and at first glance, surprisingly, the *chasid* seems to be the preferred personality. Understanding the distinction between the two personality types is essential to being able to move from *chesed*, one of three pillars of the world (*Avot* 1:2), into *chasidut*. A *baal* *chesed* is someone who is involved in *chesed*, readily performing acts of kindness; a *chasid* is one driven by a personality of *chasidut*. They are to be differentiated from the *tzaddik,* who is driven by *tzedek*. What will become clear is that the search for *chasidut* is essential for every Jew, not only for the select.

***Chesed, Mishpat* and *Tzedaka:* Three Acts, One Personality**

The prophet Yirmiyahu informs us that God performs acts of *chesed* along with *mishpat* and *tzedaka*, and He desires and hopes that His handiwork follow His lead:

Thus says God:

Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,

Neither let the mighty man glory in his might,

Let not the rich man glory in his riches;

But let him that glories glory in this — that he understands and knows Me,

That I am God, who exercises *chesed,*

*Mishpat* and *tzedaka* on earth;

For in these things I delight,

Says God.

(*Yirmiyahu* 9:22-23)

This source, which the Rambam chooses to conclude his *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* with, describes the unique Jewish tradition of morality: God stresses the attributes of *mishpat* and *tzedaka* along with *chesed*. We have already noted that the term *chesed*, in its simplest form, means kindness. The importance of kindness, especially the uniquely Jewish variety, is an undeniable part of our tradition. The Rambam, as we have seen, defines the distinction each of these various terms; now we will see how he distinguishes *chesed* from the other two.

The Rambam (*Moreh Ha-nvukhim* I, 53) explains that unlike *mishpat* and *tzedaka*, which are rooted in some sense of obligation, *chesed* is something which one does even though it is undeserved.

In our commentary to *Avot* (5:7) we have explained the expression *chesed* as denoting an excess [in some moral quality]. It is especially used of extraordinary kindness. Loving-kindness is practiced in two ways: firstly, we show kindness to those who have no claim whatsoever upon us; secondly, we are kind to those to whom it is due, in a greater measure than is due to them. In the inspired Writings, the term *chesed* occurs mostly in the sense of showing kindness to those who have no claim to it whatsoever. For this reason, the term *chesed* is employed to express the good bestowed upon us by God: "I will mention the loving-kindness of God" (*Yeshayahu* 63:7). For this reason, the very act of the creation is an act of God's loving-kindness. "I have said, ‘The Universe is built up in loving-kindness’" (*Tehillim* 89:3) — i.e., the building up of the Universe is an act of loving-kindness. Also, in the enumeration of God's attributes, Scripture says: "And abundant in loving-kindness" (*Shemot* 34:6).

The Rambam explains *tzedaka* as being derived from *tzedek*; it denotes the act of giving everyone his due and of showing kindness to every being as deserved. In *Tanakh,* it is often used to refer to the fulfillment of duties towards one’s fellow man, imposed by one’s conscience; e.g., when we heal the wound of the sufferer. When we walk in the way of virtue, we act righteously towards our intellectual faculty and pay what is due unto it. At the same time, *mishpat* denotes the act of “applying judgment as is proper in each case, whether giving benefit or punishment."

Based upon the Rambam’s definitions of these three concepts, there are three character types that embody these types of actions, as we shall see.

**The Search for *Chasidut***

Throughout the generations, there have been various movements to return to the traits that define the *chasid*, so preciously to the Sages. Two of the more famous ones were those led by Rav Yehuda Ha-chasid (1140-1217), whose teachings are contained in *Sefer Ha-chasidim*, and by Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760). Their goals were to inculcate the character traits that make one into a *chasid*. Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto (1707-1747) in his masterwork, *Mesillat Yesharim* (Path of the Just), seeks to outline the path for someone to achieve *chasidut*, as we will soon see.

The goals of these movements and the works that accompanied them were not to have *chasidut* limited to the few, but to implant its teachings into the minds of the many. Even the greatest detractors of the Baal Shem Tov’s movement did not question the interpersonal ideals of the movement; they only questioned the educational means of achieving that piety. After all, the goal of becoming a *chasid* is explicitly expressed by the Sages, as it says:

“To follow all His ways” (*Devarim* 11:22)... just as He is called “pious,” as it says (*Yirmiyahu* 3:12) “For I am pious, says God,” so should you be pious. (*Sifrei Ekev* 49)

In order to define the nature of *chasidut,* we must see where it is mentioned and what is the common theme and denominator for all who express this behavior.

**Defining the Character of the *Chasid***

A series of *mishnayot* in the fifth chapter of Tractate *Avot* define different types of people by the actions they perform. Regarding our discussion of Sedom, we have seen that one who says “What I have is mine, and what you have is yours” (10) is viewed by some as displaying behavior characteristic of Sedom. The continuation of the *mishna* indicates that one who says “What I have is mine, and what you have is yours” is a *chasid*.

In the next four *mishnayot*, the term *chasid* reappears three times to define a specific character type. The following *mishna* discusses four temperaments, and it refers to the *chasid* as one who is “hard to anger and pacified easily.” Two *mishnayot* later (13), we find four types of charitable donors, the *chasid* being the “one who feels he should give and others should give as well.” In the following *mishna* (14), we find a list of four types of individuals who go to the house of study, including “one who goes to the study hall and studies effectively”, who “is a *chasid*.”

What is the common denominator between these four character types that allow one to be considered a *chasid*?

The Rambam, in his commentary to the Mishna, defines the term *chasid*, providing a classification (quoted in the passage in *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* above) that encompasses all references to the *chasid*. He explains:

A *chasid* is the wise individual who rises in levels of performance and character until he does more than required… His actions are greater than his wisdom, and therefore he is called *chasid*… A *chasid* is one who acts *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* (above and beyond the requirements of the law).

Seeing that a *chasid* is one who does above and beyond what is necessary, all characteristics of the *chasid* are now appropriate, for he is one who does not suffice with the minimum. Thus, someone who has extreme concern for others is not content with just wanting to help others himself; he wants all to take part in the kindness, and he is therefore a *chasid*. Similarly, one who runs to the study hall and uses his time there wisely is a *chasid,* for he has high aspirations of achievement.

*Chasidut* means that one does not look to do only that which is required, but to take things one step further. For this reason, we find sources that indicate that a *chasid* is better than a *tzaddik*. This even has halakhic ramifications. The Or Zarua (*Hilkhot Aveilut* 422) writes:

My heart tells me that just as one does not bury a minor sinner next to a major sinner, so too one should not bury a *tzaddik* next to a *chasid*. For a *tzaddik* is one who upholds the entire Torah, as it is commanded, fulfilling *mitzvot* and eschewing forbidden acts; but a *chasid* is one who sanctifies himself with that which is permitted to him [by performing above and beyond the strict legal obligations].

**The Dangers of Attempting to Be a *Chasid* andthe Need for Study**

A *chasid* seeks to go above and beyond the minimum; he embraces acts and traits based on the spirit of the law, which are not normative to all. While this is an extremely commendable course of action for one who executes it properly, it is also dangerous for one who fails to apply the message appropriately. As much as the genuine *chasid* is praiseworthy, the misguided *chasid* is lamentable. The Mishna advises one to approach *chasidut* with the adequate Torah knowledge to ensure proper execution, citing a teaching of Hillel the Elder:

He used to say: “A boor cannot be sin-fearing, an *am ha-aretz* (ignoramus) cannot be pious, a bashful one cannot learn, a short-tempered person cannot teach.” (*Avot* 2:5)

While at first glance, one might translate the *mishna* as dictating that one without Torah knowledge cannot be a pious or righteous individual, based on our analysis, that does not seem to be accurate.

Rabbeinu Yona explains in line with our understanding; though an *am* *ha-aretz* can act properly and even be a *tzaddik*, he cannot be a *chasid*.

There was no need to say that a boor cannot be a *chasid*, because he cannot even reach the level of fearing sin. He is so totally empty that he will not even know how to avoid sin. However, an uneducated person who is in contact with others, can fear sin. Since he has good *middot* and some degree of clear thinking, he will know how to protect himself from sin. He can be a *tzaddik*, doing and keeping what he is told to do.

Nevertheless, only one who is great in Torah can know how to approach and attain the level of piety. Piety requires purity of heart, refinement of the soul and every one of the other positive *middot*. The ignoramus lacks the wisdom which would carry him from the middle of the road to the pious extreme of *chasidut*, doing more than what is strictly required by the letter of the law. This is why he is called an *am ha-aretz* — literally translated, “people of the world.” His behavior is in keeping with the way of the world.

Essentially, Rabbeinu Yona views Hillel as conclusively differentiating between the *tzaddik* and the *chasid*. The former does all that he is told to do and is open to all who act in accordance with what is written in the law books. The latter, on the other hand, the *chasid*, who attempts to go above and beyond the call of duty, must truly be knowledgeable of the law, so as not to err by misapplying the laws.

The concept of a misguided *chasid* is further expressed in *Sota*. The Mishna (*Sota* 3:3) indicates that among the four individuals who can destroy the world is a *chasid shoteh*, a foolish pietist.

The Talmud (*Sota* 20a) explains what a *chasid shoteh* is.

What is the case of the *chasid shoteh*? For example, a woman is drowning in the river and he says “It is not proper conduct for me to gaze at her and save her [thus he allows her to drown].”

The Yerushalmi explains similarly that a *chasid shoteh* is one who is wearing *tefillin* and takes them off before diving into the water to save a drowning individual. His extreme care for his *tefillin* causes him to be deficient in the overarching mitzva of saving a life.

The Rambam, in his commentary to the *mishna*, explains that this individual is called a *chasid shoteh* because he takes his piety to foolish extremes.

A *chasid* *shoteh* is explained by the Talmud as one who exaggerates his circumspection and attempted precision in *mitzvot* to the degree that he is despised by other individuals. He does things he is not obligated to do, as if he is an imbecile, in his desire for *chasidut*. Regarding this, the [Babylonian] Talmud in *Shabbat* and the Yerushalmi say that “one who is not obligated to do something and does it anyway is considered a fool.”

The Rambam goes on to explain that individuals who express a misguided balance of piety are often hiding their true destructive natures. Going *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* requires one to be rooted in normative behavior, and his additional voluntary actions must stem from a careful balance so as not to make him a misguided *chasid*.

Similarly, the Maharal explains the above-mentioned rule from *Avot* that a *chasid* is one who says “What I have is mine, and what you have is yours” in the following way: one is only a *chasid* if one realizes his magnanimity needs restrictions. One who provides too much is not a *chasid* but a fool. For this reason, the Talmud indicates that one should not give more than twenty percent of his wealth to charity (under normal circumstances).

The Chazon Ish (*Emunah U-vitachon, Musar Ve-halakha*) takes this idea to its logical extreme and writes that one who does not know the halakhic guidelines of various intricate situations cannot hope to achieve *chasidut*. Thus, one can understand the Talmudic passage which advises one to study in order to reach *chasidut*. True piety must come from the Torah’s definitions of proper behavior; the only question is what should be studied, and on this issue the Talmud has a fascinating and enlightening stance.

**Three Elements of Becoming a *Chasid*:**

In lesson 8 we saw that the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 30a) relates what seem to be three diverse opinions of what one should study in order to become a truly pious and righteous individual.

Rav Yehuda said: “One who wishes to be a *chasid* should fulfill the words of *Nezikin*.”

Rava said: “[He should fulfill] the words of *Avot*.”

And others said: “[He should fulfill] the words of *Berakhot*.”

We explained that thought at first glance, the Talmud seems to present three divergent opinions, a number of commentators note that these three opinions might not be arguing as much as presenting three necessary areas of expertise necessary for devout behavior, each one focusing on a different fundamental aspect of Judaism.

The Maharsha (*Bava Kama* *ibid*.) writes that all actions of a person relate either directly to God, to others, or to oneself. Each opinion expressed in the Talmud focuses on one of these three categories. The study of *Nezikin* is in order to perfect actions relating to others, the study of *Avot* is to develop one’s own character traits, and the study of *Berakhot* is to govern the relationship between man and God. The three areas of concentration discussed in the Talmud are not three opposing opinions, but three necessary facets of religious life. An aspiring *chasid* must pay close attention to the laws that govern the relationship between man and his fellow man, as expressed in *Nezikin*, master the ethical teaching in *Avot*, and learn to appreciate the power and art of blessings. However, the Maharsha adds that to be a *chasid* means to intend to do everything in its ideal fashion. He concludes, therefore, that the *chasid* must study these three areas to ensure that he is well-rounded and not only exceptional in one area of his existence.

However, one may still ask: why do these particular areas of study lead one to become a *chasid*? Based upon our definition of *chasid*, we can understand the comments of the Maharsha to this Talmudic passage.

The Maharsha also holds that the three areas of study mentioned in the Talmud are the three basic areas of religious behavior, but he understands it a little differently. One must be whole in his own self, in his relationship with God and in his relationship with his friend. He explains that contrary to common misconceptions, *chasidut* in interpersonal relationships is not expressed through one’s outpouring of kindness on behalf of others. The reason why Rav Yehuda suggests that one who wants to become a *chasid* should study the laws of *Nezikin* is because that area allows one to express their inner goodness in their interpersonal relationships.

Not causing damage is the real expression of *chasidut* in interpersonal relationships — that his neighbor will not experience any damage by his hand. For if one is not diligent in preventing damage to his friend, then he is not a *chasid*. Therefore, Rav Yehuda advises one who wants to become a *chasid* to fulfill the dictates of *Nezikin*. However, Rav Yehuda does not advise one to perform great acts of *chesed* or give charity, for though this is clearly proper — one should be generous to others — still, this does not represent great *chasidut*. Rather, it is only when one goes out of his way to ensure that in no way shape or form will he be responsible for damage to another, that one can be considered a true *chasid*. (Maharsha, *Chiddushei Aggadot*, *Bava Kama* 30a)

The Maharsha goes on to explain that damaging another is reflective of a bad soul; one does not achieve any benefit from his hurting another. Harming another expresses that one has an evil soul, hurting another without any personal gain. On the other hand, guarding oneself from causing any possible damage to another is expressive of a wholesome character. This is the behavior of one who prevents damage to others, even when he has no personal stake or benefit.

What the Maharsha wants to express is that being involved in acts of *chesed* is surely commendable, but that is one of the reasons why true *chasidut* requires also preventing damage. In many situations wherein one gives charity or the like, there is someone to recognize the good will of the giver. Conversely, if one goes to extremes to prevent damage to another, no one will necessarily notice. No one will realize that the individual who picks up the banana peel from the stairs in fact saves the life of someone who walks down the stairs ten minutes later. Partly because there will be no one to commend the one who prevents damage, doing so reflects a pure heart and represents true *chasidut*.

A particularly poignant tale may bring this home for us. After the Versailles Hall tragedy in Talpiot, Jerusalem in 2001, in which the second story of a venue collapsed during a wedding celebration, killing dozens and injuring hundreds of people, municipal inspectors made their rounds to various establishments to ensure that they all met building specifications. After inspectors analyzed a particular restaurant, they informed the owner that although his building officially met minimal standards and they could not force him to reinforce the building, it would be a good idea to do so anyway, to guarantee that no structural problems would arise in the future. The owner decided to act immediately as a *chasid* would, and he paid out-of-pocket eighty thousand dollars in order to reinforce and strengthen the building’s foundations. Under normal circumstances, the public would never have known about this act of *chasidut*, going to great extremes and expense to prevent damage. This act of *chasidut* did become known, unfortunately, because this restaurant, Sbarro pizzeria on Jerusalem’s Jaffa Road, was attacked by a suicide bomber ten weeks later. Though the results of the bombing were destructive in their own right, without the reinforcing of the building’s foundation, the entire building would have collapsed and many more would have been killed.

This owner, Noam Amar, and all of his ilk who go to extremes to prevent damage or injury to others are the true *chasidim* amongst us. Others may be willing to give to charity and the like, but if they are not willing to prevent damage — all the more if they are willingly involved in damaging others — they are not *chasidim*. Quite the contrary, they represent the antithesis of *chasidut*.

In our next lesson, I hope to delineate the path to *chasidut* as espoused by Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, as well as the parameters of acting *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*: when is this behavior truly voluntary, and when does it translate into an actual obligation?