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 #23: *Yediat Hashem —* Knowing God and Purifying One’s Character**

**The Religious Imperative of Refining One’s Character**

In our day and age, the term self-improvement has become part of popular culture; therefore, it is worthwhile to look back into our tradition in order to see if Judaism has unique teachings regarding ethical values. In fact, much has been written of late regarding the relatively recent phenomenon of non-Orthodox Jews dedicating time to study the works of the Musar movement in their thirst to identify a Jewish approach to ethical discipline and moral improvement.

While it is often assumed that the emphasis on working on one’s character first gained importance with the founding of the Musar movement in the nineteenth century, nothing could be further from the truth. Aside from its explicit mention in the words of the Sages, the stress on character development pervades the works of many Jewish thinkers, particularly the Rambam. However, the following question remains: to what degree is character perfection a means to an end, and to what degree is character perfection a religious ideal in its own right?

**The Connection between Action and Character**

The Chinnukh is well-known for his position on the connection between one’s mentality and his actions. In explaining the rationale of many *mitzvot,* he explains that outward actions affect one’s thought process; thus, certain actions are needed in order to influence one’s character. In his explanation of Mitzva 16, he introduces his opinion:

Know that a person is influenced in accordance with his actions. His heart and all his thoughts follow the deeds with which he occupies himself, whether good or bad. Thus, even a person who is thoroughly wicked in his heart… if he will arouse his spirit, constantly striving and occupying himself with the Torah and the *mitzvot*, even if not for the sake of Heaven, he will turn at once toward the good. With the power of his good deeds, he will deaden his evil impulse, for one’s heart is drawn after his actions. And even if a man is essentially righteous… but he engages constantly in impure matters… then, at some point in time, he will turn from the righteousness of his heart to become completely wicked. Indeed, it is a known and true matter that every man is influenced in accordance with his actions, as we have stated.

The opinion of the Chinnukh that one’s actions affect one’s mindset also expresses the importance of one’s character for fulfilling the deeds required of him. Yet once again, one might understand that the importance of character remains at the practical, utilitarian level. However, the Rambam seems to add another dimension.

**The Dual Nature of Character Development**

The Rambam is commonly considered to be an extreme rationalist, a thinker stressing study and knowledge; nevertheless, he wastes no opportunity to illustrate and elucidate the importance of *tikkun ha-middot,* character development . At some points, his emphasis is on the practical benefits of *tikkun ha-middot*, while in other places he glorifies the religious import of a wholesome personality.

In chapter 5 of *Moreh Ha-nvukhim*, the Rambam speaks of the importance of working on perfecting one’s character before commencing any deep thinking or analysis:

We take the same position; we think that a person, when he commences to speculate, ought not to embark at once on a subject so vast and important; he should previously adapt himself to the study of the several branches of science and knowledge; he should most thoroughly refine his moral character and subdue his passions and desires, the offspring of his imagination. When, in addition, he has obtained the knowledge of the true fundamental propositions, the comprehension of the several methods of inference and proof and the capacity of guarding against fallacies, he may approach the investigation of this subject.

The Rambam here is merely explicating the essential need for proper character in order to investigate any subject. Someone who is overly lazy or lacks control of his desires will be unable to focus sufficiently; such a person will not arrive at the proper conclusions from their initial investigations. His mind might even be swayed to permit something his uncontrolled desires prevent him from resisting. At other times, however, the Rambam discusses the religious imperative of cultivating a refined character. The Rambam is aware that one might take this idea for granted, so when mentioning the need of *teshuva* (repentance) for character flaws, he directs his teaching to those who might disagree:

You ought not say that repentance applies only to sins which entail action, such as fornication, robbery, and theft. Rather, just as a person needs to repent for these, so too he needs to probe which bad character traits he may have and to repent for them: anger, enmity, envy, frivolity, the pursuit of wealth and honor, the pursuit of foods, and the like. For all of this, a person needs to repent. In fact, these sins are more complex than those which entail action, for when a person becomes immersed in these, it is very difficult to part from them. Thus, the verse (*Yeshayahu* 55:7) says, “Let the evil person forsake his path, and the iniquitous person his thoughts.” (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:3)

The Rambam’s call to *teshuva* not only for sins “which entail action” but also for “bad character traits” expresses his conviction that one’s poor character is not just a cause of failure in other aspects of spiritual life; it is a religious failure in its own right. (See “A Pure Heart: Refining Character and Balancing Values” in HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein’s *By His Light*.)

The Avodat Ha-melekhnotes that the Rambam expresses similar sentiments elsewhere. In *Hilkhot De’ot* 6:7 the Rambam writes that one is obligated to give reproof not only to one who sins, but even to one who is “pursuing a path which is not good.” The Avodat Ha-melekh understands this to mean that the Rambam is applying the obligation of rebuking a sinner to one who exhibits negative character traits; even actions which are not explicitly prohibited, but which reflect a deficient character, are spiritually corrosive and therefore sinful.

**Knowing God, the Source of Character Refinement**

The following question remains: what is the source of the obligation of character development? Is it merely an aspect of “walking in the ways of God” and “being holy,” or is there some particular obligation regarding perfecting one’s character? Indeed, this may lead us to another question: how distinct is the Jewish doctrine of morality? Can one learn how to act properly from teachings which are not Torah-based? The more we view ethical teachings as a means to an end, the more the lessons should be universal. On the other hand, the more we see character development as a uniquely Jewish religious doctrine, the more we should expect to find distinctions within Jewish sources.

While we will only deal with the tip of the iceberg, by identifying the biblical source for character development, we will see that Judaism has a unique moral message regarding personal improvement and character development. The Jewish system, built around *hilkhot bein adam le-chavero*, recognizes the practical benefits of a sterling character. However, it often presents character development as a religious imperative, one which reason seems to indicate is unique to Jewish tradition.

We will begin with the fascinating words of the Chazon Ish; he notes that the interpersonal directives in the Torah are not additions to the ritual laws, but rather part and parcel of the Jew’s religious personality.

There is a notion that the perfection of one’s traits relates to the *mitzvot* between man and man, and the obligation to fear Hashem relates to the *mitzvot* between man and his Creator. Stemming from this is the idea that there are people who have perfected their observance of *mitzvot* relating to man’s personal relationship with his Creator but are lacking the correction of their traits; they are thus wanting in their relationship with other people.

However, anyone who looks deeply into this notion cannot harbor such an idea. For truly, he whose traits are as they were when he was created, unchanged by morality and added knowledge, so that he is in the grip of his evil inclination instead of the other way around, cannot possibly have achieved perfection in *mitzvot* between man and his Creator. If he seems to be observing them somewhat, that is only because he does not confront any of his bad traits while doing them. When he does meet up with their resistance, his fear of God will not be strong enough to withstand it … In other words, this man is rotten to the core, for it is his evil inclination that rules: all his mitzva observance stems from habit, as it fits in with his sense of honor, his desires and the natural flow of his life. But just try to insult him, and his behavior will undergo a complete transformation. (Chazon Ish*, Emuna U-vitachon*, ch. 3)

**The Rambam’s Source for Character Development**

If we analyze the Rambam’s teachings on character development, we may clearly see his understanding of its religious nature. The Rambam begins his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, with the mitzva of knowing God, *yediat Hashem*. This mitzva is often known as the mitzva of *emuna*, commonly translated as faith in God. The Rambam, however, (at least in *Mishneh Torah*) refers to the mitzva as *yedia*, actual knowledge of God. Even the word “*yedia*” must be clarified. Although it refers to intellectual knowledge, it also carries with it the biblical connotation of “intense connection,” as in: “And Adam knew (*vayeda*) again his wife, and she bore a son” (*Bereishit* 4:25). The Rambam’s mitzva of knowing God requires understanding that leads to a feeling of an intimate connection with God.

This idea continues to express itself throughout the Rambam’s first book of *Mishneh Torah*, understandably called *Sefer Ha-madda*, the Book of Knowledge. The second unit of the book is *Hilkhot De’ot*. “*De’ot*” (singular: *de’a*) is clearly culled from the same root as *madda* and *yedia*, but its translation is a little sticky. A careful reading of the unit indicates that the term *de’a* has different connotations at different points, but the unit clearly begins by discussing man’s character traits. The Rambam opens *Hilkhot De’ot* as follows:

Each and every man possesses many character traits. Each trait is very different and distant from the others… (*Hilkhot De’ot* 1:1)

The Rambam’s use of the term *de’a* in terms of character traits is only the first clue to his opinion of the connection between knowledge of God and character perfection.

In 3:2, he vividly expresses his conception of how knowledge of God should be the guiding force in man’s life:

A person should direct his heart and the totality of his behavior to one goal, becoming aware of God, Blessed be He. The [way] he rests, rises, and speaks should all be directed to this end. Thus, whoever walks in such a path all his days will be serving God constantly, even in the midst of his business dealings, even during intercourse; for his intent in all matters is to fulfill his needs so that his body will be whole to serve God… Concerning this matter, our Sages have directed us and said: “All your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven.” This is what Shelomo declared in his wisdom: “Know Him in all your ways, and He will straighten your paths” (*Mishlei* 3:6).

The Rambam then goes on to develop, in the fourth chapter, the regimen for one to maintain a healthy body. However, this statement of the importance of *yediat Hashem* appears at the end of two chapters devoted to maintaining a healthy character. Careful reading of these chapters indicates that the basis of character perfection is in fact knowledge of God. He begins (2:1):

To those who are physically sick, the bitter tastes sweet and the sweet bitter. Some of the sick even desire and crave that which is not fit to eat, such as earth and charcoal, and hate healthful foods, such as bread and meat. It all depends on how serious the sickness is.

Similarly, those who are morally ill desire and love bad traits, hate the good path and are too lazy to follow it. Depending on how sick they are, they find it exceedingly burdensome.

The Rambam then discusses the remedy for the morally ill:

They should go to the wise, who are the healers of the souls. [The wise] will heal them by teaching them [how to acquire proper] traits, until [the wise] return them to the good path. Concerning those who recognize their bad traits and do not go to the wise to heal them, Shelomo says (*Mishlei* 1:7): “Fools scorn wisdom and correction.”

This comes after the Rambam’s explanation of *derekh Hashem*, the fulfillment of “following His ways”, in the first chapter. Because God is described in *Tanakh* in terms that enable us to understand the desired behavior, we may know the proper way to act. Essentially, if one thinks about it, the mitzva of character-building entails studying God’s way of dealing with the world and modeling oneself after Him. In other words, the mitzva of *yediat Hashem*, knowing God, translates itself into an obligation to learn God’s system, the desired character traits, and to model one’s behavior upon them.

The implications of the Rambam’s opinion are tremendous. After all, the Rambam seems to say that the ultimate refinement of character is not based upon the results of one’s actions, but rather based upon God’s system, revealed to those who know Him. Many have attacked the Rambam’s stress on the intellectual aspects of our tradition, but the depth of the Rambam’s opinion becomes apparently only when one understands his view of the connectedness of man’s mindset, character and inner world. Knowledge is of utmost importance, but only so long as it moves its possessor toward a state of Godly conduct in this world.

**The Four Perfections**

Just as the Rambam begins *Mishneh Torah* with the importance of knowing God, he concludes it with the same idea. The Rambam ends the final unit, *Hilkhot Melakhim,* with his view that the Messianic era will be a wondrous time during which mankind will be able to focus solely on knowing God. However, it is specifically his conclusion to *Moreh* *Ha-nvukhim*, the book directed to the confused intellectual, which reveals how much the knowledge of God is connected to the personality of man.

In the final chapter of *Moreh* *Ha-nvukhim*, the Rambam is discussing *chokhma*, wisdom. He writes that there are four main areas of perfection that people attempt to achieve. The Rambam delineates these types of perfection, then goes on to explain why the first three cannot be man’s aim: their sublimity is not inherent, but rather ancillary to their unique identity. The Rambam writes:

The ancient and the modem philosophers have shown that man can acquire four kinds of perfection. The first kind, the lowest in the acquisition of which people spend their days, is perfection as regards property; the possession of money, garments, furniture, servants, land, and the like. The possession of the title of a great king belongs to this class. …

The second kind is more closely connected with man himself than the first. It includes the perfection of the shape, constitution, and form of man’s body; the utmost evenness of temperaments; and the proper order and strength of his limbs. This kind of perfection must likewise be excluded from forming our chief aim, because it is the perfection of the body, and man does not possess it as man, but as a living being… (*Moreh* *Ha-nvukhim* III, 54)

The third type of perfection the Rambam delineates is perfection of moral behavior. Interestingly enough, the Rambam writes that this cannot be man’s true aim because it only reflects actions when in the presence of others; it is not inherent to man’s being.

The third kind of perfection is more closely connected with man himself than the second perfection. It includes moral perfection, the highest degree of excellence in man's character. Most of the precepts aim at producing this perfection, but even this kind is only a preparation for another type of perfection, and it is not sought for its own sake. For all moral principles concern the relation of man to his neighbor; the perfection of man's moral principles is, as it were, given to man for the benefit of mankind. Imagine a person being alone and having no connection whatsoever with any other person: all his good moral principles are at rest; they are not required, so they give man no perfection whatsoever. These principles are only necessary and useful when man comes in contact with others.

As the Rambam writes, moral perfection does not seem to be the chief goal. Explaining the fourth type of perfection, he gives the crown to it: perfection in the knowledge of God, which is integral to man’s essence.

The fourth kind of perfection is the true perfection of man: the possession of the highest, intellectual faculties, the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions as regards God. With this perfection, man obtains his final object; it gives him true human perfection: it remains his alone, it gives him immortality, and on its account, he is called man. Examining the first three kinds of perfection, you will find that, if you possess them, they are not your property, but the property of others; according to the ordinary view, indeed, they belong to you and to others. However, the last kind of perfection is exclusively yours; no one else owns any part of it…

The prophets have likewise explained to us these things, and they have expressed the same opinion on them as the philosophers. They say distinctly that perfection in property, in health or in character is not a sought-after quality worthy of pride and glory for us: the knowledge of God — i.e., true wisdom — is the only perfection which we should seek and in which we should glory. Yirmeyahu, referring to these four kinds of perfection, says (9:22-23): “Thus says God: ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glories glory in this — that he understands and knows Me, that I am God, who exercises mercy, justice and righteousness on earth; for in these things I delight,’ says God.”

The Rambam, however, continues and adds a twist. Though he states in his explanation of the third perfection that moral character is not the ultimate goal, here he writes that knowledge which fails to express itself in one’s character is pointless:

Having stated the sublime ideas contained in that Scriptural passage and quoted the explanation of our Sages, we will now explore what the remainder of that passage teaches us. The prophet does not content himself with explaining that the knowledge of God is the highest kind of perfection; for if this had been his sole intention, he would have said, "’But let him that glories glory in this — that he understands and knows Me,’" and would have stopped there. Alternatively, he would have said, "that he understands and knows me that I am One," or "that I have not any likeness," or "that there is none like me," or a similar phrase. He says, however, that man can only glory in the knowledge of God and in the knowledge of His ways and attributes, which are His actions… This is expressed in the words, “‘That I am God, who exercises mercy, justice and righteousness on earth.’"

The prophet thus, in conclusion, says, “‘For in these things I delight,’ says God." This indicates that the object is for man to practice “mercy, justice and righteousness on earth.” In a similar manner, we have shown (I, 54) that the object of the enumeration of God's Thirteen Attributes is the lesson that we should acquire similar attributes and act accordingly. The object of the above passage is therefore to declare that the perfection in which man may truly glory is attained by him when he has acquired — as far as this is possible for man — the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Providence and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge he will then be determined always to seek mercy, justice and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of God. We have explained this many times in this treatise.

Essentially, what the Rambam declares in his concluding teaching is that real knowledge of God requires developing a unique personality, one of thoughts which are sacred, one of an inner life of depth, one of a mindset transformed by the intellect. This idea is similar to that of the Chinnukh quoted earlier. One should strive for *yediat Hashem*, but not only in the intellectual realm; one must extend it to the emotional realm as well. Knowing God should lead one to develop a refined character; Godly wisdom must be constantly expressed in one’s human personality. This formulation differs from the third conception of perfection, which is deficient because its morality focuses on how one deals with others only. The heightened fourth conception of perfection, that of knowing God and expressing that knowledge in one’s character, is wholly unique: one’s character is a reflection of one’s inherently holy being, not an expression of how well one has learned to deal with others, by making friends and influencing them.

However, we now encounter a thorny problem. Here, the Rambam seems to view *yediat Hashem* as the basis of the religious imperative of proper character development, yet the Rambam is known to be the champion of learning proper character traits from other sources, as he indicates at the beginning of his work *Eight Chapters*. This anomaly will be discussed in our next lesson.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch