YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/26aggada.htm>

**Shiur #26: Religious Reductionism**

R. Simlai expounded: “Six hundred and thirteen commandments were communicated to Moshe.”

….David came and reduced them to eleven (principles), as it says: “A Psalm of David. Lord, who shall sojourn in Your tabernacle? Who shall dwell upon Your holy mountain? He who walks upright, and does righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart; who has no slander on his tongue, nor does evil to his fellow, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors them that fear the Lord; he who swears to his own hurt, and changes not; he who does not lend money with interest, nor take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall not falter.” When R. Gamliel arrived at this verse, he would cry. He said: “One who does all of the above shall not falter. If he does one of the above, he shall falter?”…He said to him: “Even if he only does one of these things, he shall not falter.”

Yeshayahu came and reduced them to six (principles), as it says: “He who walks righteously, and speaks uprightly; he who despises the gain of oppression, who shakes his hands from holding bribes, who stops his ears from hearing blood, and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil” (*Yeshayahu* 33:15)….

Mikha came and reduced them to three, as it says: “It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (*Mikha* 6:8)….

Yeshayahu returned and reduced them to two, as it says: “Thus says the Lord: Keep justice, and do righteousness” (*Yeshayahu* 56:1).

Amos came and reduced them to one, as it says: “For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek Me, and live” (*Amos* 5:4). R. Nachman bar Yitzchak questioned this: “Perhaps it means seek me via observance of the entire Torah?” Rather, Chavakuk came and reduced them to one as it says: “And the righteous shall live by his faith” (*Chavakuk* 2:4). (*Makkot* 23b-24a)

Rivan explains that the earlier generations, who were more righteous than we are, were able to keep the entire Torah. When later generations proved less worthy, David and others provided a smaller list for them to focus on. Many other commentaries reject this approach. Did a king and prophets truly attempt to scale back the scope of halakhic responsibility and tell their listeners to focus exclusively on a small group of *mitzvot*? Furthermore, some of the acts listed are not technically *mitzvot*. For example, despising a vile person may not fulfill a commandment. One approach explains that the lists enumerate broad categories that encompass or lead a person to the totality of Torah. The lists do not exempt a Jew from other commandments; they merely provide routes towards a more encompassing fulfillment. Alternatively, the list simply expresses a minimum which qualifies a person for the world to come, but does not exhaust the extent of religious requirements.

Different interpretations of the three items listed by Mikha present us with overarching categories. Mikha speaks of justice, mercy and walking humbly. R. Yosef Albo explains that these categories incorporate both commandments between man and God and between man and man. “*Mishpat*” (justice) and “*chesed*” (loving kindness) belong to the latter category; humility relates to understanding the awesome transcendence of the Almighty and speaking appropriately about God (i. e. the doctrine of negative attributes). Thus, Mikha instructs his listeners to begin with a twin focus on both interpersonal relationships and a proper relationship with God (*Sefer Ha-ikkarim* 3:30).

R. Yaakov Ettlinger advances a similar approach in his *Arukh Laner*. He also identifies mercy with the interpersonal *mitzvot* and humility with a person’s relationship with God. However, he differs from R. Albo in suggesting that “*mishpat*” addresses the category of *mitzvot bein adam le-atzmo* (between a person and himself). According to R. Ettlinger, “*mishpat*” demands judging my own actions carefully and testing their appropriateness. We should recognize the importance of this third category of commandments, those relating to responsibility to one’s self. We can better appreciate why some actions we strongly object to are wrong, such as profanity, pornography, and drunkenness, by placing them in this third grouping. Those engaging in these patterns of behavior fail to honor themselves more than they hurt others.

Maharal (*Chiddushei Aggadot*) locates a different triumvirate in Mikha’s prophetic call. To understand his approach, note that the Gemara speaks of attending a funeral in order to give honor to the deceased or bringing joy to a bride as examples of walking humbly with God. For Maharal, Mikha focuses on balancing strict law and justice with compassion and mercy. Clearly, “*mishpat*” and “*chesed*” set up the two poles. Maharal cleverly explains that caring for the deceased or for a bride straddles the fence between the two categories. Strict justice does not demand that I attend a funeral in the same way that it requires me to pay my debts or to not damage your property. On the other hand, it is obviously unjust for a deceased person to lie uncared for, in dishonor, or for a bride to lack the means for her wedding. Mikha taught us about law, mercy, and all that lies in between.

Perhaps we should think about this *gemara* in the context of the need to avoid both an all or nothing approach and a reductionist approach that limits Judaism to a single theme. On the one hand, there is a danger in always demanding complete compliance. Individuals first becoming observant often need a more gradual entry. Even those born into committed families frequently struggle to meet the broad range of religious demands. Rather than despair, they need to take pride in partial accomplishments, while thinking about how to grow into greater devotion. To that end, David, Yeshayahu, Mikha, and Amos emphasized short lists of obligations.

On the other hand, we cannot simply say that all of Torah boils down to one principle. I am concerned when I see various Orthodox groups for whom every *dvar Torah* (word of Torah) inevitably comes back to the same mitzva. Some Chabadniks focus every shiur (class) on the Messiah, some Religious Zionists always come back to the land of Israel, some Breslavers make everything about faith, while other groups appear exclusively obsessed with Torah study or acts of *chesed*. In each of these cases, the groups incorrectly reduce the multiple ideals of Torah to a single value. An approach more authentic to Torah gives expression to the multiplicity in the world of *mitzvot*.

I do not think that this *gemara* justifies such single mindedness. Most of the commentators make it clear that a more narrow focus was never meant to supplant the many requirements of a Torah life. Rather, the shorter lists either serve as some kind of *be’dieved* (*ex post facto)* requirement or they are intended as a starting point paving the way to a more robust and broad observance.

In this context, it is worth noting Meiri’s explanation of Chavakuk’s solitary theme. Though this prophet seemingly reduces Judaism to the ideal of faith, Meiri interprets faith as wholehearted service of God. Thus, the only way to reduce Torah to one principle is to speak of a broad category, *avodat Hashem* (service of God), constituting the goal of the entire system. Once we attempt to realize that fundamental goal, we return to the world of multiple obligations and manifold ideals.

Torah observance is not all or nothing, and we value partial performance. At the same time, we must constantly strive for more and not make a virtue out of mediocrity. Furthermore, we should appreciate the many values incorporated in our Torah and not fall into the trap of religious reductionism.