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 #28: *Netira***

One of the most complicated aspects of interpersonal relations is developing the strength of character to deal with individuals who have wronged one. Beyond natural feelings of dislike towards the aggressor, one is often tempted to get some payback; as the English proverb goes, “Turnabout is fair play.” Even if one succeeds in holding back from actual vengeance (*nekima*), it feels only natural, at least, to countenance one’s holding a grudge (*netira*). What does the Torah have to say about this type of behavior?

On the one hand, the desire for revenge may simply be a character flaw built into man's nature, an animalistic tendency which can bring no good; after all, as another saying goes, two wrongs cannot make a right. On the other hand, there is certainly room to view revenge as a necessary means of teaching evildoers that their antics will not be tolerated. Indeed, dealing with one's persecutors may be understood in terms of the biblical epigram, "An eye for an eye” (*Shemot* 21:24, *Vayikra* 24:20). This educates wrongdoers: by hurting others, they ultimately hurt themselves. Certainly, we might expect holding a grudge to be acceptable, as this guarantees that the malefactor’s misdeeds won't be easily forgotten.

The Torah's outlook on the proper response to personal offenses is therefore completely fascinating. Under normal circumstances, the Torah forbids taking revenge or even bearing a grudge, classifying these actions as harmful. At the same time, there are exceptions to the rule and God Himself is seen as an avenger. Understanding both aspects can allow us to grasp the Torah's definition of *nekima,* as the translation "revenge" does not do it justice.

 Initially, the Torah seems to state unequivocally that any form of grudge-bearing or vengeance is prohibited:

Do not hate your brother in your heart. You shall certainly rebuke your comrade, and you shall not bear sin on his account. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen, and you shall love your as yourself. I am God. (*Vayikra* 19:17-18)

Previously (see Lesson 14), we noted that a number of commentators view these verses as dealing with the spirit that should prevail in relations *bein adam le-chavero* when one feels wronged. The verses educate man how to effectively deal with someone who has wronged him or her. Verse 17 states that, first and foremost, one must not let concealed hatred flare up inside; rather, one must confront and reprove the malefactor, without causing any undue embarrassment.

According to this understanding, verse 18 discusses how one should proceed if previous attempts at reproof and reconciliation have failed. The verse states that one must not take revenge or even bear a grudge; rather, one must love all Jews. This understanding is expressed by Rav S.R. Hirsch:

The preceding verse teaches that if a person feels that someone has wronged him, it is his duty to reprove him verbally. Our verse now teaches and demands of the offended party something that is most difficult: Even if his reproof turned out to be fruitless, he may not take revenge; what is more, he must purge from his heart the remembrance of the wrong that was done him, even if the other has done nothing to conciliate him.

**The Natural Urge**

The natural urge for *nekima* and *netira* is expressed very powerfully by the Ramchal in *Mesillat Yesharim* (Chapter 11):

Hate and revenge, too, are very difficult for man's spiteful heart to escape, for in view of his being extremely sensitive to insult, and suffering great anguish because of it, revenge, being the only thing which will put him at rest, is sweeter than honey to him. Therefore, if it is within his power to abandon the urging of his nature and to overlook the offense so as not to hate the one who ignited hatred within him, nor to take revenge against him when the opportunity to do so presents itself, nor to hold a grudge against him, but to forget the whole affair and remove it from his heart as if it had never occurred — if he can do this, he is strong and courageous. Such conduct is easy only for the ministering angels among whom the aforementioned traits do not exist, not for "dwellers in houses of clay whose roots are in dust" (*Iyov* 4:19). But the King has decreed, in perfectly lucid language, requiring no interpretation: "Do not hate your brother in your heart ... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen.”

The Ramchal considers it a natural urge, almost impossible to overcome, to forgive and forget wrongs. He notes that it is an angelic quality to be able to treat the offender as if nothing has been done. He goes on to say that the means of overcoming this attempt of the evil inclination to ensnare man may be found in the concluding passage of the verse.

The evil inclination progressively inflames the heart and constantly seeks to leave at least some trace or memory of the wrong. If it is not successful in leaving a strong reminder it will attempt to leave a weaker one. For example, it will tell a person, "If you wish to give this man what he did not want to give you when you were in need, at least do not give it to him graciously." Or, "If you do not want to hurt him, at least do not do him a great favor or offer him valuable assistance." Or, "If you want to go so far as to be of great help to him, at least do not provide this help in his presence." Or, "If you have forgiven him, do not renew your acquaintance with him and do not become his friend; it is enough that you do not show yourself to be his enemy. And if you want to go so far as to befriend him, at least do not show him as much friendship as of yore."

All such suggestions are among the intrigues of the evil inclination, by which it attempts to ensnare a person's heart. To counteract this, the Torah states a general, all-embracing principle: "You shall love your fellow as yourself" — "as yourself," with no difference whatsoever; "as yourself," without distinction, without devices and schemes; literally, "as yourself."

In order to succeed at developing this holy response and to be able to withstand the natural urge for *nekima* and *netira,* we must first understand what they are and the outlook the Torah is trying to impress upon us.

**The Definitions of the Prohibitions**

The two injunctionsmentioned in the verse would seem to imply that there are two separate prohibitions: a prohibition against taking revenge*, nekima,* and a prohibition against bearing a grudge, *netira*. The Talmud (*Yoma* 23a) differentiates between the two terms:

What is revenge and what is bearing a grudge? If one said to his fellow: "Lend me your sickle," and he replied "No," and tomorrow the second comes [to the first] and says: "Lend me your ax," and he replies: "I will not lend it to you, just as you would not lend me your sickle" – that is revenge. And what is bearing a grudge? If one said to his fellow: "Lend me your ax," and he replied "No," and tomorrow the second comes and says: "Lend me your garment," and he replies: "Here it is. I am not like you who would not lend to me" – that is bearing a grudge.

The examples provided by the Talmud indicate that this verse prohibits not only a negative response to one who has refused to lend and now asks for a favor in return, but even an affirmative response coupled with a snide remark.

The Talmud provided examples of these two behaviors, and the commentators seek to define them and identify their unique characteristics. The Ramchal (*ibid*.) provides a concise distinction:

The difference between taking revenge and bearing a grudge is that the first refers to the withholding of a good from one who kept some good from him or injured him in some way, whereas the second refers to the interpolation, within a worthy act towards one who has wronged him, of some reminder of that wrong.

Rav David Tzvi Hoffman distinguishes between *nekima* and *netira* based upon the immediacy of the response. *Nekima* is immediate vengeance, while *netira* is nursing hatred in one's heart while awaiting a later opportunity to take revenge.

Similarly, Rav Hirsch explains that the word *netira* is derived from the same Hebrew root as the word *matara,* target.

The meaning of *netira* then is to concentrate on a specific point for a long time in order to strike it maliciously… to harbor resentment and bear a grudge.

What is particularly interesting is the type of *nekima* which is prohibited: not only is vigilante maliciousness proscribed, but even the mere refusal to lend out a tool is beyond the pale. The impulse to repay ungenerosity in kind may be understandable and even acceptable to many of our minds, but the Torah forbids it. Why is this?

Moreover, the examples in the Talmud raise a number of questions. Firstly, why does the Talmud focus only on the second individual's response, ignoring the first individual’s refusal? Secondly, the items to be borrowed change from one case to the next — does this asymmetry have any deeper significance?

Regarding the first question, the Chizkuni explains:

You may ask: why is only the second individual is condemned and not the first, despite his unwillingness to lend to his comrade? After all, seemingly the second individual had good reason to refuse, as he was not given permission to borrow initially, while the first individual refuses without any explanation.

One may answer that the first refuses to lend his tool merely out of miserliness; he cannot bear to part with his sickle. Now, the Almighty doesn't force a man to lend his implements out against his will. However, the second individual would have lent him if not for the fact that his hatred drives him to seek vengeance. Thus, it is hatred that motivates him to do this. Therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He says, "Let the love which you have for him overpower the hatred you feel, and let peace come to the world."

The Chizkuni's comment is mind-blowing. The Torah does not obligate one to lend out tools and, therefore, while it may be unfriendly to do so, one cannot be faulted for refusing to do so. However, one who doesn't mind lending tools out generally but refuses in a given case due to harboring resentment violates a prohibition!

As for the second question, concerning the items being requested, the Malbim explains that the examples are to be taken in sequence. Reuven asks Shimon for a sickle, and Shimon refuses. The next day, Reuven vengefully refuses to lend Shimon an ax. When, on the third day, Reuven asks Shimon for a garment, Shimon may not bear a grudge by telling Reuven off. Nechama Leibowitz (*Studies in Vayikra*, p. 361) cites an interesting explanation as well.

A number of questions also arise based on the Torah's formulation of these two prohibitions. It is interesting to note that *netira*, bearing a grudge, is mentioned in the Torah after *nekima*, though it would seem that *netira* is a far less severe means of dealing with frustration at another's misbehavior. Why is the verse constructed in this manner? Furthermore, are these two completely separate prohibitions, or is there some case in which one who violates the prohibition of *nekima* also violates the prohibition of *netira*? Finally, why are these two prohibitions stated in the same verse that concludes with the all-encompassing directive, "You shall love your fellow as yourself” — what is the connection?

Regarding this last question, a number of answers have been offered. The Alshikh explains that the prohibitions of revenge and grudge-bearing emerge from the positive commandment to love one's fellow as oneself. One would not want to be harmed by a grudge or act of vengeance, so instead of responding maliciously, one must show love to others. He adds that even the individual who honestly feels that he has never wronged another human being should pay heed to the concluding words of the verse, "I am God." Certainly we have all, at some point or another, not done what God has asked of us, and just as we would not want Him to bear a grudge or take revenge, neither should we.

The Or Ha-chayim explains that the Torah connects loving one's fellow with these prohibitions in order to indicate that it is God's wish that we relate to our fellow Jews with the same love that we have for ourselves. As he explains it, the grudge-bearer’s remark indicates that he still harbors resentment against his fellow. The Torah tells us that the reason we must not bear a grudge is “I am God.” This means that the unity and harmony of individual Jews enhances God's unity. This is all rooted in the Kabbalistic concept that all Jewish souls are branches of the Holy Name of God. This cause is so essential that even when grudges may be justified, they must be avoided at all costs, because the unity of Jewish souls is so powerful.

A deeper understanding of these prohibitions will hopefully provide some insight in answering the other questions as well.

**Understanding the Prohibition of *Netira***

What is wrong with grudge-bearing? Why is it improper to feel resentment towards a malefactor? After all, one has no intent to harm the other; one merely seeks to avoid helping the other who has done wrong.

It may in fact be that bearing a grudge is not prohibited unless one openly expresses the feeling. The Talmud's example of *netira* involves speech: “Here it is. I am not like you who would not lend to me.” What is the actual definition of the prohibition of *netira*? Is it nursing within one's heart a mindset of disgust, even if one never openly expresses it; or is it acting on it, not allowing the other to forget the original misdeed? Moreover, is it prohibited due to its inherent nature, or does the Torah forbid it because of what it may lead to?

A number of commentators seem to clearly indicate that the prohibition of *netira* applies to bearing a grudge in one's heart, even if it is not openly expressed. The Rashbam (*Vayikra* 19:18) distinguishes between the two terms in this exact manner:

“You shall not take vengeance” — to repay evil with evil; “or bear a grudge” — even in your heart. Rather, overcome your inner feelings.

Rabbeinu Yona (*Shaarei Teshuva* 3:38) seems to explicitly deal with this issue.

Who is bearing a grudge? One who responds "I am not lending to you, and I am not like you, as you didn't lend to me in the past.” However, the punishment is not for the words spoken, but rather for bearing a grudge in one's heart.

He indicates that the essential prohibition is in one's mindset, which one’s words merely reveal.

The Rambam (*Hilkhot De'ot* 7:8) seems to understand the prohibition of *netira* as a prohibition rooted in developing a mindset that might lead to *nekima*.

So too, one who bears a grudge against a fellow Jew violates a prohibition… One should eradicate the thing from his heart and not bear a grudge. For as long as one nurses a grievance and keeps it in mind, one may come to take vengeance. Therefore, the Torah emphatically warns us not to bear a grudge, so that the impression of the wrong shall be obliterated and no longer remembered.

The Rambam indicates that grudge-bearing on its own would not be so bad if not for the fact that nursing grievances is liable to lead one to take revenge. Nevertheless, the Rambam does tell us that bearing a grudge is forbidden even if not expressed in speech.

The Chinnukh (Mitzva 242) echoes this and adds that any recollection is within the prohibition:

We are forbidden to keep in our heart any ill-feeling over the harm that another Jew had done to us. Even if we should resolve not to repay him through actions for his deeds, the mere remembrance of his sin in the heart is forbidden us.

All the opinions cited above seem to indicate clearly that the prohibition of *netira* may be violated even through thought. However, they might disagree on the question of whether it is to be viewed negatively on its own or only as presaging material vengeance.

An alternate understanding is offered by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook. He deduces (*Mitzvat Re’iya*, p. 98) from the Talmudic language that bearing a grudge is a normal feeling deeply imbedded in man's subconscious; therefore, the natural grudge that might appear in one's heart is not to be viewed as forbidden. (At the same time, Rav Kook does expand on the relationship between *nekima* and *netira,* as we shall see below.) Nevertheless, even if the element of speech is integral, nonverbal shows of grievance may still be forbidden (as may be indicated in the abovementioned passage from *Mesillat Yesharim*).

Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl (*Sichot*, *Vayigash*) explains that the mere memory of someone else's action is not the basis of the prohibition. In fact, there are many *mitzvot* which require us to remember something, but there too the focus is not upon the physical memory, but the willingness to act based on that memory. Recalling another’s misdeed is not prohibited; it is the willingness to "remember" the act when the other asks for help that is forbidden.

Based on the above, we may say that the natural emotional memory and grudge that one holds is allowed; it is the cultivation of these feelings as a reason to treat the other differently or to remind the other of the misdeed in a time of need that is in fact prohibited.

**The Relationship between *Nekima* and *Netira***

The Rambam indicates that *netira* is prohibited for fear it might lead to *nekima*. The Yad Ha-ketana, however, disagrees and views *netira* as an independent prohibition: *netira* is prohibited because the bearer essentially declares that insignificant prior bad acts will forever separate these two individuals, engendering constant feelings of hatred within society.

The Yad Ha-ketana even states that keeping the grudge in one’s heart is actually more severe than expressing it with words. The prohibition is violated even in silence, whenever one fails to forget the act another has done. However, by doing so without voicing one's feelings, one also violates "Do not hate your brother in your heart,” which refers to unexpressed enmity. By the same token, because it is the inner feeling of hatred that is forbidden, one violates the prohibition immediately when feeling the grudge, even if one is never asked to lend in return. Secondly, because the subject of the prohibition is the hatred and not the speech, one who rebukes another who has refused to lend while lending an item will not violate any commandment; on the contrary, the lender fulfills the mitzva of *tokhacha*.

Above, we cited the view of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook that bearing a grudge in one's heart is not a violation of the prohibition. However, Rav Kook adds that even though the natural feeling of being upset is not forbidden, this does not mean that the focus of the prohibition is taking revenge or making snide comparisons. In fact, these actions are prohibited because they will actually lead to a corrupted mindset where one continues to harbor negative feelings and bear grudges. Interestingly, Rav Kook understands that the primary prohibition is actually a negative mindset, which seems to be more closely aligned with *netira.* This question is also related to the abovementioned question: is *netira* an attitudinal prohibition, independent of taking revenge; or is it a precursor to revenge, contained in every act of vengeance?

We may even distinguish between the prohibition of revenge and that of bearing a grudge based on the question cited above: is action necessary? We may understand, following the view of Rav Kook, that the natural feeling of bearing a grudge is not prohibited; the injunction is only violated when the feeling is expressed through speech. On the other hand, the feeling of revenge, the intention to act, is sufficient to violate the prohibition of *nekima.*

**Self-Control**

It seems much easier to understand how one can succeed in overcoming feelings of *nekima;* one may merely feel anger while having the resolve not to act upon it. *Netira*, however, is independent of physical action; indeed, according to most sources, one violates the prohibition even by harboring the grudge inside. How may one succeed in not only forgiving, but forgetting as well? As we saw above, the Rambam advises (*Hilkhot De'ot* 7:8):

One should eradicate the thing from his heart and not bear a grudge. For as long as one nurses a grievance and keeps it in mind, one may come to take vengeance. Therefore, the Torah emphatically warns us not to bear a grudge, so that the impression of the wrong shall be obliterated and no longer remembered.

The Rambam informs us what must be done, but how may one succeed in removing the temptation to act in this manner?

The Yerushalmi (*Nedarim* 9:4) explains that the means of overcoming one's natural inclination to take revenge or bear a grudge requires a new outlook on the Jewish people as a whole.

It is written, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen” — how is this to be done? If a man was cutting meat and the knife entered his hand, would the injured hand retaliate by cutting the other hand?

One who follows this approach and views the Jewish people as a whole knows that any act of revenge is essentially hurting oneself as well. (This seems to dovetail with the comment of the Or Ha-chayim quoted above.)

This explanation might actually be insinuated in the verse. Rav Hirsch points to the unusual term “your countrymen,” literally: children of your people. Rav Hirsch explains:

To strengthen this command, Scripture reminds the offended party of the offender's identity: the offender is one of the children of his people… The fact that the offender is from his people should suffice to remove from one’s heart any vengeful feelings. After all, “your people” is God's people. It is to this national community that God refers when He says, “I will take you for me as a people” (*Shemot* 6:14). At that time, He transformed Israel into His people. And from then onward, His dominion has been revealed in His community through the relationship between its members. They are the ones who are to magnify God's glory and establish His throne on earth. God has dominion over our land, our possessions and our legal claims. Hence, He commands us regarding the sabbatical year and the prohibition of taking interest… By fulfilling these commandments, we submit to Him in helping one another. God wishes also to have dominion over our feelings. Hence, He has forbidden us to take vengeance or bear grudges. We are obligated to offer the most difficult sacrifice of submission: we must subordinate our feelings to God's Will and remove from our hearts any feelings of revenge and resentment.

Indeed, forgetting another's negative behavior is difficult and can be likened to a sacrifice. However, the cathartic feeling that accompanies doing so paves the way for a unified Jewish people and a society where people can easily forget each other's mistakes and focus on the good that binds us.

In next week's lesson, we will take a fresh look at the prohibition of *nekima,* taking revenge.