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* #19: Being *Yashar* and the Attribute of *Yashrut***

**Introduction**

In last week’s lesson, we learnt about the significance given to the verse in *Devarim* (6:18) instructing us to “do the right (*yashar*) and the good (*tov*) in God’s eyes.” We noted the singular importance of the verse which, according to the Ramban and others, is a general directive to ensure that all our actions, even those not required or prohibited by any explicit commandment, be in line with the Torah’s description of *yashar* and *tov*. But what exactly is the definition of these two terms, “*yashar”* and “*tov”*? Concerning the former in particular, a specific definition will not only help us develop a proper understanding of this all-important verse; it will also enlighten us to appreciate the many other verses and statements of the Sages using this term.

The word *yashar* literally means “straight,” and it is generally understood in metaphorical contexts as a reference to moral rectitude, “upright” or “right”. The adjective (plural form: *yesharim*) is also used to form different nouns, from the biblical *yosher* and *yeshara* and the Midrashic *yashrut* to the modern term *yashranut*. For a proper understanding of the term and its implications, we must view it in context, especially where it appears alongside other words or in their place.

The Mishna in *Avot* (6:1) lists the character traits that one who studies Torah in its ideal form develops. It states:

Rabbi Meir stated: “Whoever engages in Torah study for its own sake, merits many things; furthermore, the creation of the entire world is worthwhile for his sake alone… The Torah clothes him in humility and fear of God; it makes him fit to berighteous, pious, rightand faithful…”

The first two terms are familiar to us — the characters of the *tzaddik* and the *chasid* we have explicated — but the question remains: what is *yashar*? How does it differ from the other positive traits mentioned in the passage? While some may view the Mishna’s lengthy listing as mere poetry, a proper definition of these concepts and the differences between them will allow us to understand and appreciate their unique messages and directives for right behavior.

***Yashrut* of God and Man**

In more than one verse, God is described as a *yashar* and the teachings of the Torah are referred to as *yesharim*. The need to define *yashar* is made more pressing by the Torah’s usage of the term in addition to more common descriptions of God; it seems to add another divine characteristic. An example of this phenomenon is found in *Parashat Ha’azinu* (*Devarim* 32:4) near the end of the Torah in its reference to God and His attributes.

The Rock! Perfect is His work, for all His ways are justice; a God of faith without iniquity,righteous and right is He.

Our forefathers are referred to as *yesharim* as well, as we will discuss below. If *yashar* is a description of God, then it makes sense that individuals who succeed in modeling their life based on God’s teachings should achieve that similar distinction.

What is even more startling, is that *yashar* is not only a description of God and the Torah, but is also used as the defining characteristic of man from the time of his creation. The verse in *Kohelet* (7:29), which we will analyze at length below, attests to man’s being created *yashar* but failing due to his searching out “reckonings”.

*Yashrut* seems to be an essential character trait of mankind, and its absence or suppression leads man to extreme troubles. Thus, emulating the Patriarchs, who are known as *yesharim*, who model God’s attribute of being *yashar* and retain man’s innate *yashrut*, is clearly of utmost importance. It therefore makes sense that the Ramchal entitles his classic work on spiritual growth “*Mesillat* *Yesharim*” — the *mesilla* (path) of the *yesharim* is the way for man to realize his potential. As he maps out the levels described by Rabbi Pinechas ben Ya’ir, he attempts to educate individuals to become *yesharim*, not *tzaddi*kim or *chasidim*. The overwhelming importance of becoming *yashar* is self-evident from the fact that developing *yashrut* essentially allows someone to return to his original inborn attribute.

Furthermore, the name of the Jewish people, *Am Yisrael*, may also indicate the unique heritage of *yashrut* that is reserved for the Jewish people.

Let us now examine the details of how the term “*yashar*” is used in *Tanakh* and the Sages’ writings.

***Sefer Ha-yashar***

The term “*sefer ha-yashar*” (the book of the right) is used in a number of verses in *Tanakh* (*Yehoshua* 10:13, *II* *Shemuel* 1:18). The Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 25a) records a dispute as to which book of *Tanakh* referred to as *sefer ha-yashar*.

The first opinion states that *sefer ha-yashar* always refers to the Book of *Bereishit,* which records the actions of the ancestors of the Jewish people.

Rav Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “This is the book of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who are known as *yesharim*, as the verse indicates (*Bamidbar* 23:10) “May my soul die the death of *yesharim*.”

The verse in *Bamidbar* is a quote from the Aramean prophet Bilam, who is aware of the peaceful passing of the Patriarchs. He, too, wishes to die a tranquil death, and he therefore declares his desire to die painlessly, as they did. His reference to the Patriarchs as *yesharim* is used by Rabbi Yochanan as proof of the fact that *sefer ha-yashar* is the chronicle of the right-living Patriarchs.

Bilam is not privileged to have God accede to his request. The verse states (*Bamidbar* 31:8) that Bilam dies by the sword of the Jewish people, a painful expiration. Evidently, Bilam is aware of the *yashrut* of the forefathers, and he acknowledges that their righteous, painless passing is a direct result of this attribute of theirs. Though he admires their final moments, he is nevertheless unwilling to live his life in the way they did, and therefore his passing and his eternal suffering are constant testaments to his lack of *yashrut*. Thus, he is undeserving of this honor.

Why does Bilam fail to act with the *yashrut* of the Patriarchs if he recognized its importance? Bilam, after all, is a wise individual? What is the source of the disconnection between his knowledge and his actions? Understanding *yashrut* as expressed in the acts of our ancestors will provide us the answer.

**Bilam’s Downfall**

The fact is that Bilam’s straying from the straight path of the Patriarchs represents the challenge that all mankind faces; his failure demonstrates the characteristics that might lead to one’s downfall.

While *yashrut* seems to be an attribute that must be acquired, as presumably the Patriarchs did, it is also described, in the verse in *Kohelet* referenced above, as being innate.

But, see this I did find: God has made man right, but they sought out many reckonings. (*Kohelet* 7:29).

Man is created *yashar*, but he may lose that trait through his pursuit of “reckonings”.

The Rambam posits, along these lines, that one who is aware that he has moral deficiencies and fails to try to heal them as he would try to do for his physical ailments is, in effect, leaving the path of *yosher*.

Similarly, those who are morally ill desire and love bad traits; they hate the good path and are too lazy to follow it. They find it exceedingly burdensome according to their sickness. Yeshayahu (5:20) the prophet speaks of such people: “Woe to those who call the bad good, and the good bad, who take darkness to be light and light to be darkness, who take bitter to be sweet and sweet to be bitter.” Concerning them it is stated (*Mishlei* 2:13) states: **“They leave the paths of *yosher* to walk in the ways of darkness.”** (Rambam, *Hilkhot Deot* 2:1)

The Metzudat David understands the above verse in *Kohelet* in a similar manner (though his explanation of the end is somewhat different).

“God has made man right” — this is because I know that God created man to be *yashar*, i.e., to follow the middle path in character traits, such as anger, sadness, mercy and the like, rather than go to either extreme; a person who follows this behavior is recognizable as a *yashar* person... However, human beings seek many designs, at times turning to one extreme… (Metzudat David, *Kohelet* 7:29)

Man is created to be *yashar*, morally straight and admirable; it is his searching after various “reckonings” that move him in different directions.

In a lengthy piece near the end of his commentary on the Torah (*Meshekh Chokhma,* *Devarim* 30:11), Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk relates his thesis of the pure creation of man in the image of God, with a sense of *yashrut*. This is what is often referred to as *sekhel ha-yashar*, the right mind. When he refrains from overanalyzing, man has an inner purified sense of justice and morality. This is similar to the idea of natural morality, which we discussed at the beginning of this series. The only force that can destroy this inner sense of moral judgment is man himself, attempting to acquire more than his due, initiating schemes and reckonings and conniving to achieve things that he does not really deserve, thereby corrupting his inner sense of Divine morality, the legacy of his being created in the image of God.

The Rambam (*Moreh Ha-nvukhim* 3:12) relates a similar thesis in his description of the true cause of most bad things in the world, and he too references the verse in *Kohelet* cited above. The Rambam points out a grave misunderstanding of man’s role in the trials and tribulations that befall mankind:

Men frequently think that the evils in the world are more numerous than the good things; many sayings and songs of the nations dwell on this idea. They say that a good thing is found only exceptionally, whilst evil things are numerous and lasting…

The Rambam goes on to delineate three classes of misfortune and explains that while there are some evils which come about through natural disasters, most come about by human hands:

The second class of evils comprises such evils as people cause to each other, when, e.g., some of them use their strength against others. These evils are more numerous than those of the first kind: their causes are numerous and known; they likewise originate in ourselves, though the sufferer himself cannot avert them. …

However, the Rambam continues, the greatest source of evil in the world and the prime cause of harm is not the natural world or other people, but man harming himself.

The third class of evils comprises those which each one causes to himself by his own actions. This is the largest class, and it far outnumbers the second class. It is especially of these evils that all men complain; few men are found that do not sin against themselves by this kind of evil. Those that are afflicted with it are therefore justly blamed in the words of the prophet, "This has been by your means" (*Malakhi* 1:9). The same is expressed in the following passage, "He that does it destroys his own soul" (*Mishlei* 6:32). In reference to this kind of evil, Shelomo says, "The foolishness of man perverts his way" (*ibid*. 19:3). **As he has already explained, this kind of evil is man's own work, as it says, "**But, see this I did find: God has made man right, but they sought out many reckonings" (*Kohelet* 7:29), and these inventions bring the evils upon him…

As the Rambam describes, when it comes down to it, man is often his own worst enemy. He is born *yashar* and has the perfect nature for success. Thus, man’s perversion stem from his own devices; he alone is responsible for his failures through his betrayal of his inner *yashrut*. The cause of this failure is expressed effectively through an analysis of the differences between the first of the *yashar* Patriarchs, Avraham, and his admirer but polar opposite, Bilam. The mishna (*Avot* 5:19) lists three character traits that define the differences between Avraham’s disciples and Bilam’s disciples:

Anyone who has the following three traits is among the disciples of our forefather Avraham, and whoever has three opposing traits is among the disciples of the wicked Bilam.

Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit and an undemanding soul are the disciples of our forefather Avraham.

Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul are the disciples of the wicked Bilam.

How are the disciples of our forefather Avraham different from the disciples of the wicked Bilam? The disciples of our forefather Avraham enjoy the fruits of their good deeds in this world and inherit the World to Come… but the disciples of the wicked Bilam inherit Gehenna and descend into the well of destruction…

The difference between Avraham’s disciples and Bilam’s disciples is expressed in their character. Do they feel that their achievements warrant that they receive special treatment, or do they recognize their subservience to a higher cause? In fact, both Bilam and Avraham were prophets for the nations of the world — Avraham for the simple reason that there was no Jewish people yet. Avraham achieved *yashrut* because of his clinging to proper and humble character traits.

Sometimes it is specifically the bright individuals, or those who think they can play the system, who fail to take heed; all too quickly, they start down the path of neglecting their *yashrut*. The right paths are travelled by those who do what they know is right without questions. Rav Yitzchak Arama (*Akeidat Yitzchak,* *Kohelet* 7:29) explains that sometimes the search for intrigues and ingenuity causes a person to outsmart himself; in trying to become overly wise, one loses his hallmark innate simplicity

The Maggid of Mezritch is quoted as explaining the need to see differences in the disciples rather than the prophets themselves. *Yosher* is subverted when one presents himself in a way different from his true nature. Bilam pretends to be a God-fearing individual, but this is a façade, an exterior to hide his true feelings and lack of rightness.

Likewise, a number of commentators on the verse in *Kohelet* call our attention to the verse’s explanation for what may lead one to lose his *yashrut*. The Alshikh explains that this verse expresses the downfall of King Shelomo, who, though created *yashar,* expounded the reason of the prohibition for a king to take too many wives. Eventually, he permitted himself to marry numerous wives, explaining that the reason did not apply to him. This was an act of seeking reckonings, setting aside the Torah’s wisdom, and it caused him to veer from the straight path.

The importance of *yashrut* is evident in a number of sources that explain that *yashrut* is not only a positive character trait, but the defining attribute for one who wants to act in accordance with the will of God. Rav Chayim Shmuelevitz says (*Sichot Musar,* p. 347), “*Yashrut* is the most important attribute amongst all others, and all other attributes require it. Any deviation from the path of *yashrut*, even in the slightest aspect, can cause death…”

*Yashrut,* in essence, is the attribute necessary to ensure that one’s actions are true to one’s inner knowledge. One who is straight and *yashar* does not try to outsmart the system, and therefore he is true to his inner knowledge and honest with himself. A life without *yashrut* is a life where knowledge is compartmentalized and completely disconnected from actions. Thus, Bilam’s life is the antithesis of *yashrut*; his desire to die, rather than live, in the way of *yesharim* effectively explains the source of his downfall. In his plea, he expresses his inner knowledge of how essential and beneficial it is to be *yashar*, to walk the straight and narrow path without trying to outmaneuver God, but his desire to try to attain things that are not meant for him causes him to attempt to outwit God and to be left with nothing.

**The Netziv’s Explanation of *Sefer Ha-yashar***

The Netziv, in his introduction to the first volume of the Torah, explains the reason that *Bereishit*, the book of the Patriarchs, is called *sefer ha-yashar*, the book of the right. His explanation expresses the reason why *yashrut* is so essential, especially for interpersonal behavior. He writes:

The Book of *Bereishit* is called by the Prophets “*sefer ha-yashar”,* as explained in the Talmud *Avoda Zara* (25a)… as of Rabbi Yochanan: “This is the book of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who are known as *yesharim*, as the verse indicates, “May my soul die the death of *yesharim*.”

One must understand, why is it that Bilam refers to our forefathers specifically with the term *yesharim*, and not by another reference such as *tzaddikim*, or *chasidim*? Secondly, why is this book in particular referred to with the term “*yesharim”*? And why is Bilam’s prayer for his end to be like the death of *yesharim*?

The Netziv continues by providing a unique explanation for the term *yesharim*, based on the above-cited verse in *Ha’azinu* that refers to God as both *tzaddik* and *yashar*.

The matter is explained by the verse in the Song of *Ha’azinu* (*Devarim* 32:4): “The Rock! Perfect is His work … righteous and right is He.” The specific praise of God as *yashar* is used to explain the righteousness of God’s judgment in destroying the Second Temple because of “a crooked and perverted generation” (*ibid*. v. 5). We may explain that during the Second Temple, there were *tzaddikim* and *chasidim,* as well as those who toiled in the words of Torah; however, they were not *yesharim* in their dealings with others. Due to the baseless hatred in their hearts towards each other, they suspected that those who disagreed with them on religious matters were Sadducees or heretics. This brought them to bloodshed under false pretenses and many other evils until the Temple was destroyed. This is the justification for the destruction: for God is *yashar* and God could not tolerate *tzaddikim* like these. Rather, [God prefers] people who act in a way that is *yashar* even in worldly matters, not those who act crookedly even for the sake of Heaven; this causes the destruction of creation and the annihilation of the world’s population.

In the Netziv’s understanding, it is insufficient to be a *tzaddik* and even a *chasid*, even to study Torah; as the Talmud explains, the people of the generation of the Second Temple’s destruction had all of these qualities. If one lacks *yashrut*, the direct simplicity of being straight and caring about others, then God cannot stand or tolerate these “righteous” individuals. The Patriarchs, he goes on to explain, were very different:

And this was the praise of the Patriarchs, that besides their being *tzaddikim*, *chasidim* and lovers of God in the most perfect way, they were also *yesharim*; that is, they conducted themselves towards others, even towards despicable idol worshippers, with love; they cared about providing for their benefit, as that keeps the world in existence. Thus, we see that our patriarch Avraham prayed for the city of Sedom, even though he hated them and their king with the utmost enmity due to their evil ways, as is clear from his statement to the king of Sedom; still, he sought their survival…

For this reason, the book of *Bereishit,* which delineates the actions of the Patriarchs, is known as *sefer ha-yashar*. Bilam, in a moment of divine inspiration, was not shocked by the evil of his ways, by his failure to be a *tzaddik* or *chasid* along the lines of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, for he was a prophet for the nations of the world. Indeed, his head was steeped in impurity… Nevertheless, it was inappropriate for him to seek to uproot an entire nation, which is not the right way to preserve the world. This is why he cried out, “May my soul die the death of *yesharim*” — i.e., the ones who preserve Creation.

This *yashrut* allows one to truly be righteous, for when one cares about all of God’s creations, about all of mankind, one acts with them accordingly. The Patriarchs serve as the model. They cared even about their enemies! How much more so must they have cherished their neighbors and friends; thus, one must desire what is good for others and follow in the Patriarchs’ path.

The concluding verse in *Hoshea* (14:10) states:

Who is wise and will understand these things, understanding and will know them? For God’s ways are *yesharim*; *tzaddikim* will walk in them and sinners will stumble over them.

The words of the Torah enable the truly righteous to follow the proper path, as long as they understand that the words of Torah are *yesharim*; God cannot be outsmarted or outwitted. Quite the contrary, as we saw last week, the directive to do the right and the good requires that one apply the proper set of behaviors that one knows to be right, even when the literal, legal understanding allows one to act differently.

**The Rambam’s View of the Tribe of Levi**

What can enable one living in this world, pulled in numerous directions by various reckonings, to succeed in staying on the straight path?

As we saw in the first source from *Avot*, the learning of Torah is supposed to empower someone to be as *yashar* as he was when created; studying God’s word allows one to continue improving his personality. This is actually explicitly mentioned by the Rambam when he explains the power and achievement of one who decides to dedicate his life to the study of Torah. A cursory reading of the Rambam’s statement might lead one to believe that he is using mere poetic imagery; however, in the work *Ora Ve-simcha,* by the former head of Yeshivat Chevron in Jerusalem’s Geula neighborhood, the author points out that the Rambam’s imagery is built on the verse in *Kohelet,* among other sources.

The Rambam, in discussing the special status of the tribe of Levi (*Hilkhot Shemitta Ve-yovel* 13:13), asks:

Why did the tribe of Levi not receive a portion in the inheritance of the Land of Israel and in the spoils of the area like their brethren? Because they were set aside to serve God and minister unto Him and to instruct the people at large according to His just paths and righteous judgments, as it is stated (*Devarim* 33:10), “They will teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Torah to Yisrael.” Therefore, they were set apart from the ways of the world…

The Rambam goes on to describe how the tribe of Levi was set aside from the other tribes due to their duty of being the teachers of Torah for the masses. “They are God’s legion,” as the Rambam says, and, therefore, they must be treated differently. Nevertheless, the Rambam continues, this unique status is not limited to the tribe of Levi.

However, not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him, so that his wisdom impels him to set himself aside and stand before God, to serve Him and to minister to Him and to know God, **so that he walks in a *yashar* way, as God made him, and he removes from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek,** he is sanctified as the Holy of Holies. God will be His portion and heritage forever, and He will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites…

The Rambam depicts the one who dedicates his life to the service of God as being able to walk in a *yashar* way*,* as God made him. This is a direct quote of the verse in *Kohelet*. As the Rambam continues, he succeeds by removing all the reckonings which can sway one from the straight path. It is the study of Torah and the model of its heroes that enables and empowers man to arise above the petty reckonings of life and behave in a *yashar* manner.

The Patriarchs were *yesharim* because their dedication to and their relationship with God enabled them to keep their eye on the target and not lose sight of their values by attempting to advance through devious reckonings. The Torah can empower us to act in the same way and joyously, as the verse describes:

God’s directives are *yesharim*; they gladden the heart. (*Tehillim* 19:9)