YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RAV SOLOVEITCHIK

by Rav Ronnie Ziegler

LECTURE #9: Catharsis of the Emotions

After discussing the need for and method of purification of the physical realm of man's existence, the Rav moves next in his essay "Catharsis" to consider the purification of the emotional realm. While catharsis of the former requires that man refrain from certain acts, catharsis of the latter demands that he change his innermost feelings. As the Gemara tells us (Sanhedrin 106b), "God wants the heart."

"[T]he Halakha thinks there is an ethic, not only of action, but of feeling, as well. Man is master over his own emotional world, capable of disowning feelings or emotions, however compulsive or powerful, if they seem to be disruptive; and, conversely, of assimilating redemptive emotion into his personality." (p. 47)

In other words, because our feelings are such an important part of us, and because they affect us so deeply, it is crucial that we exert control over them, that we shape and direct them in a positive fashion, and that we integrate them into our service of God. In fact, as we shall see in this lecture and the next, the Rav believes that a person's main arena of religious struggle lies precisely within the internal-emotional realm.

COMMANDING EMOTIONS

Although the assumption that one can be master over his emotional world may seem foreign to modern man, it lies at the basis of many halakhot. While many mitzvot regulate man's actions, e.g. the commandment to eat matza or the prohibition of theft, some mitzvot seem to address themselves directly to man's emotions, e.g. "You shall love the Lord your God" (Devarim 6:5), "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (Vayikra 19:17), and "You shall not desire your neighbor's house..." (Devarim 5:18 - see "For Further Reference," #1). This corresponds to the famous distinction first posited by Rabbenu Bachya ben Yosef ibn Pakuda between chovot ha-evarim and chovot ha-levavot, duties of the limbs and duties of the heart.

The obvious question presents itself: how can a person be expected to control his feelings? Can he help it, for example, if he is jealous of someone wealthier than he is? Strikingly, few of our sages actually ask this question. They seem to take it for granted that since one's emotions are a matter of halakhic concern, it is clear that one can and should exert control over them.

One of the few Rishonim to deal with the question, the 12th-century Bible commentator Rav Avraham ibn Ezra, suggests that one can control his emotions through an intellectual effort, i.e. through internalizing the laws of Halakha.

"I will offer you a parable. Know that a peasant of sound mind who beholds a beautiful princess will not desire in his heart to lie with her, for this cannot be. [Recall that he is writing in the context of a feudal society.] ... Similarly, a wise person knows that all wealth ... comes from God; therefore, he will not desire that which God has not given him. Additionally, since he knows that it is God who has forbidden his neighbor's wife to him, she will be even more exalted in his eyes than the princess in the eyes of the peasant." (Shemot 20:13)

The unstated opinion of most Rishonim, however, is presented forcefully by the anonymous 13th-century classic, Sefer Ha-chinukh:

"Do not wonder and ask: But how can it be in one's power to restrain his heart from longing for riches that he may see in his fellow man's possession, when he himself is lacking them all? How can a prohibition be given in the Torah about something which man cannot possibly obey?

"This matter is not so; none but wicked fools... would speak so. For it is indeed in one's power to restrain himself, his thoughts and his longings, from whatever he wishes. It lies within his free choice and his decision to repel his desire or draw it near, with regard to all matters, as he wishes; and his heart is given over into his control; however he pleases, he may turn it... There is nothing so good for a man as a good, pure thought, since that is the beginning of all good deeds and their end. And this, as it seems, is the significance of the 'good heart' which the Sages praise in Avot (2:9)." (Mitzva 416; 424 in R. Chavel's edition)

As opposed to ibn Ezra's theory of intellectual persuasion, the Chinukh seems to think that controlling emotion is simply a matter of sheer willpower and force of habit.

ACTION AND FULFILLMENT

Aside from the "duties of the limbs" and the "duties of the heart," there is a third hybrid category of mitzvot. The Rav was the first to define this category in strict halakhic terms, and he devoted much attention to it. In this category, although the Halakha demands the performance of a certain external action, the mitzva actually is fulfilled through an internal experience. In "lomdish" parlance, the Rav termed this the duality of ma'aseh and kiyyum (act and fulfillment).

Often, ma'aseh and kiyyum go together: for example, one fulfills the mitzva of eating matza simply by ingesting it, regardless of his inner awareness of the liberation from Egypt. However, the Rav focuses our attention on cases where the act and the fulfillment exist on two different planes (both, however, are necessary for proper fulfillment of the mitzva). For example, the mitzva of prayer consists of reciting certain words (ma'aseh), but its essence (kiyyum) is "the service of the heart," the experience of standing before God and the feelings of gratitude and dependence. Similarly, the Torah tells us to recite the Shema twice daily, but the mitzva's true fulfillment consists in the accompanying kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim (acceptance of the yoke of God's kingship). It is interesting that, in "Catharsis," the Rav draws his examples of purging the emotional realm from this category of mitzvot. [We shall return to this important group of commandments in next week's lecture.]

MOURNING AND JOY

The Rav's first illustration of emotional catharsis is God's command to Aharon not to mourn the deaths of his two sons. On the day on which the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was to have been dedicated, the greatest day of Aharon's life, his sons Nadav and Avihu were suddenly struck down by a divine fire. Since Aharon, the High Priest, was wholly consecrated to divine service, he had to continue fulfilling his duties despite his personal tragedy. Aharon was not permitted the basic human right to mourn; he had to deny one of man's most powerful emotions, the love for a child.

[Note that while Aharon's sense of mission as a representative of the people overcame his personal sorrow, the People of Israel performed the opposite gesture. They overcame their feelings of communal joy at the dedication of the Mishkan and mourned for the tragedy of the individual. "And Moshe spoke to Aharon and to his sons Elazar and Itamar, saying: 'Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes ... But your kinsmen, the entire House of Israel, shall bewail the burning that the Lord has wrought'" (Vayikra 10:6; see Ramban and Chizkuni ad loc.). In other words, the individual must sometimes overcome his personal interests and instead dedicate himself to the community, while the community must feel the pain of each individual. The Rav, however, focuses here on dedication to God, not to the community.]

Of course, God does not demand total commitment only from the high priest, but from the entire "nation of priests" (i.e. the Jewish People) as well. As an example, the Rav cites a common situation which is actually very similar to the predicament Aharon found himself in. When major holidays fall during one's "shiva" mourning period, they cancel the mourning. This does not entail merely a change of clothes or other superficial differences; it somehow demands of the mourner that he forsake grief in favor of joy. Neither the halakhic laws of mourning nor the command to "rejoice in your festivals ... and you shall have nothing but joy" (Devarim 16:14-15) refer solely to external actions. As the Rav puts it:

"[Mourning] is an inner experience of black despair, of complete existential failure, of the absurdity of being... Similarly, the precept of rejoicing on a holiday ... [refers] to an all-penetrating depth-experience of spiritual joy, serenity and peace of mind deriving from faith and the awareness of God's presence." (pp. 48-49)

[I highly recommend that you see the rest of the passage where the Rav so beautifully describes these experiences. It is clear that one cannot write like this unless he has experienced these feelings himself.]

If mourning (avelut) and holiday rejoicing (simchat yom tov) were merely external observances, or if one were internal and one external, then perhaps we could have found some way for them to coexist. But since they are both primarily internal fulfillments, one must prevail over the other, since they are mutually contradictory experiences.

In his halakhic discourses, the Rav develops at length this theory of the internal kiyyum of both avelut and simchat yom tov. These are contrasted to the rabbinic mitzva of honoring and enjoying Shabbat (kibbud ve-oneg), whose content is exhausted by external actions. Because the mitzva of kibbud ve-oneg does not mandate an internal kiyyum, Shabbat does not cancel avelut. Rather, on Shabbat one does not manifest his mourning publicly but nevertheless continues certain practices of mourning in private. [See "For Further Reference," #3.]

DISCIPLINE AND FEELING

Rav Soloveitchik is aware that catharsis of the emotions is very demanding, and he does not hide this fact. Facing the situation realistically, he displays uncharacteristic hesitance and diffidence in assessing the capacity of modern man to attain emotional catharsis:

"Is it possible? As far as modern man is concerned I would dare not answer. But with respect to Biblical man we read that Aaron acted in accord with the divine instruction." (p. 48)

"Can one replace the experience of monstrosity (avelut) with the feeling of highest meaningfulness (simchat yom tov)? I have no right to judge. However, I know of people who attempted to perform this greatest of all miracles." (p. 49)

[Among the latter, the Rav may have had in mind his grandfather, Rav Eliyahu Feinstein of Pruzhan. Rav Soloveitchik writes in "Halakhic Man" of his grandfather's presence of mind when, while his beloved daughter was about to die, he remembered to lay tefillin of Rabbenu Tam prior to becoming an onen (one whose relative has died but not yet been buried, who is exempt from performing mitzvot). We will return to discuss this incident when we study "Halakhic Man."]

In this realm, the Halakha seems more intrusive than in any other. What are more intimate and personal than one's feelings? Rav Soloveitchik himself admits that "The Halakha, which at times can be very tender, understanding and accommodating, may, on other occasions, act like a disciplinarian demanding obedience" (p. 49).

But it is important to remember that the Halakha is not demanding that we quash all feeling. It wants us to feel, to experience the gamut of human emotions, the joys and sorrows of life. The Ramban states this strongly in the introduction to his masterpiece on avelut, Torat Ha-adam, where he polemicizes against those who adopt a stance of philosophic apathy towards the world. But, while we feel deeply, our emotions must be shaped and guided by the law and must remain within our control. The Torah wants to purify our emotions and to redeem us by means of our emotions.

Next week's lecture will broaden our inquiry, examining the necessity of inwardness in all areas of religious life.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE:

1. Desire and Coveting: Note that I quoted the verse "You shall not desire" (lo titaveh), and not the verse "You shall not covet" (lo tachmod - Shemot 20:14 and Devarim 5:18), as an example of a mitzva pertaining SOLELY to the emotions. Many Rishonim interpret the latter prohibition as entailing some sort of action, while the former is only a feeling (e.g. Rambam, Hilkhot Gezela 1:9-12).

2. How can the Torah command emotions? See the interesting comments regarding "You shall not covet" by the Rav's great-grandfather, the Beit Ha-levi, in his Torah commentary to Shemot 20:14.

3. Mitzvot which require action but whose fulfillment is experiential - halakhic and philosophic underpinnings:

A. Avelut: see esp. Shiurim Le-zekher Abba Mari z"l, vol. 2, pp. 182-196. Also: "Peleitat Sofreihem," in Divrei Hagut Ve-ha'arakha, pp. 137-140; "A Eulogy for the Talner Rebbe," in Shiurei Harav, pp. 66-73; Shiurim Le-zekher Abba Mari z"l, vol. 1, pp. 40-49 (Tumat Kohen).

B. Simchat Yom Tov: ibid., vol.2 pp. 188ff.; vol. 1, pp. 64-68; U-vikkashtem Mi-sham, footnote 19 (pp. 209-212).

C. Kibbud ve-oneg Shabbat: Shiurim Le-zekher Abba Mari z"l, vol. 1, pp. 50-64.

D. Keriat Shema: ibid., vol. 1, pp. 24-33.

E. Fasts: ibid., vol. 1, 69-90; "Al Ha-tzar Ha-tzorer Etkhem" and "Ha-evkeh Be-chodesh Ha-chamishi?" adapted by Rav Yair Kahn from a lecture by the Rav, Alon Shevut Bogrim, 9 (Sivan 5756), pp. 131-142 (also in Daf Kesher, vol. 5).

F. Viddui: On Repentance, pp. 77-81, 84-85.

G. Prayer (Shemoneh Esrei): ibid., pp. 81-84.

H. Hallel and Pesukei De-zimra: Shiurim Le-zekher, vol. 2, pp. 17-34.

I. Avoda She-balev in general: Shiurim Le-zekher, vol. 2, pp. 1-16 (Birkot Ha-Torah); "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," Tradition 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 55-72; On Repentance, pp. 81-85.

J. You Shall Not Covet: Rav Michael Rosensweig, "Lo Tachmod," Beit Yitzchak, 19 (5747), pp. 214-227.

K. Tzedaka: see the YHE-Halakha shiur, "Tzedaka: Positive and Negative Mitzvot," based on a shiur by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein.

L. Shofar: B. David Schreiber, Noraot Harav, vol. 1.