YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***TORAH LISHMAH* – A NEW HORIZON**

**By Rav Elyakim Krumbein**

***Shiur* #4: Intellect and Emotion – Alliance or Conflict?**

1. ***Torah Lishmah* – Learning with a Sense of Identification**

We ended our last *shiur* by concluding, based upon Rava’s comments in *Berakhot* (17a) and our analysis of the Kabbalistic work *Reishit Chokhma*, that learning *lishmah* means learning Torah for the purpose of observing Torah. However, as we explained, this does not mean learning practical Halakha, but rather refers to learning out of a deep-seated sense of identification with the goal of realizing the ideals of Torah in practical life. The more one connects oneself with this goal, and the more this connection motivates one’s learning, the deeper the level of *lishmah* one achieves. We further noted that this conclusion proves that when we approach the topic of *Torah lishmah*, the question must be not what purpose Torah study serves, but rather how the student is to integrate his internal, emotional being in his learning.

Before proceeding to the main topic of this week’s installment, we cannot take leave of the *Reishit Chokhma* before citing several lines from the section dealing with *ahava* – love of *mitzvot* (end of chapter 4). The author makes the following comments after describing the value of love for *mitzvot*, as he proceeds to discuss love for Torah itself:

And just as one should find performing a *mitzva* desirable, one should similarly find this with regard to involvement in Torah learning, that the will of his soul shall intensify within him and all bodily senses shall be negated. His soul shall be attached to the study of Torah to the point where he feels nothing of worldly matters, as the Sages *z”l* said in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 88a) about Rava, that as he was studying a fly sat on his hand and blood flowed from his fingernails, but he did not feel the bleeding because of his intensive attachment to Torah. I similarly heard of many recent scholars who experienced this same intense connection to Torah, to the point where they did not feel worldly matters at all.

This passage makes no mention at all of a mystical experience of *deveikut* (“attachment” to God). It rather depicts – from the perspective of the outsider – a person studying with deep involvement, the kind of intense involvement that could grow only out of a keen appreciation of the lofty significance of Torah. Rava, the towering, sharp-minded scholar, known for his logical thinking and analytical acuity, studied Torah with a passion and emotional involvement that drew his attention away completely from a bloody wound. His emotional intensity did not detract at all from his intellectual activity; to the contrary, it intensified his concentration. Rav Eliyahu De Vidas incorporates this emotional bond under the title of “love.” I recommend looking up the prooftext in *Masekhet Shabbat*, which tells of the awe and wonder expressed by an onlooker who observed Rava’s intense devotion.

The Problem with Emotional Involvement

At this point we can take leave of Rav Eliyahu De Vidas, now that he has brought us to the question on which we would like to focus. For a there is a vexing problem that lurks as we proceed along the path we have begun to develop. We have thus far established that one who learns Torah *lishmah* must involve his emotional being in the learning process. In effect, we have merged the pure, clear, objective intellect with the emotional realm, the world of personal, subjective feelings and tendencies. Do we not endanger the intellectual achievement by merging the intellect with emotion? Is there not an inherent contradiction between clarity of thought, neutral observation and objective analysis, on the one hand, and, on the other, the force of emotions and the involvement of personal feelings?

1. **Emotions: Myths and Facts**

We generally perceive emotions as blind, irrational and uncontrollable experiences. According to this viewpoint, one who wishes to think efficiently must silence the demands of his personality and the “noise” that arises from the depths of his consciousness, as much as possible. However, a number of researchers have posited that this picture is just a myth, and that in truth, an essential, mutual connection exists between emotions and cognition. Much has been written about this connection, and it is crucial for us to familiarize ourselves with it at least to some extent, so that we can properly understand the emotional mechanism that underlies the concept of *Torah lishmah*.

In their work, *Passion and Reason* (NY, 1996), researchers Richard and Bernice Lazarus paint a picture of emotions that work in tandem with intelligence: “Actually, emotions and intelligence go hand in hand, which is why humans, highly intelligent beings, are such emotional animals” (p. 3). The authors contend that emotions are aroused in a person’s heart in response to the situations he encounters, and as a result of the personal meaning which he “reads” into his reality. The force of the emotion depends, among other things, upon his evaluation of that meaning. Emotion is aroused also in accordance with the person’s goals in his life, to the extent to which he senses that the current circumstances advance or hinder that goal. These researchers give us a very detailed description of a wide spectrum of emotions which clarifies their close relationship to the intellectual faculties of thought and evaluation.

This study sheds light on the approach of our Torah tradition toward emotions, the approach that is prevalent in *musar* literature. For example, one who browses through the chapter titles in *Orchot Tzadikim* will find many emotions listed, including pride, humility, shame, love, enmity and anger, though the author calls them “*middot*” (“qualities” or “attributes”) rather than “emotions.” This suggests an outlook that views love, enmity and anger not as “accidents” that happen to a person, but rather qualities that a person forms and implements in his life. The *Orchot Tzadkim*’s treatment of the attribute of shame, which he presents in the beginning of the third section, is characteristic:

The Sages said: The intellect is shame, and shame is the intellect. For it was said about Adam and Chava, “Both of them – man and his wife – were naked, but they were not ashamed” (Bereishit 3:1)… And after they partook of the Tree of Wisdom, it says, “Both of their eyes were opened” (Bereishit 3:7). Indeed, except for humans, no other creature has shame, because none have wisdom, and every wise-hearted person knows the supremacy of the intellect and wisdom, for through it one can arrive at the truth of things… The proof is that you have never seen a mindless person who has shame, or a knowledgeable person without shame.

A person is ashamed because he did not live up to the moral standard in which he believes. This emotion thus depends upon acknowledging certain demands, recognizing the importance of meeting those demands, and the disappointment of failure. The author in this passage speaks particularly of shame, but a similar claim can be compellingly made for other emotions, as well.

1. **The Role of Emotion in Cognition**

From this very brief discussion of the conscious foundations of emotion, let us proceed to the question that relates more directly to our topic of *Torah lishmah*, namely, the crucial contribution of the realm of emotion to rational functioning. We rely here on Israel Scheffler’s essay, *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions* (New York-London, 1991, pp. 3-4; see also the sources listed there in note 2). The author introduces the essay as follows:

The mention of cognitive emotions may well evoke emotions of perplexity or incredulity. For cognition and emotion, as everyone knows, are hostile worlds apart. Cognition is sober inspection; it is the scientist’s calm apprehension of fact after fact in his relentless pursuit of Truth. Emotion, on the other hand, is commotion – an unruly inner turbulence fatal to such pursuit but finding its own constructive outlets in aesthetic experience and moral or religious commitment.

Scheffler sees it as his duty to challenge this assumption of “the opposition of cognition and emotion,” because

it distorts everything it touches: mechanizing sci­ence, it sentimentalizes art, while portraying ethics and religion as twin swamps of feeling and unreasoned commitment. Education, meanwhile--that is to say, the development of mind and attitudes in the young--is split into two grotesque parts: unfeeling knowledge and mindless arousal.

There is thus a need to clarify the mutual relationship and “cross fertilization” that in truth exists between the two realms of emotion and cognition. One focal point of this integration is what Scheffler calls the “rational character.” The activity of intelligence, at its highest level, occurs and is arranged in accordance with certain norms and values, which are entrenched within the personality and even define its makeup. From this perspective, Scheffler writes, cognitive activity

also requires suitable emo­tional dispositions. It demands, for example, a love of truth and a contempt for lying, a concern for accuracy in observation and inference, and a corres­ponding repugnance at error in logic or fact. It demands revulsion at distor­tion, disgust at evasion, admiration of theoretical achievement, respect for the considered arguments of others. Failing such demands, we incur rational shame; fulfilling them makes for rational self-respect.

The deep, intense emotions that Scheffler mentions here – love, contempt, repugnance, admiration and others – constitute the basis upon which the success of one’s analytical efforts rest. Conversely, we might say that the failure to cultivate these feelings is likely to impair the cognitive process and distort its results, all the more so if this diminishing of the “rational character” involves the bolstering of a different character, such as an affinity for laziness, personal gain and fame. Clearly, these emotions jeopardize the intellectual process. Scheffler’s conclusion is that we should not speak of controlling urges through “cold intellect,” but rather of achieving control over the intellectual process by building one’s emotions and character in a certain way. It thus turns out that a firm emotional foundation strengthens the learning process.

That being said, we cannot deny that excessive emotionality can interfere with intellectual functioning and undermine its potential for achievement. When does emotion flow at cross-current with cognition? We may identify two possible scenarios when this occurs. The first is that to which we alluded above, namely, when the emotions are not arranged according to the model of the “rational character,” such as if the student feels love not for truth, but rather for personal enjoyment, profitable gain or fame, and these emotions are active even in the context of learning. A second situation which invites this clash is when the student subjugates his intellectual efforts themselves, and sees them as a means to achieving an emotional goal. This can occur in either an aesthetic or religious framework, and in this vein Rav Chayim Volozhin expressed criticism of the Chassidic movement, as we’ve already seen (and as we will discuss further).

In any event, Scheffler’s conclusions are valid when a person regards his learning as a valuable objective, when he loves truth, and when clarifying the information is the fulfillment of his aspirations and expresses his deepest and most emphatic desire. And this is true regarding our subject, as well. If we imagine a person whose identification with the vision of realizing the Torah’s ideals in life brings him to desire the truths that emerge from its study, then his personal involvement contributes qualitatively to his learning and its success.

1. **Another Effect of Emotion on the Quality of Study**

Later, Scheffler proceeds to describe two special “cognitive emotions” that both oppose and complement one another. The first is the joy of confirming a supposition. The investigative drive is fueled by the expectation that our educated and logical hypothesis will be affirmed by the facts we discover, leading toward a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment when this indeed happens. The power of this experience makes a very important contribution to the progress of cognitive discovery. However, this emotion also entails great danger. The desire to arrive at this gratifying experience could potentially distort the observations and impact upon the “facts” that one “discovers.”

In direct contrast to this emotion, the feeling of surprise surfaces when an unexpected fact is discovered. A piece of data that we never guessed and which goes against our expectations can result in various different kinds of feelings of surprise. In the worst case, it can cause disappointment and breed indifference. But in a mature person, surprise can arouse curiosity and intensify the search for truth. These ideas demonstrate just how much emotions impact upon the ability to properly delve into intellectual study. Ultimately, the moral standing of the student and researcher determine the nature of his experiential world, which then, in turn, determines the quality of his cognitive skills.

The above observations are all from the perspective of the general academic world. I believe that applying this line of thought to our context lends them additional weight. The experiential roots of learning Torah *lishmah* lie in the realm of the spirit – the ideal of implementing Torah in practical life, love of Torah and connecting oneself to the word of God. Personally, I find it easier to imagine the intense concentration of Rava (as described in *Masekhet Shabbat*) than to envision something similar in a scientist driven by the love of truth in its general sense (though we shouldn’t deny the possibility altogether). In comparison with our secular surroundings, the spiritual atmosphere of Torah presents a stronger emotional world, which is also more pure and demanding of honesty, as a basis upon which to build “cognitive emotions” that support scholarly goals.

We can anticipate that this kind of “building” will occur in a consistent and exhaustive fashion in Rav Chayim Volozhin’s work, *Nefesh Ha-chayim*. This work is our next stop, and I hope that what we have learned until now will help us to internalize the ideas in *Nefesh Ha-chayim*.

In preparation for the coming *shiurim*, readers are advised to obtain a copy of *Nefesh Ha-chayim*. (An online copy is available at <https://www.sefaria.org.il/Nefesh_HaChayim>.) In previous *shiurim*, we cited lengthy excerpts from this work; henceforth, we will cite shorter passages. I hope that our discussion will be clearly understood even by those who do not have the book in front of them, but studying the relevant passages in their original source will certainly be useful.