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 #27: The Sources for the *Kiruv* Obligation**

In the previous two lessons, we have focused on the loving nature of reaching out to others and the historical precedents for bringing them closer to God. Besides the sources already quoted, there are a number of interpersonal *mitzvot* which lie at the heart of the obligation.

One of the biggest proponents of *kiruv* was none other than Rav Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen Kagan, better known as the Chafetz Chayim. Though his name is often associated with the concept of purity of speech or his halakhic masterwork *Mishna Berura*, he also called for a movement of epic proportions to return lost Jews. His *Chomat Ha-dat* delineates four basic sources for this endeavor, which are binding upon all.

The first source of obligation is what we discussed in the initial lesson. One is required to assist others actively to recognize God's goodness and to appreciate His name and that of the Torah, based on the *mitzvot* of *ahava*, of loving both God and one's fellow man, as well as the mitzva of *kiddush ha-shem*, sanctifying the name of God. The mitzva of *kiruv* is rooted in love, recognizing that at times one shows true love of God by foregoing personal growth in order to ensure that the overall goal of God's name being sanctified is achieved.

***Arevut* and *Tokhacha***

The second obligation is rooted in one's responsibility for others, *arevut*, as discussed at length in Lesson 20. The Chafetz Chayim explains that the dictum of “*kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh”* teaches that the Jewish people are to be viewed as one organism; therefore, any part of the body that is deficient will by definition affect everyone.

The Chafetz Chayim explains that one who is careful to keep the laws of Shabbat but is not involved in influencing others to do so will be called to task in the future. He will be viewed as a Sabbath desecrater for allowing others to sin.

A similar understanding appears in *Reishit Chokhma*, by Rav Eliyahu de Vidas (*Shaar Ha-yira* 14):

It is written (*Devarim* 32:9), "For God’s people are His portion; Yaakov, the cord of His inheritance." This indicates that all Jewish souls are bound to one another like a braided cord, and are, therefore, united together with no separation.

When you shake one end of a taut rope, the entire rope vibrates. This is the meaning of the verse (*Bamidbar* 16:22) "One man sins, but You rage at the entire congregation!" This also explains the case of Akhan, the reason being that "all Jews are guarantors for one another."

Furthermore, the Chafetz Chayim views *tokhacha* as an explicit mitzva obligating one to help others improve their spiritual practice. The Rambam explicitly states in *Hilkhot De'ot* 6:7 that even observing one's friend walking in a way that is not good obligates one to offer reproof:

If one observes that a person has committed a sin or is pursuing a path which is not good, it is a duty to bring the one in error back to the right path and point out to him that he is wronging himself by his evil actions, as it is said: "You shall certainly rebuke your comrade."

In fact, the Chafetz Chayim writes that in the future not only will one be held accountable for failing to help others spiritually, but these others will actually accuse whoever forgoes this obligation of negligence.

**The Right Hand and the Left**

One might add that even in this noble effort which is rooted in love (see Lessons 21-22), one must be careful to ensure that this act is one of *kiruv*. Whenever one may attempt to influence others in any way, one always runs the risk of actually turning them off. If one does so, one will not only fail to achieve the desired results; one will actually accomplish the opposite. The Talmud (*Sota* 47a, *Sanhedrin* 107b) offers some practical advice for offering constructive criticism.

Our Rabbis taught: “One must always ensure that the left hand pushes away as the right hand brings close — unlike Elisha, who pushed Gechazi away with two hands, and unlike Yehoshua ben Perachya, who pushed his student away with two hands.”

Thus, the weaker hand, the left, is the one used to distance the sinner, while the right hand, the stronger one, is to be used to bring the other close. (See Maharsha, *Sanhedrin ad loc.*) The Talmud adds that even great men like the prophet Elisha and the sage Yehoshua ben Perachya went too far in distancing their pupils who had strayed, causing these disciples to fail completely.

Indeed, the Abarbanel (*Devarim* 33) notes that the concluding portions of the Torah, describing what will befall the Jewish people in the future based on whether they obey God or unfortunately fail to do so, provide a model of this conduct: the right hand must bring close, as one must focus primarily on the good and assure that there will be a positive end.

The Alshikh is very fond of this lesson and includes it numerous times in his various commentaries. In his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim* (2:6), he explains that this is the meaning of the verse: "His left hand is under my head, and His right hand embraces me."

Israel says: “Even when I am in exile, God has not forsaken me. Though He pushes me away with His left hand, He draws me close with His right. ‘His left hand is under my head and His right hand embraces me.’”

The Alshikh further expounds the biblical language, noting that instead of using the simple phrase *tachat roshi*, under my head, this verses chooses to use the phrase “*tachat le-roshi*,” which literally means “under to my head.” This indicates that even though Israel metaphorically feels distanced by the left hand, we recognize even this as an act of love.

This teaches us that even the suffering is beneficial to us. God acts like a doctor who administers a blood test. Though this may be painful, it is necessary for the patient's health. Similarly, we must suffer in order to cleanse our soul of the filth of the evil inclination.

Rav Immanuel Ricchi, in his Mishnaic commentary *Hon Ashir,* examines the dictum in *Avot* 1:7: “Do not attach yourself to the wicked.” He explains that one may not join an evildoer, but one also must not distance such a person completely. One must distance with the left hand while using the right to bring the wicked closer to the true path.

A number of contemporary halakhic authorities (see *Yabbia Omer,* *OC* 15:6; *Meshaneh Halakhot* 9:216) endorse this mindset for anyone involved with *kiruv*. However, this does not answer one simple question: how can one try to help change others' behavior without turning them off?

In this regard, we may refer to a story of Rav Chayim Ozer Grodzinski, a younger contemporary of the Chafetz Chayim (recorded by Shmuel Himelstein in *Wisdom & Wit,* published by Mesorah Publications in 2003). He was once approached by a young Jew who had forgone observance; after receiving a draft notice, he approached the great sage to beseech his assistance in escaping the deadly Russian draft.

Rav Chayim Ozer fully understood that one of the purposes of drafting Jews was to eliminate their Jewish observance, so he asked the youth how he felt his Shabbat observance would be hurt in the army. The youth looked down and admitted that in truth it had been some time since he had observed Shabbat. Rav Chayim Ozer continued to attempt to gage the youth's level of observance, only to find out that along with Shabbat, the youth had abandoned eating kosher food, wearing *tefillin* and praying.

At this point, the youth was convinced that Rav Chayim Ozer would not only refuse to give him a blessing but would severely reprimand him: how dare he ask for a blessing when he was entirely unobservant! However, Rav Chayim Ozer merely sat there in tears and delivered the following remark: “I can only hope the Russian army will be as disappointed with you as I am.”

The youth was beside himself. What did the statement of Rav Chayim Ozer meant? His doubts were resolved when he soon after received a completely out-of-the-ordinary letter from the draft office. The Russians were disappointed in his abilities and had no interest in conscripting him.

The words expressing Rav Chayim Ozer's hurt alongside his concern had been fulfilled. However, after hearing Rav Chayim Ozer's message, the youth decided to dedicate his life to observance.

**The Interpersonal Sources**

The Chafetz Chayim points to a third set of obligations: those interpersonal *mitzvot* that require one to help others physically. One is obliged to return another's lost article, and one is forbidden to stand idly by as another's blood is spilled; thus, one is required to assist others in times of distress. Though the focus of the Torah upon another's lost object or a threat to another's life, it obviously would require the same type of action on behalf of an individual in spiritual danger. These interpersonal *mitzvot,* according to the Chafetz Chayim, clearly express one's spiritual obligations to others.

In fact, the Chafetz Chayim is not the originator of all these ideas, though he is extremely eloquent in presenting them. The Chafetz Chayim's comments are based on an understanding that the various interpersonal *mitzvot* requiring one to save others’ lives and care for their possessions clearly would obligate no less when others are faced with spiritual losses. Rav Yitzchak Berkowitz quotes a number of earlier sources that are understood similarly. This idea is actually found in Rashi's commentary to *Devarim* 23:9, when he explains (based on *Sifrei* 252) why the Torah forbids descendants of converts from the nations of Ammon and Moab from ever marrying native-born Jews, while it allows grandchildren of converts from Edom and Egypt to do so. He relates this to the complicity of Ammon and Moab in the Baal Peor incident, in which Israel was led into an orgy of sin.

Thus, you learn from here that someone who causes a person to sin does worse than one who kills him, for one who kills him, kills him in this world, whereas one who leads him to sin removes him from this world and the World to Come. Therefore, Edom, who came forth against them with the sword, is not rejected, nor is Egypt, who drowned them. These, however, who caused them to sin, are rejected.

In fact, a number of early commentators write that these interpersonal *mitzvot* mandate spiritual assistance as well. The Shela (*Parashat* *Kedoshim*) states:

The prohibition of standing idly by (*Vayikra* 19:16) is entailed because *kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*. Now, if we are required to save the physical body, we certainly are equally responsible to save the soul, i.e. if we see others involved in sin, we must save them.

In *Minchat Chinnukh* (139:4), Rav Yosef Babad points out that bringing others back to the proper path involves a fulfillment of a few interpersonal *mitzvot*.

Besides fulfilling the commandment "You shall certainly rebuke your comrade,” one also fulfills the commandment "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your fellow." This commandment requires that we save someone whose life is in danger — for example, through drowning. Bringing another back to Torah is no less significant.

Furthermore, one also fulfills the mitzva of returning another's lost article (*Devarim* 22:1): "You shall return them to your brother.” As our Sages teach us (*Bava Kamma* 81b), this commandment also requires us to restore a person's life and health. Therefore, if one can save a person from sin, which involves a loss of both body and soul, one certainly has the responsibility to save him and bring him back to the right path.

In truth, there are those who take issue with this understanding (see Rav Saadia Gaon’s *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive 28) and limit these specific obligations to their context of physical assistance. However, the copious sources cited indicate that the need to reach out to others is essentially not only an obligation *bein adam la-Makom* but one *bein adam le-chavero*.

**The Curse**

The Chafetz Chayim cites a fourth obligation for *kiruv rechokim,* based on the verses in *Parashat Ki Tavo* concerning the ceremony to take place at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval. The final line to be recited is the following:

“Cursed be he who does not uphold the words of this Torah, to fulfill them.” And all the people shall say, “Amen!” (*Devarim* 27:26)

The commentators differ as to the meaning of this imprecation. Rashi explains this verse as a general declaration to uphold the entire Torah:

Here, Moshe included the entire Torah, and they accepted it upon themselves with a curse and an oath.

The Ramban writes an alternative understanding based on the Yerushalmi, which understands the verse as related to one's communal responsibility:

In the Yerushalmi*, Sota* (7:4), I saw a question regarding the verse: "Is the Torah falling that it must be held up? …Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta says, “This is the earthly court,” for Rav Yehuda and Rav Huna said in the name of Shemuel, “It was concerning this matter that Yoshiyahu tore his garments and said, ‘It is incumbent upon me to uphold.’” Rabbi Asi says in the name of Rabbi Tanchum bar Chiya: “One may study the Torah, teach it to others, observe and perform its *mitzvot;* nevertheless, if one has the capacity to strengthen it among the public and does not do so, he is also included in this curse.”

The Ramban continues by explaining the ramifications of his understanding.

The Sages thus expound the verse’s reference to upholding the Torah as binding upon the royal house or the princes, who have within their power to uphold and enforce the observance of Torah against the wicked who nullify it. Even if one is a perfectly righteous person in his own deeds, but he has the ability to strengthen the observance of Torah against the wicked who nullify it and does not do so, he is cursed.

Though the Ramban limits the scope to powerful community leaders, such as King Yoshiyahu (see I*I Melakhim* 22:11, *II Divrei Hayamim* 34:19), the last opinion in the Yerushalmi would actually seem to include anyone who is able to do so. There is keeping the Torah, which is extremely important, but there is still a curse for one who doesn't "uphold the words of this Torah” by helping others observe them.

The Chafetz Chayim understands that anyone who occupies a position in which one may help others has already accepted the obligation to do so with the force of a blessing and a curse. Obviously, the tremendous potential blessing should be an equal, if not greater, impetus than the curse designated for one who fails to live up to this promise.

**A Time for Action**

An understanding of the importance of fulfilling these various *mitzvot* and responsibilities, one may often wonder why indeed it seems that many fail to live up to these obligations. The most basic reason for lackadaisical observance of *kiruv* is the mindset that one is not fit to take part in this endeavor. Clearly, one must be cognizant of the possible dangers of negative influence (see *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu*, Vol. I, “The Influence of One's Surrounding”). However, there are other reasons given as well.

The Chafetz Chayim uses an analogy to address this question, one of a small town on fire. All the citizens run to the local water source, forming a bucket brigade to extinguish the fire. One man goes into hiding and doesn't involve himself. When confronted afterwards, he explains that he is not a trained fireman, and the public should rely on professionals. His neighbors respond: “When there is a contained fire, then we can rely on the firemen, but when the entire town is burning, everyone must take action.”

This is the view of the Chafetz Chayim, writing at the beginning of the 20th century, before the assimilation that is so common in our day became rampant. He felt that the whole town was burning; can anyone familiar with the modern statistics state otherwise?

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, in a seminal and passionate speech (available at: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/purim/silent.htm>), questions whether those who are not involved in this endeavor are indeed dubious of their ability to be helpful or are rather less concerned than they should be. He cites the Purim story in the Scroll of Esther, in which Mordekhai informs Queen Esther of the impending decree regarding the annihilation of the Jewish people. Esther seems to be more concerned with Mordekhai’s appearance than the plight of her people. She is understandably afraid to approach the king to try to avert the decree, as approaching the throne room without invitation is a capital crime. Mordekhai seems to ignore this, accusing her of the most cowardly weakness due to lack of concern.

“Do not imagine that you will escape in the royal palace from all the Jews. For if you will remain silent at this time, relief and salvation will arise for the Jews from somewhere else, and you and your father's house will perish. Who knows, perhaps for the sake of a time like this you came to join the royalty?" (4:14).

Rav Lichtenstein explains the gravity of Mordekhai's accusation.

Behind the apparent timidity lies apathy. If you really cared, if you considered your own soul to be at stake, would you be able to say, "For a whole month I have not been called to the king"? Is this how someone talks when she believes that her nation is in danger? Is this the response of someone who cares?

Someone who really cares, someone whose consciousness is deeply rooted in the collective experience of *Am Yisrael*, someone whose destiny is bound up with that of the nation, disregards any consideration of danger or possible anger on the part of the king. In fact, such a person doesn't even have to disregard these thoughts - they don't even enter her mind. Such considerations arise, whether consciously or subconsciously, out of a perception that everyone else may perish, but I will manage to save my own skin.

In the Scroll of Esther, there is a happy ending. Queen Esther takes Mordekhai's words to heart and puts her life on the line to save the Jewish people. That is the turning point of the book, and the "young, passive, powerless Esther faces her moment of truth, and she prevails. She passes the test. And it is now that she rises to her full height and reveals herself- not just in title, but in essence - as Queen Esther."

Rav Lichtenstein describes powerfully this message and then questions whether our modern predicament is any different:

Such was Esther's redemption then. And the same applies to us today. We are all, to some degree, Esther. Each of us, for whatever reason, has doubts as to his ability to accomplish. We, too, are hesitant: "What, we're going to achieve all that? We're going to save *Am Yisrael*? I'm going to put a stop to assimilation? Little me? I'm just a youngster; I can achieve only little: a little bit in my neighborhood, a little bit in a youth group, a little bit in the family. But to start a revolution? To determine the future of a nation? To avert an evil decree? Little me?"

…Today too, everyone knows that *Am Yisrael* is in grave danger. There is danger of assimilation, danger of mixed marriages, danger of people losing their way, danger of being cut off from roots and values. Can it be that only you can't see it? As if this information is hidden somewhere? Is there any difficulty involved in obtaining the statistics on Jewish education in Israel and in the diaspora? Someone who cares enough can get his hands on the figures: sixty percent of Jews in the diaspora are being lost! And the situation here in Israel is nothing to be excited about. A person is quite capable of finding out, if he's interested enough, the number of students who "drop out" of the national-religious system!

…This is the real question. If you understand the situation - and there is no reason or excuse not to - then you hear the cry that emanates from every part of the country, from every corner of the globe, expressed in the spiritual dangers surrounding us and threatening us on every side. Someone who cares knows what is going on, and once he knows he must ask himself: What significance does this knowledge have for me? To what extent does it cause me pain? To what extent do I identify with world Jewry, in fasting and prayer? To what extent is my spiritual world structured such that *Knesset Yisrael* and its dangers are on one side and I, with my considerations and private plans, am on the other?

Like Esther, we will all have to ask ourselves the question when the time comes… What will be our answer then? More importantly, what is our answer today?

**Reflected Light**

Though the contemporary need to act must be desperately felt by every Jew, one who attempts to reach out may become dejected if these attempts fail to yield apparent results.

There are those who recognize the importance of this endeavor but are turned off by failure, feeling that they have not done any good, that their words have been rejected or dismissed. In truth, while this mindset is understandable, it is often unjustified. One never knows when his or her words may impact another; moreover, these words may impact the speaker, without his or her notice.

Two Chasidic teachings may help us deal with this form of discouragement. First is the teaching regarding the beginning of *Shema*. The Torah (*Devarim* 6:6) states: “And these matters shall be on (*al*) your heart." “On your heart” seems to be an odd choice of phrasing; why not the more intimate “in your heart”? The Chasidic masters explain that essentially, all a teacher can hope to accomplish is to let his words reach the surface of the heart, as it were. They may be met with fierce opposition, and the words may not succeed in penetrating the heart. However, by putting the words on one’s heart, one ensures that the second something happens which causes the heart to open, the words will be right there to enter immediately.

Secondly, there is also a great benefit in speaking to others about deep spiritual concepts with the aim of influencing them. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov writes (*Likkutei Moharan* 184):

When people speak about religion, both direct light and reflected light are generated. When you discuss Godliness with a friend, the information that he receives from you is direct light. What you gain (from your own words) through him is reflected light.

Sometimes you can speak to a person about Godliness, and your words aren't accepted. Still, you yourself can be motivated by your own words. Your words literally bounce off from your friend, and are reflected to you. This is very much like a rubber ball. The reason why a ball bounces from a stone wall is because it cannot penetrate it. Similarly, when the other person refuses to accept what you tell him, your words are reflected to you. You yourself can then be influenced by your own words. These same words may not have had any effect at all on you if you had spoken them to yourself. But when you express them to someone else, and he is not influenced, they are reflected to you. You can then be motivated by your own words.

As a person who is the child of two *baalei teshuva*, two individuals who were influenced by *kiruv rechokim*, I can attest to you that a few nice, caring words offered by individuals who were reaching out helped bring about a transformation in my parents’ lives, in turn setting the stage for this little lesson being written today. Thank you!