YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #15: Unifying Values and Traits**

Let us return to the narrative of *Sefer Bereishit*. As noted, Manitou explains that the act of Creation is essentially an act of Divine loving-kindness, focused on making room for an “other.” This provides the yardstick for man's most fundamental test: making room for the other and acknowledging his existence alongside my own. The test begins with the story of Kayin and Hevel. Kayin's test, as the firstborn, is to make room for Hevel, his brother, the "subordinate." Kayin fails the test and kills Hevel, obliterating his existence. We also traced the attitude towards the other via the relationships of the patriarchs and matriarchs in *Sefer Bereishit*.

We will now take a more detailed look at the story of Avraham. Here, too, we see a realization of the concept of making room for the other, as well as the "fraternity equation."

We have already seen in previous *shiurim* that the ideal that prompts Creation – the quality for the sake of which the world is created – is loving-kindness. This is also the essential quality of Avraham, as expressed in different episodes in Avraham’s story, and especially in his hospitality. Hospitality is the physical embodiment of making room for the other – bringing the other into one’s own home. Avraham maintains his custom even when he is weak and recovering (following his *brit* *mila*) – a situation in which a person usually retreats into his own space. We see another expression of Avraham’s lovingkindness in his confrontation with God in which he attempts to save the people of Sedom from annihilation. Here he makes room even for those who are completely opposed to him and the moral message that he brings to the world. Avraham realizes the purpose of Creation; it is for this reason that he is the father of the Jewish nation.

Many different nations and cultures have a founding figure. In Jewish tradition, this status belongs to Avraham, but not to Avraham alone; he is one of three founding fathers. This is a somewhat novel idea. In a regular family, there is only one father; in *Am Yisrael*, there are three. Avraham alone is not enough. The nation cannot be built up solely on the basis of his trait of loving-kindness. At this point, Manitou introduces what he calls the “unity of attributes”: *Am Yisrael* is based not on one crucial trait alone, but rather on the proper combination of the various qualities via which God is revealed in the world.

**The Problem with Absolute “*Chesed*”**

Although *chesed* is the most fundamental manifestation of God, and for this reason also the main purpose of man, this trait cannot stand alone. God’s attributes also include *din* – strict justice, or firm limits. We see this expressed, for example, after the sin of the golden calf, when God initially declares that the nation is deserving of annihilation. This is a manifestation of the attribute of *din*, in accordance with what we know from the Ten Commandments: The Holy One, blessed be He, is a jealous God Who punishes those who serve other gods. Only at a later stage does God forgive the nation, by virtue of His trait of mercy coming to the fore. It then becomes clear that God is also “merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and keeping kindness to the thousandth generation; forgiving transgression and iniquity and sin.” It must be emphasized that the Divine trait of compassion does not erase the trait of justice after the sin. When the second tablets are given, they too attest that God is “a jealous God.” This does not change.

Avraham is the foundation and loving-kindness is the basis, but it is not the be-all and end-all. The trait of loving-kindness (*chesed*) is followed by the trait of justice (*din*), as embodied in Yitzchak. Yitzchak earns his existence in the episode of the *akeida* – indicating that the value of a person’s own existence comes from God. According to the trait of *din*, there is no room for or any real existence in any violation of the absolute Divine will. And without Divine will there is no right to exist – as expressed in the *akeida*.

Yitzchak introduces a new value in the development of the nation. Unlike the people of Sedom, who also epitomized *din* and were in fact opposed to *chesed*, in Yitzchak this trait finds holy expression. His path was not opposed to that of Avraham; instead, it added another value that needed to unite with the value of *chesed*.

In our discussion of the story of Kayin and Hevel and the “fraternity equation,” we saw that Manitou emphasizes reciprocity: A person is meant to care not only about others, but also about himself. He and his fellow come from the same single Divine source, and they are equal. Reciprocity is a reflection not of *chesed*, but of *din*. It represents justice. It cannot be that the other should exist and I should not.

Avraham’s story shows why we cannot adopt his essence alone and pursue *chesed* to an extreme. Avraham wanted to save Sedom in the name of an absolute surrender for the sake of the existence of the other. God nevertheless overturned Sedom – because evildoers have to be destroyed. Indeed, we have seen throughout history how absolute kindness can also lead to distortion, as in the case of Christianity, whose vision of total kindness degenerated into cruelty.

**The Problem with any Absolute Value**

In general, following just one principle leads to distortion. When a person is motivated by one sole goal, in his mind that goal will come to justify the means – any means. All values become subservient to that ideal. Manitou emphasizes that almost every revolution in history that sought to inculcate some or other absolute value brought about a bloodbath in the name of that value. Adherence to a single principle led to totalitarian regimes that attempted to subject the entire world to an ideal (Communism, Fascism) or, in the case of the French Revolution, for example, the rule of Napoleon:

The Jewish People’s slogan is, “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” We speak of the Source of the unification of attributes – God is One, our one and only God – rather than of any specific trait. The Jewish People’s theology parallels its moral worldview: a unity of attributes, unity of values, absolute monotheism. The Lord, Who is God, is the Creator; it is He Who acts.

The other nations have different slogans. Each takes upon itself the promotion of a different value – in most cases, cut off from other values – and this is a real problem, because a value that is severed from other values becomes a value of evil (the “*sitra achra*”). The example that I like to use is the attribute of loving-kindness. Real kindness has limits; in other words, it is limited by the attribute of justice. The *chesed* of the *sitra achra* is not limited, and therefore it quickly turns into behavior that is not moral. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* IV, p. 61)

Why, then, was Avraham permitted to follow the path of *chesed* alone? Because there was a need to restore the attribute of Divine kindness to the world. *Chazal* (*Bereishit Rabba* 19), in their description of the early generations of mankind, speak of the Divine Presence distancing itself from those generations to the ends of the seven firmaments, until Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov appeared and brought the Divine Presence back down to this world, one level at a time. The kabbalists explain that each firmament mentioned in the *midrash* represents a different attribute of God, each of which, in turn, reappeared in the world. Thus, the attribute of *chesed* had to appear in the form of Avraham to the greatest possible extent; then another attribute had to appear in its fullest form, to balance it.

Avraham begs for Divine mercy for Sedom, but a world in which the kindness of Avraham is not accompanied by the *din* of Yitzchak will empower the wicked. We know what can happen when there is no balance; both Avraham and Yitzchak had sons who did not balance them. Yishmael intensified the *chesed* of his father (Avraham), while Esav intensified the *din* of his father (Yitzchak). Both stand as proof of how problematic each attribute can be when left on its own and how essential it was that each of the three forefathers make their special attribute manifest.

Avraham did not appear in the world in order for us to imitate him, but rather in order that *Am Yisrael* would learn both his attribute and others, and thereby build a wholesome nation complete in its traits. In *shiurim* to come, we will examine how the attributes work together and how the representative of each attribute came to have a son who represented a very different attribute.

In this context, Manitou cites a teaching of *Chazal*: “The forefathers themselves are the *merkava* (Holy Chariot)” (*Bereishit Rabba* 47 and elsewhere). A chariot cannot run on just one wheel; it needs at least three. Three elements can create a whole truth, and the Torah therefore could be given only to a nation that had all three attributes as its foundation. The message that the Torah brings to the world is the totality of attributes.

Translated by Kaeren Fish