YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

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Dedicated in memory of

Matt Eisenfeld *z"l* and Sara Duker *z"l* on their 20th yahrzeit.

Though their lives were tragically cut short in the bombing of Bus 18 in Jerusalem, their memory continues to inspire.

*Am Yisrael* would have benefitted so much from their contributions.

*Yehi zikhram barukh*. –

Yael and Reuven Ziegler

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**Shiur #23: Loving God (XIII): Loving Israel and Loving God (part 1)**

**Loving One’s Fellow: Not Quite as Oneself**

When we began to discuss the *mitzva* of loving God, we mentioned the *mitzva* of loving one’s fellow: “Love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18). In the context of mentioning this verse, we addressed the difficulty in demanding that a person truly love every member of the people of Israel (“your fellow”) as himself.

We cited Ramban’s explanation, found in his commentary on the Torah, according to which the formulation of the verse is somewhat hyperbolic. Ramban thus tempered the actual demand of the Torah:

The Torah’s commandment is that one should love his fellow in every regard, just as he loves himself with all of his goodness… meaning that these two loves are likened in his view, since sometimes one loves his fellow… but desires in his heart that he will always have more than his fellow in every [kind of] goodness. Thus the verse commands that one’s love should not be diminished by this jealousy in his heart, but one should love with maximal goodness to his fellow, just as one would act for himself; he should not limit his love. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 19:17)

Ramban inferred this explanation from the formulation of the verse: It does not say *ve-ahavta* ***et*** *re’akha kamokha*, but *ve-ahavta* ***le-****re’akha kamokha*, meaning that one must desire that his fellow experience complete goodness, without stinting.

However, now that we have come such a long way in examining and analyzing the principles of loving God, it seems that we can provide a deeper and more fundamental perspective on the *mitzva* of loving one’s fellow.

**Love Your Fellow – Literally**

In the course of our studies, we have addressed the fact that loving God is both necessary and expected of us, since it is not a demand that one love something outside of oneself, but that one love something that is truly close to one’s heart. A person’s soul is a part of God above that resides in one’s heart; as a direct result, every person’s soul facilitates his intimate connection with God.

In order to achieve this awareness and understanding, a person must internalize the proper relationship between his body and his soul. The body aspires to connect the person to the earth, from which it was made, while the soul aspires to lift the person upward to its source, to God. When there is a deep awareness of this point, a person can connect intimately to his supreme Source, to the Creator of the world.

This notion is particularly apparent from the words of the wise man in *Kohelet*. On the one hand, the wise man demonstrates that there is no hope for mankind to rise up and draw close to God; there is no difference between man and beast:

For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate. As the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same spirit; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust. (*Kohelet* 3:19-20)

At this stage, even a person’s “spirit” is “the same spirit” as that of a beast.

However, in the continuation, the wise man distinguishes between two types of spirit: “Who knows if a man’s spirit does rise upward and if a beast’s breath does sink down into the earth?” (*Kohelet* 3:21). The first spirit is that of the beast, the animalistic spirit. The second spirit, in contrast, is the divine spirit – the divine soul that resides within a person. The divine spirit rises up and never sinks down into the earth. As the wise man said, “And the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the spirit returns to God who bestowed it” (*Kohelet* 12:7). If a person can cause the divine spirit within him to overpower his body, then it can truly be claimed that “the thing is very close to you” (*Devarim* 30:14).

If we adopt this point of view of the *mitzva* of the love of God, we can develop the concept of the love of Israel as well – that one can indeed truly love every member of the people of Israel as himself.

Thus writes R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Ba’al Ha-Tanya:

Acting on the suggestion mentioned above – to view one’s body with scorn and contempt, finding joy only in the joy of the soul alone – is a direct and easy way to attain the fulfillment of the commandment “Love your fellow as yourself” toward every soul of Israel, both great and small.

For whereas one despises and loathes one’s body, as for the soul and spirit, who can know their greatness and excellence in their root and source in the living God? Being, moreover, all of a kind and all having one Father – therefore, all Israelites are called real brothers by virtue of the source of their souls in the one God; only the bodies are separated. Hence, in the case of those who give major consideration to their bodies while regarding their souls as of secondary importance, there can be no true love and brotherhood among them, but only [a love] that is dependent on a [transitory] thing.

This is what Hillel the Elder meant when he said in regard to the fulfillment of this commandment, “This is the whole Torah, while the rest is but commentary.” For the basis and root of the entire Torah are to raise and exalt the soul high above the body, reaching unto the Source and Root of all the worlds, and also to bring down the blessed light of the *Ein Sof* upon the community of Israel, as will be explained later – into the fountainhead of the souls of all Israel, to become “One into One.” This is impossible if there is, God forbid, disunity among the souls, for the Holy One, blessed be He, does not dwell in an imperfect place, as we pray: “Bless us, our Father, all as one, with the light of Your face.” (*Tanya*, *Likkutei Amarim* 32)

The Ba’al Ha-Tanya adds the demand that one cause his soul to overcome his body. The body is separate – “He who isolates himself pursues his desires” (*Mishlei* 18:1) – while the soul is one, hewn from a supreme Source.

From this perspective, we can state confidently that “We all have one father… one God created us” (*Malakhi* 2:10). All of us, as one, cling to the Root, the Foundation, and the Source. This kind of love, whose Source and Foundation lie in the recognition of the unity of all the souls of Israel, is the complete, pure love.

When a person causes his soul to overcome his body, even his soul becomes liberated from the body’s shackles, bursting forth not only with the love of its Creator, but also with the love of Israel, of which it is an inseparable part. This is a love that is not dependent on a transitory thing, a natural, fundamental love that cannot be stopped or hindered.

The great difficulty in achieving this sublime state is rooted in the great difficulty in triumphing in the struggle that is constantly being waged within a person. Every person struggles to cause his soul to overcome his body, to emphasize man’s superiority over beast and to prioritize the spiritual aspirations of pursuing divine service, of living a life of Torah and *mitzvot*, and of allowing these values to feature prominently in one’s life.

When a person manages to reach this level of control over his body, and is able to see the true, eternal reality of his spiritual world, then his soul is one, together with the souls of the community of Israel.

The souls of the community of Israel are all one unit, a notion that is expressed by several *mitzvot*. We can demonstrate this by examining one positive commandment and one negative commandment: the mitzva of *arevut* (mutual responsibility: “All Jews are responsible for one another” [*Sanhedrin* 27b]); and the prohibition of taking vengeance and bearing grudges (“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen” [*Vaykira* 19:18]).

**All Jews Are Responsible for One Another**

*Chazal* identified the principle of mutual responsibility between Jews with regard to fulfilling *mitzvot* at two junctures: at the giving of the Torah and before the people of Israel entered the land of Israel.

We read in *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*:

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] says: This proclaims the excellence of Israel. **For when they all stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah they all made up their minds as one to accept God’s kingship with joy**.[[1]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, they pledged themselves for one another. And it was not only concerning overt acts that God, revealing Himself to them, wished to make His covenant with them, but also concerning secret acts…. But they said to Him: Concerning overt acts we are ready to make a covenant with You, but we will not make a covenant with You in regard to concealed acts lest one of us commit a sin secretly and the entire community be held responsible for it. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Ba-Chodesh* 5)

In *Massekhet Sanhedrin*, *Chazal* viewed the value of *arevut* as connected to the moment when the people of Israel entered the land, to the act of crossing the Jordan, in light of the covenant that was forged with God at the plains of Moav.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Talmud states:

“Concealed acts concern the Lord our God; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children forever” (*Devarim* 29:28). Why are the words *lanu u-levanenu* (“for us and our children”) and the *ayin* of the word *ad* (“forever”) dotted? To teach that God did not punish for concealed transgressions until the Israelites had crossed the Jordan. This is the view of R. Yehuda. R. Nechemia said to him: Did God ever punish [all Israel] for concealed acts? Does not Scripture say “forever”? But just as God did not punish [all Israel] for concealed acts [at any time], so too did He not punish them [corporately] for open transgressions until they had crossed the Jordan. (*Sanhedrin* 43b)

The common denominator between the two Tannaitic positions cited here is that the act of crossing the Jordan and entering the land of Israel was significant in terms of the value of *arevut* and maintaining a sense of mutual obligation.

What is the relationship between these two junctures – the covenant at Sinai and the covenant at the plains of Moav – with respect to mutual obligation and responsibility? We can offer two possible suggestions:

1. The covenant at Sinai was cancelled following the sin of the Golden Calf, and thus there was a need to forge a new covenant at the plains of Moav.
2. The covenant at Sinai was a vow that stemmed from the nation’s desire and willingness, through understanding and responsibility. The covenant at the plains of Moav injected into this understanding the element that gave this vow binding force for all future generations.

In either case, the principle of *arevut* took on a binding, halakhic nature, obligating every member of the people of Israel to demonstrate concern for his fellow Jew’s spiritual endeavors and to aid him in fulfilling *mitzvot*. This is implied in a passage from the end of the third chapter of *Massekhet Rosh Ha-shana*: “Ahava the son of R. Zeira learned: Any blessing that one has already recited on behalf of oneself, he can recite again on behalf of others” (*Rosh Ha-Shana* 29a). As Rashi explains there: “Since all Jews are responsible for one another with respect to *mitzvot*.” There is also a parallel obligation to prevent others from violating prohibitions whenever one sees a member of the people of Israel who is about to violate any prohibition.

The test case for the limits of *arevut* is when there is a conflict between one’s personal obligation to be totally free of spiritual iniquity and one’s responsibility toward the other. In other words, how should one deal with a situation in which one must act against one’s religion in order to prevent another person from sinning or in order to allow another person to fulfill a *mitzva*?

Of course, we are not referring to a case in which a person must violate a severe transgression, but merely a minor sin – for the sake of a much greater gain for his fellow. The question, as formulated by *Chazal*, is: “Is then a person told, ‘Sin, in order that your fellow may thereby gain?’” (*Shabbat* 4a).

Since the Talmud does not provide a unified position on the matter, the *Rishonim* were forced to compromise between the passages. In this framework, it will suffice to examine one of Ritva’s responsa. Ritva writes: “And furthermore, there he acted on his own accord, whereas here, we stated that we do not tell him that he may do so” (Ritva, *Shabbat* 4a). Ritva distinguishes between two types of people who find themselves in a situation in which they must help their fellow Jew to avoid violating a severe prohibition, when doing so requires that one violate a minor prohibition. One kind of person consults his rabbi and asks for guidance regarding how to proceed, while another kind of person acts out of a deep sense responsibility toward his fellow Jew, without feeling the need to seek guidance from a sage or a rabbi.

According to Ritva, if a person consults his rabbi in such a case, the rabbi should instruct him not to violate the minor prohibition. But if he acts on his own accord, without asking, we inform him that he acted properly.

At first glance, this seems quite surprising. If it is proper to violate the minor prohibition in such a case, then why don’t we instruct every person to act in this way? And if the person acted improperly in violating the minor prohibition, then we should try to prevent everyone from doing so!

The most sensible way[[3]](#footnote-3) to understand Ritva’s approach is based on the assumption that there are two levels within the *mitzva* of *arevut*. The most basic level that exists for every Jew is the obligation to ensure that every Jew fulfills *mitzvot* and avoids sins. This kind of *arevut* constitutes feeling a sense of personal responsibility, as a part of a larger whole, for the actions of others. This *arevut* is fundamentally parallel to the concept of an *arev* (guarantor) in halakhic civil law, referring to a person who is willing to guarantee – or take responsibility for – another person’s loan.

The higher level of *arevut* cannot be dictated by any judicial court. Rather, it is an obligation that is confined to a person’s own consciousness. When a person recognizes that the nation of Israel is considered one body, it becomes clear to him that when one person sins, every other person must view this as his own personal sin. In light of this insight, the dilemma described above in *Shabbat* 4a can no longer be viewed as an interpersonal conflict. In reality, we are all one person, the metaphysical personification of Israel.

The closest analogy in terms of civil law to this idea is the *arev kablan*, who, according to one interpretation, is viewed as if he himself was the original borrower. This is the level of *arevut* that a person must accept on his own.

Thus, the covenant at the plains of Moav caused all of Israel to become responsible for one another, while the covenant at Sinai represented voluntary *arevut*, stemming from Israel’s internal awareness that it was encamped in front of the mountain “as one person with one heart.”

The covenant at the plains of Moav bound the community of Israel to *arevut* as an obligation, but the covenant at Sinai provided the possibility of *arevut* that stems from a feeling of intrinsic belonging. The *arevut* of the covenant at Sinai is greater than the basic form of *arevut*, since it views everyone literally as one person. However, it depends on a penetrating understanding of the essence of the connection between all the various components of the community of Israel, which are like the limbs of one fundamental organism. If this recognition can truly penetrate into one’s heart, then one can view every Jew as an inseparable part of oneself.

The root of love, as we have seen, can be found fundamentally in a deep recognition of the root of unity.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The Prohibitions of Taking Vengeance and Bearing a Grudge**

In *Parashat Kedoshim*, in the first section of the verse that we have been discussing, we read: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen” (*Vayikra* 19:18). The prohibition of taking vengeance and the prohibition of bearing a grudge have been interpreted by the commentators in various ways. We will present two of these interpretations here.

We read in the *Sefer Ha-Chinukh*:

At the root of the *mitzva* lies the purpose that a man should know and reflect that whatever happens to him, good or bad, is caused by God, blessed is He, to occur to him; from a human hand, from a man’s brother’s hand, nothing can be without the will of God, blessed is He. **Therefore, should a man inflict suffering or pain on him, let him know in his soul that his bad deeds were the cause, and God (be He blessed) decreed this upon him**; and let him not set his thoughts to take vengeance from him. For the other is not the cause of his trouble, since it is sin that brought it about. As David (peace be with him) said, “Let him go on hurling abuse, for the Lord has told him to” (*Shmuel* II 16:11). He attributed the matter to his sin, not to Shim’i ben Gera. Moreover, there is another great benefit resulting from the *mitzva*: **[It serves] to stop contention and remove hate from people’s hearts.** And when there is peace among people, God grants them peace. (*Sefer Ha-Chinukh* 241)

The *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* emphasizes two points. First, it is proper to avoid taking vengeance in order to eliminate conflict and strife from the world. In addition, it is not proper to take vengeance because all suffering that is caused is actually from God, and thus a person who causes suffering assumes the role of God’s agent.

R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, the author of *Kli Yakar*, writes:

Since taking vengeance and bearing a grudge are bad traits in a person’s body, and it is not proper to take vengeance on any person who is a member of your nation – whether he is good or evil. This is because vengeance is presumably taken over what that person did to you – to your body or to your possessions – and these things are not so esteemed or important that it is worth taking vengeance over them. However, it is permitted to take vengeance on the gentiles, since it is presumed that they wish to prevent you from fulfilling God’s *mitzvot* and to lead you astray from the Lord your God. This is something important and esteemed, and it is worth taking vengeance over this; indeed, this is called “divine vengeance.” That is why it says here, “against your countrymen,” to exclude the gentiles who are not your countrymen, as it says, “To impose retribution upon the nations, punishment upon the peoples” (*Tehillim* 149:7). (*Kli Yakar*, *Vayikra* 19:18)

The main point advanced by *Kli Yakar* here is that it is proper to take vengeance for God’s sake, but not for a person’s sake.

However, the *Yerushalmi* explains the prohibitions of taking vengeance and bearing a grudge in a different manner:

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? (*Yerushalmi*, *Nedarim* 9:4)

According to the *Yerushalmi*, the entire nation of Israel is considered one body, and all the people within that body serve as limbs. Therefore, the prohibition of taking vengeance really needs no explanation, as long as we internalize the verse, “Love your fellow as yourself,” and the idea that all of Israel is viewed as one singular organism.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. Note that here, too, the feeling of mutual responsibility stems from the convergence with the *mitzva* of accepting God’s kingship, as we emphasized above. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Just like the covenant at Sinai, the covenant at the plains of Moav begins with a sense of obligation toward God as well. It is from this obligation toward God that the value of mutual responsibility and obligation between the various components of the nation derives. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is another simple explanation. On a technical level, violating the minor prohibition is certainly permitted, and this would theoretically have been the proper ruling as well. However, we do not rule this way because it is not fitting for a *beit din* to instruct a person to actively violate a Torah prohibition, since there is a concern that this will cause people to lose respect for the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To sharpen the matter, note that the numerical value of the word *ahava* (love) is equivalent to that of *echad* (one). Moreover, the root of the task of loving that is expected in the context of the *mitzva* of loving one’s fellow Jew is to turn *acher* (other; written as אחר) into *echad* (written almost identically as אחד). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)