YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

By Harav Baruch Gigi

**Shiur #24: Loving God (XIV): Loving Israel and Loving God (part 2)**

**“For the Lord’s Portion Is His People”**

In the previous *shiur*, we emphasized the principles of loving one’s fellow Jew, which stem from the internal awareness of the unity of the souls of Israel and their common root in the living, divine Source.

*Or Ha-Chayyim*, in his commentary on the verse, “Love your fellow as yourself,” provides an excellent explanation for this point:[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Love your fellow as yourself” – Meaning that God desires that you love your fellow as yourself…. God provides a reason for this: “I am the Lord” – meaning that, as it says [*Zohar* 3:16] that through the unification of the hearts [of the people of Israel], the name of God, may He be blessed, becomes unified. This is [based on the concept that] the community of Israel consists of branches of [the Tetragrammaton], as it says, “**For the Lord’s portion is His people**” (*Devarim* 32:9). God was very shrewd in giving these directives regarding Israel’s behavior in a staggered form. *Mitzva* 1: “You shall not hate” (*Vayikra* 19:17). *Mitzva* 2: “You shall not take vengeance” (*Vayikra* 19:18). *Mitzva* 3: “Love your fellow.” (*Or Ha-Chayyim*, *Vayikra* 19:18)

The community of Israel, which is united in its love, is “the Lord’s portion.” According to *Or Ha-Chayyim*, God commands his nation to recognize this unity in three stages. The first two stages are passive injunctions to avoid engaging in the negative emotions and activities that prevent one from seeing the positive side in others. Only at the final stage does one begin to internalize and understand the principle of the unity of souls.

At the beginning, we are commanded in the prohibition of baseless hatred: “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.” Then we are commanded in the prohibition of taking vengeance: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen.” These two prohibitions leave room for a feeling of detachment from others. At the end, however, it is the *mitzva* of love that overcomes all obstacles: “Love your fellow as yourself.”

As we have already mentioned, the moment a person negates his own body and connects to the root of his soul, he encounters love. As the wisest of all men said: “But love covers up all faults” (*Mishlei* 10:12).

**What Is Hateful to You, Do Not Do to Your Friend**

We learn about this same dual set of levels from a Talmudic statement attributed to Hillel the Elder. There is the basic dimension of achieving the love of one’s fellow Jew and the loftier dimension that transfers a person from the love of his fellow Jew to the love of God. In order to understand the matter, let us closely examine the passage in the *gemara*:

On another occasion, it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder’s cubit that was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is its commentary; go and learn it.” (*Shabbat* 31a)

At first glance, it seems that Hillel’s assertion that the *mitzva* of loving one’s fellow Jew – presented here in the negative formulation, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend” – is the whole Torah (while the rest is its commentary).

It is clear from Rashi’s commentary on the passage that he found this statement difficult to accept at face value, so he was forced to explain unconvincingly:

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend”; “Do not desert your friend and your father’s friend” (*Mishlei* 27:10). This is the Holy One, blessed be He; do not go against His words, since it would be hateful to you if your friend would go against your words. Alternatively, [this refers to] your actual friend, [and the verse refers to *mitzvot*] such as robbery, theft, adultery, and most of the *mitzvot*. (Rashi, *Shabbat* 31a)

Rashi suggests two different approaches to understand the position of Hillel the Elder. The second approach seemingly assumes that most of the *mitzvot* are interpersonal *mitzvot*. Based on the halakhic principle of “most is like all,” interpersonal *mitzvot* are thus the primary part of the Torah, and the rest of the *mitzvot* are merely commentary.

This assertion is not at all easy to accept. The assertion becomes particularly problematic when considering the actual number *mitzvot* in the Torah. However, even if we are discussing a values system, it is difficult to claim that *mitzvot* between a person and God do not constitute a central component of divine service. In addition, according to this approach, it is difficult to see how all the *mitzvot* between a person and God could be considered a commentary on the interpersonal *mitzvot*.

In contrast, according to Rashi’s first suggested approach, the focus is transferred from one’s actual human friend to God Himself – “your friend and your father’s friend.” Just as you would not want your friend to ignore your requests, you should take care not to go against the commands of the ultimate Friend, your supreme Friend, the Creator. But this interpretation diverges even further from the apparent fundamental meaning of Hillel the Elder’s statement.

Let us first address the negative formulation that is stressed in Hillel’s statement – “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend” – contrasting it with the verse, which emphasizes the positive side – “Love your fellow as yourself.” It seems that this change represented Hillel’s effort to establish a system of levels, a kind of ladder that would allow a person to reach great spiritual heights. The anecdote that the Talmud relates begins with a heathen who wanted to convert, expressing one wish only: that he would be taught the whole Torah while he stands on one foot, that he learn the fundamental principle upon which everything is based. Hillel declares that this fundamental principle is to avoid causing harm to others: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.”

This recognition – that others have a right to exist in peace and without being harmed – is the basis for everything in the Torah, according to Hillel the Elder. The first step is for a person to remove himself from the egocentric mindset, in which only he exists and all others must either vanish into thin air[[2]](#footnote-2) and disappear or negate their own existence by serving him and treating him as their master.

At this stage, a person can begin to process and understand the principle of “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.” There are others who have rights and desires, and I am not permitted to disturb them or cause them harm.

It is only at this stage that a person is able to find a common foundation with another person. Then the process of drawing close to the other person begins, until one reaches the pinnacle of the command to “Love your fellow **as yourself**.” At this point, one begins the transition from self to other, eventually revealing the truth – that the other is not actually “other.” While it is true that the other person has his own different and separate world, in reality we are all simply made up of numerous points of interface, and all together we form a broader and more significant single entity. This is the true basis of love.

The purpose of the single entity that is formed from love is not to blur the identity or the independent rights of the other. On the contrary, the realization that every person represents a small piece of a grand mosaic generates a sense of responsibility and a recognition of the need to allow every person to develop and advance in his own way. One recognizes that we all have one joint purpose – to build and perfect the world so that all its inhabitants can live together in harmony.

**This Is the Book of the Generations of Man**

The fundamental outlook on the root of all souls begins from one point: “a portion of God above” (*Iyov* 31:2). At this point, all the souls of Israel are contained within God, and from there they become divided into the various “limbs” of the nation, where each one has its own role, value, and place. Together, they form a single, coordinated body.

The imagery of limbs is exceedingly significant, since it allows us to view each and every limb as unique and distinct, with its own set of tasks. In a person’s body, each limb has its own role; the task given to every limb is to allow every other limb to carry out its task and to avoid preventing the other limbs from doing so. Together, they make up a whole, harmonious body – a complete, perfect world.

This is how *Meshekh Chokhma* explained the disparity between the approaches of R. Akiva and Ben Azzai regarding the “great principle of the Torah”:

“Love your fellow as yourself” – R. Akiva said: This is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai said: “This is the book of the generations of Adam (i.e., man)” (*Bereishit* 5:1) is an even greater principle. This is so that you will know that all the evil systems already existed, such as the system of might, which existed during the generation of the Flood: “For the earth is filled with lawlessness” (*Bereishit* 6:13); and “When the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men” (*Bereishit* 6:4). The system of “We shall all have a common purse” (*Mishlei* 1:14) existed during the generation of the Dispersion, when they wanted to all become partners and joint owners of all wealth. All women and all treasures would not have personal ownership, but would be jointly owned by all. So the Holy One, blessed be He, confounded their speech, such that every nation wanted to obliterate its fellow nation.

The completion of man’s exalted purpose and the pinnacle of his goal – so that he cannot perfect himself any further – only occurred once the patriarchs experienced God’s providence…. Thus you must know that “This is the book” refers to the book of the Torah, which recounts the Generations of Man, namely, his development to the upper limit of what he can achieve in this world. (*Meshekh Chokhma*, *Vayikra* 19:18)

*Meshekh Chokhma* relates here to various societal systems that arose in the course of history, presenting two extreme examples: the system of might and the system of the common purse.

I believe that in describing these two systems, *Meshekh Chokhma* was alluding to the modern systems of totalitarianism and communism, respectively. Totalitarian regimes and their dictators attempt to control all aspects of humanity in order to create, in effect, a culturally and behaviorally monolithic society. In doing so, these governments commit acts of violence and moral destruction, as in the generation of the Flood. On the other hand, societies that follow communist ideals – “We shall all have a common purse” – tried to achieve a state of complete, sweeping equality, as in the generation of the Dispersion.

According to *Meshekh Chokhma*, both systems should be rejected. Totalitarian regimes should be rejected because they trample all that stands in their way and create death and destruction in their wake. Communism should be rejected as well, since it does not provide room for the individual and for the various limbs of humanity to express themselves. Those who adopted this philosophy attempted to eliminate all traces of personal identity and to create one collective identity.

Therefore, *Meshekh Chokhma* cites Ben Azzai’s statement, which is “an even greater principle.” The principle of loving your fellow as yourself, taken alone, and thus misinterpreted, can lead to countless societal problems. However, when “Love your fellow as yourself” is read in tandem with “This is the book of the generations of man,” the principle is given the proper framework. The Torah, by dint of the array of *mitzvot* that it contains, is the only thing that can create the proper connection between the personal place of the individual in the world – his ability to develop in his own way – and the individual’s harmonious connection to the world around him.

**Have We Not All One Father?**

By viewing the matter through this lens, we can understand the relationship between interpersonal *mitzvot* and *mitzvot* between a person and God, which we discussed at the beginning of this *shiur*. Let us follow Rashi’s first approach here, that God is “your friend and your father’s friend.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

When a person leaves the “I” mindset and adopts the “other” mindset, he unlocks the door to understanding the meaning and purpose of life. At that point, he begins to understand that every individual, his friend and his friend’s friend, all serve a much deeper and more meaningful purpose. It is not enough that I am alive and that I allow my neighbors to live and even prosper. We all live together in the world and aspire to achieve certain goals that cannot be limited to the terrestrial plain alone.

Our thoughts spread out to realms that exist far beyond our ephemeral physical existence. A person seeks the meaning of eternity, of a connection to “your friend and your father’s friend,” the Root and Father of humanity. As the prophet Malakhi said: “Have we not all one Father?” (*Malakhi* 2:10). And as we read in *Or Ha-Chayyim* above: “The community of Israel consists of branches of [the Tetragrammaton].”

Thus wrote R. Pinchas Ha-Levi Horowitz, the author of the *Hafla’ah*, in his commentary on the verse, “Love your fellow as yourself”:

This means that all the souls of Israel are included in the community of Israel, and likewise the whole Torah is completely included within “I the Lord am your God.” However, the soul of Israel diverges into numerous branches. Additionally, when a person clings to the root – as it says, “You, who held fast to the Lord your God” (*Devarim* 4:4) – he causes himself to cling to the root of the Torah, which is unity. As the verse says, “One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard” (*Tehillim* 62:12). This means that even though they heard “I the Lord” and “You shall not make for yourself” in one utterance, from the mouth of the Almighty, as it were, nevertheless, “one thing God has spoken,” since the utterance came from a source of true unity. However, when Israel heard, this implied understanding, and [the utterance] could only be understood by draping the utterance in *chokhma* (wisdom) and *bina* (intellect), which are also terms of unity, as they are described in the *Zohar*: “Two friends who never separate” (*Zohar*, *Vayikra* 4a).

Even still, they are the positive and negative aspects of one concept, and that is the meaning of “I the Lord am your God” and “You shall not make for yourself.” When the verse says, “Two things have I heard: that might belongs to God,” it means that we heard from the mouth of the Almighty, which is the aspect of *bina*. Therefore, [Hillel] used a negative formulation in saying, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.” Even though the *mitzva* to “Love your fellow as yourself” is a positive commandment, one who hears this commandment accepts it as a positive commandment and a negative commandment. And that is why it says, “Love your fellow as yourself”: These are “two friends who never separate.”

It was concerning this point that Ben Azzai said that an even greater principle of the Torah is the true unity itself, [manifested in] the book of the generations of Adam – the first man – which included within it all of humanity [i.e., not only members of the community of Israel] until the end of all generations. We can use this idea to interpret the verse, “Exalt the Lord with me; [let us extol His name together]” (*Tehillim* 34:4); it means that the main way in which God’s name is exalted is when all of Israel unites in a true unity, i.e., when you are “with me” – in one unity. But when we are “together,” we can only “extol His name.” (*Panim Yafot*, *Vayikra* 19:18).

In this incredible passage, *Panim Yafot* creates a dual set of connections: between the community of Israel and God, and between interpersonal *mitzvot* and *mitzvot* between a person and God. Similarly, he draws a parallel between the first two Commandments – “I the Lord am your God” and “You shall not make for yourself” – and the two formulations of the *mitzva* to love one’s fellow Jew – “Love your fellow as yourself” and “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.”

The respective foundations of unity in the Torah and in the community of Israel connect to the same root: “You, who held fast to the Lord your God, are all alive today.” The intimate connection between human beings creates intimacy with God, the Source of all life. Through the togetherness of all of Israel, God’s name can truly burst forth to become exalted and extolled.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See also *Meshekh Chokhma*’s commentary on the verse, which describes at great length the various levels of contemplating the universe, in which the hand of God is revealed at each stage. From this viewpoint, a person can succeed in fulfilling the *mitzva* of loving his fellow as himself, which leads, in turn, to loving God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is based on the *midrash*:

   About what did they quarrel? “Come,” said they, “let us divide the world.” One took the land and the other the movables. The former said, “The land you stand on is mine,” while the latter retorted, “What you are wearing is mine.” One said: “Strip”; the other retorted: “Fly [off the ground].” Out of this quarrel, “Kayin set upon his brother Hevel and killed him” (*Bereishit* 4:8). (*Bereishit Rabba* 22:7) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Even though we have adopted the first approach advanced by Rashi, we can connect this to his second approach as well. Interpersonal *mitzvot* are the first step in a person’s departure from his exclusively inward focus. By default, then, *mitzvot* between a person and God constitute “commentary” on the very principle of a person’s obligation toward what exists outside of himself. This is true on the terrestrial plain, but also on a deeper and more fundamental level at the root of life, in a person’s connection with God Himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)