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 #26: The History and Centrality of *Kiruv***

In last week's lesson, we saw various sources indicating that reaching out to others spiritually (*kiruv*) is a fulfillment of the commandments to love loving God, to love one's fellow man and to sanctify the name of God.

Indeed, the Rambam takes special note of Avraham's commitment to this ideal. If we go back in time, we find that spiritually uplifting others has been a basic tenet of Jewish tradition from the moment of its inception — and for good reason, as it is a very fundamental religious obligation. Even before the Torah is given, Avraham is driven by a love of God to embrace his obligation to all mankind.

In fact, the Torah repeatedly mentions that Avraham “called out in the name of God” (*Bereishit* 12:8, 13:4, 21:33; continued by Yitzchak, 26:25).

The Talmud *(Sota* 10a) explains this call:

Do not read “And he called;” read “And he had others call” — this means that Avraham motivated others to become aware of God and call out to Him.

Indeed, the Rambam views this as so essential that he opens *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* in *Mishneh Torah* not with halakhic material, but with history, his understanding of Avraham's path to God and his commitment to impart it to others. He describes the slippery slope towards idolatry that mankind slowly fell into, and Avraham's awakening (1:2-3):

The wise men among them would think that there is no God other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, save some individuals: Chanokh and Metushelach, Noach, Shem and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world - the Patriarch Avraham - was born.

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images which made them lose awareness of the truth. Avraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path.

This describes Avraham’s personal evolution, coming to recognize God in a world that had almost entirely forgotten Him. However, the Rambam does not stop there. Working off the abovementioned verses as well as complementary Midrashic sources, the Rambam details Avraham's travels and his attempts to influence the world through *kiruv*, sharing with them the eternal truths he had come to know. Avraham does this even under the threat of death.

He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the God of the world, to Him [alone] is it fitting to bow down, sacrifice and offer libations, so that the people of future generations would recognize Him. Thus, it is fitting to destroy and break all the images, lest all the people err through them, like those people who thought that there are no other gods besides these. When he overcame them through the strength of his arguments, the king desired to kill him. A miracle was performed for him, and he left for Charan, where he began to call in a loud voice to all people and inform them that there is one God in the entire world and it is proper to serve Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan and called out, as the verse (*Bereishit* 21:33) states: "And He called there in the name of Lord, the eternal God." When the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and tens of thousands gathered around him. These were the men of the house of Avraham. He planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle, composed texts about it, and taught it to Yitzchak, his son. Yitzchak also taught and advised others. He also taught Yaakov and appointed him as a teacher…

One of the Midrashic sources for this approach relates to the verse (*Bereishit* 12:5) which states: “He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the souls (*nefesh*) they had made in Charan, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.” How does one “make” souls? The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 39:21) comments:

These are the converts they made. Avraham would convert the men and Sara would convert the women.

Based on this famous interpretation, it is complimentary in the circles of those involved in *kiruv* to describe one as “*boreh nefashot rabbot,*” “creator of many souls,” a term applied in our liturgy to God Himself!

The Raavad (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:3) is puzzled by Avraham’s lonely position. Why does only Avraham confront the idol worshippers? After all, as the Rambam himself mentioned, there were other great men, such as Shem and Ever, who knew the truth as well. Why did they not protest?

Rav Yosef Karo, in his *Kesef Mishneh* (*ad loc.*)*,* explains that indeed this is the defining characteristic of Avraham:

Avraham called out and publicly proclaimed belief in one God. Shem and Ever, on the other hand, only taught the ways of God to their students, but they did not push themselves to go out and proclaim it publicly. It is for this reason that Avraham is greater than they.

Many Midrashic sources and many classical commentators note a similar distinction between Avraham and Noach. The *Zohar* (*Vayera* 106a), for example, notes that “Noach remains silent, saying nothing and seeking no mercy” when God informs him of impending destruction, unlike Avraham, who argues with God immediately. Though each is righteous, Avraham merits special attention because Avraham attempts to influence the entire world and save everyone, while Noach focuses on himself and his family. We may explain this by way of a parable. Surviving in a cold environment may be accomplished in one of two ways, either by putting on a coat or by lighting a fire. One who is focused on personal needs will put on a coat, but one who wants to provide heat and warmth for others as well will light a fire.

It is understandable that Avraham is driven by the desire to share his understanding of God with others, as Avraham is described by the prophet Yeshayahu (41:8) as the quintessential lover of God.

The Rambam elsewhere (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:2) describes true love of God by citing Avraham's example.

One who serves Him out of love occupies himself in the Torah and the *mitzvot* and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive, not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it. This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch Avraham, whom God describes (*Yeshayahu* 41:8) as "Avraham, who loved Me," for his service was only motivated by love. God commands us to do so, as Moshe states (*Devarim* 6:5): "You shall love Lord, your God.'' When a man will love God in the proper manner, he will immediately perform all of the *mitzvot* motivated by love.

Avraham's dedication to this principle is even more remarkable in light of what he gives up in order to do so. While he certainly has more to learn in Charan, he dedicates his life to influencing others. The Chatam Sofer notes this and comments on its implications.

The Chatam Sofer's son and student, Rav Shimon Sofer (in *Pittuchei Chotam,* Introduction to *Responsa Chatam Sofer, YD*), expresses the greatness of Avraham Avinu in this fashion, elaborating on Rav Yosef Karo’s abovementioned comment.

In truth, even before him there were unique individuals who knew God and desired knowledge of His ways. Who was greater than Chanokh? He… was lifted up to become like one of the heavenly host who stand before the King to minister to him. We do not find that the earthly elements of Avraham Avinu, may he rest in peace, became that purified.

However, it was not on account of any deficiency or lacking of his soul that Avraham did not reach this level… For he understood in his wisdom that God does not desire that man only perfect his soul, leaving the people of his generation behind, a brood of sinful men who provoke God to anger, as happened to the generation of Chanokh and the Generation of the Flood. This experience taught him that it is better for a person to give up a little of the perfection of his soul in order to increase the glory of God, reducing the number of those who rebel against Him and increasing the number of those who serve and know Him.

Rav Shimon Sofer goes on to describe how God seeks out those who influence others, even if by doing so they fail to reach the greatest of heights. (A complete translation of the introduction, which is recommended reading, can be found at [http://www.kiruv.com/articles/74/chasam-sofer-on-responsibility](http://www.kiruv.com/articles/74/chasam-sofer-on-responsibility/); see Year 1, [Lesson 29](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/29chavero.htm) for the halakhic discussion regarding these ideas.)

Were the great of every generation to concentrate on perfecting themselves to the exclusion of others, only one in a million would achieve perfection. The bulk of society would remain in a state of corruption. The world would be destroyed by the wickedness of its inhabitants and God’s purpose in creation would not be fulfilled.

In truth, the path followed by Avraham should be seen to be the obvious one. To realize this, one has only to consider the soul. The soul is the Godly dimension within us and prior to joining the body, it is conversant with the deep secrets of Heaven. Once in this world, however, it is trapped in a body which blinds it to the truth. Why did God do this? Why did He deprive it of its high level? What benefit does the soul have from finding itself trapped in the lowly body?

The answer is that only in this trapped condition, where its light is dimmed, can it develop closeness and similarity to its Creator. This is done by giving, by influencing others, starting, obviously, with its own body. The soul can raise the body to a level which would be utterly impossible for a body without a soul. In its original state the soul was incapable of giving, only of receiving. Now, it may be “trapped” in the body, but the soul has someone to influence: its own body. This will be the greatness of the soul and its achievement, for only by giving will it develop.

In the same way as the soul is only fulfilled by influencing the body, so is the human being only fulfilled by influencing others. That is why the Torah commands us to teach our children, to teach our students, to guide the misguided. These commandments tell us that a person will not fulfill the purpose of creation if he only perfects himself but ignores others.

In truth, Rav Sofer's call to follow in the footsteps of Avraham's love-driven campaign is understandable, as the verse in *Yeshayahu* refers to the Jewish people as "The seed of Avraham who loved me." As his children, we are bidden to walk in this same path of love.

**Bringing Others Close to the Torah**

*Kiruv* is rooted in love of God and one's fellow Jew; it requires walking in the path of Avraham, calling out to all of mankind, teaching the world about God. Avraham sets the stage of Jewish history, as God declares:

For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him to **keep the way of God, to do righteousness and justice**, to the end that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken to him. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

Avraham's greatness lies in his commitment to educating his progeny, who will maintain the chain of tradition, to follow the way of God. We are bidden to continue on his path, as expressed in this verse.

Avraham’s initiative was calling out in the name of God, but this was not a static endeavor; it evolved through the generations, bringing us to another paradigm, that of Aharon. The Mishna tells us to continue in Aharon’s path, by bringing others close to the Torah. The basic directive of *kiruv* seems to emerge from this source, *Avot* 1:12, which advises us:

Hillel says: “Be like the students of Aharon, love peace and pursue peace, love people and bring them close to the Torah.”

The Mishna clearly connects the ideal of "loving people" with *kiruv*, as we discussed in the previous lesson. The commentators discuss the exact relationship between the two. As they note, the ability to influence others positively is rooted in a sincere feeling of love for others; Aharon's example of kindness is the model to follow.

Rav Tzvi Yehuda Ha-Kohen Kook (*Torat Eretz Yisrael*, p. 89) stresses the need to be driven by love:

Is this speaking about people who are close to the Torah or those who are far away? There isn't a need to bring a close person near. Rather, Hillel's intention is to refer to those far away. He instructs us to love people who are distant from Torah. However, the Mishna doesn't tells us to love people in order to bring them close to the Torah, but rather to love them and afterwards bring them close to the Torah. The main point is to love, and due to this, they will naturally come close to the Torah.

Other Mishnaic commentators go further. Rav Chayim of Volozhin (*Ruach Chayim*) argues that because *kiruv* itself is an act of love, it should be pursued even when in the short term it may lead to some conflict:

One must love mankind and bring them closer to the Torah. This is true even though it sometimes happens that attempting to bring another close to the Torah has detrimental consequences, such as leading to quarrels… for fear of lost income or the like… Nevertheless, love mankind and bring them closer to the Torah, for this is the ultimate act of love one may show for another. Afterwards, when God is happy with man's actions, He will ensure that even his enemies will make peace with him…

According to the Me’iri, Aharon's success in *kiruv* was made possible by the high esteem which the people held him in. Rabbeinu Yona comments that Aharon's love for others caused him to try to solve others’ quarrels, something that people who lack true love for others may not be willing to get involved in. Furthermore, when he approached individuals who had sinned, he did so with such love that they were taken aback: how, they felt, could they continue to sin if someone as great as Aharon held them in such high regard? Aharon's loving personality and exemplary character allowed him to influence others positively.

The Vilna Gaon (in his commentary to *Mishlei* 10:20) points out that in order to influence others, one must follow Aharon's example, choosing kind words rather than insults.

The righteous person comes with pleasant, gentle words and draws a person to the Torah. Everybody then wants to follow this righteous person.

The idea of bringing others closer to the Torah is usually focused on those who seem to be distant from it, those who are defined as *rechokim*. However, in truth, while *kiruv* is most noticeable when applied to *rechokim*, the same holds true for just about everyone. Anyone can benefit from getting a little closer to God and His Torah. The Shela (*Shaar Ha-otiyot, Kedusha*) indicates this, defining the idea of *kiruv* as helping individuals, including ourselves, to come closer to the Torah by raising the level of sincerity in observance of the *mitzvot*. We might say that this is a solid source for the term known as *kiruv kerovim,* bringing those who are already close even closer to sincerity in their observance.

How can *kiruv* be done in a personally uplifting manner? What are its explicit obligations? These questions will have to wait until next week.