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 #29: “*Ve-ahavta Le-reiakha Kamokha*” II *–* Putting the Needs of Others First**

In last week’s lesson, we started to see the importance of the mitzva “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha*,” “You shall love your fellow as yourself*,”* the obligation to love one’s fellow Jew. The language of the verse defines this commandment with extreme parameters: to love another as oneself.

The significance of this mitzva is evident in Rabbi Akiva’s determination that this mitzva is “a great principle of the Torah.” In fact, a number of sources suggest that one should accept this mitzva upon himself daily before praying, in order to connect one’s prayers to the needs of the community (*Shaarei Teshuva, Shaar Ha-avoda*)*.*

The mitzva’s formulation is an unlimited call to care for the Jewish people, but the literal definition of this mitzva poses a challenge, as it would seem to require an emotional feeling of love for others equal to oneself. How can one understand this emotional obligation? Secondly, the obligation seems to be excessive: can one really love another as oneself?

Last week, we saw how this second question leads the Ramban to explain this mitzva as a call for one to desire whatever he would want for himself for others as well, rather than love others as himself; the latter, the Rambam maintains, is humanly impossible, for no one can love another as he loves himself. The Ramchal, on the other hand, feels that the obligation to love another Jew as oneself is to be taken “*mammash*,” literally.

In order to understand how one may strike a balance between one’s own needs and the needs of others, we must take other sources into account. These sources provides a different picture of the obligation to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

**Your Life Comes First**

One certainly can understand that the obligations of this mitzva direct one to pray for others’ wellbeing, to teach Torah to others, to prevent others’ harm and various additional obligations. The question is the following: does it require one to give up his limited resources in order to provide for others what he has, even if doing so would require him to restrict his lifestyle? Even if one must love another as oneself, must he provide for others’ needs the same way in which he provides for his own?

In fact, there is an explicit source that addresses this issue. Aside from the obligation of “*Ve-ahavta,”* there is another verse which places one’s own needs above those of others. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 62a) deals with an existential moral dilemma of two people in the desert with a flask containing enough water for only one of them:

Two people are travelling along the way, and one of them has in his possession a flask of water. If both drink from it, they will both die. However, if only one of them drinks, he will be able to make it out of the desert.

Ben Petura expounded, “It is better that both should drink and die that that one should witness the death of his fellow.”

Then Rabbi Akiva came and taught, “‘Your brother shall live with you’ (*Vayikra* 25:36) — your life comes first, before the life of your friend.

Rabbi Akiva’s understands the verse as indicating one’s own life takes precedence, and therefore one should drink the water, even if his doing so will allow himself to live and the other individual to die. The exact parameters of this law are complex (see *Iggerot Moshe, YD* 145, and the Chazon Ish, *YD* 69:2) but the basic principle is of utmost importance: one’s own life takes precedence over that of others.

What is even more astounding is that this is Rabbi Akiva talking, the same one who teaches us the importance of “*Ve-ahavta”* as “a great principle of the Torah” is the same one who gives precedence to man’s own needs. Which one is it? Is one obligated to treat others as equal to himself completely, as the “great principle” would seem to indicate, or should one give precedence to one’s own needs and only then deal with others’ needs?

As we saw last week, some commentators use this as a proof-text for their definition of “*Ve-ahavta”* as a call to care for others’ needs but not to provide for them, because no one can in fact provide for others as themselves.

A striking passage in the Talmud also discusses putting one’s own needs first, but takes it far beyond the case of two men in the desert; instead, the passage examines the case of two cities and a spring which provides enough water for only one of them:

A spring belongs to the residents of the city, so if it comes to their lives against the lives of others, their lives come first, before the lives of others. (*Nedarim* 80b)

This initial statement is understandable; however, the conclusion is startling:

If they must choose between their own animals and the animals of others, their own animals come first, before the animals of others.

If they must choose between their own laundering and the laundering of others, their own laundering comes first, before the laundering of others

If, however, they must choose between the lives of others and their own laundering, the lives of others come first, before their own laundering. However, Rabbi Yosei says that their own laundering comes first, before the lives of others.

Though it is understandable that one’s own animals are given precedence over those of others, Rabbi Yosei’s opinion gives precedence to the upper city’s laundering needs before the drinking needs of the second city — which is mindboggling. Despite the continuation of the passage, which discusses the importance of hygiene, in turn giving significance to laundering needs, the opinion seems extreme: can one’s laundering needs actually take precedence over another community’s basic needs of hydration? (In fact, while the simple understanding of the Talmud would indicate that one city’s laundering water takes precedence over another community’s drinking water, the law is more complicated; see *Mishpetei Shalom* 13:10-11 and notes *ad loc*.)

In a slightly different context, the Talmud defines one’s obligation to others as taking a backseat to the license to fulfill one’s own needs. Regarding the mitzva of *tzedaka,* charity, we find similar sources that would indicate that one’s providing for others should be done in ways that do not jeopardize one’s social standing.

The Talmud (*Ketubot* 50a) states:

In Usha they enacted: One who bestows money should not bestow more than a fifth… lest he become dependent on other people for his support.

Again, an analysis of the mitzva of *tzedaka* will provide the halakhic guidelines for this law (see, for instance, *Ketubot* 67a), but the simple understanding is very straightforward: one should not, and might not even be allowed to, be overly generous in ways that may hurt his ability to provide for himself.

If we return to the question we started with, these sources provide a clear ruling that only reiterates the original problem in a different form. If all of these sources state that one’s own needs take precedence, at some points even in what seems to be a selfish manner, then what does it mean that one should love others as himself?

**The Rambam’s Opinion**

In last week’s lesson, we saw that a simple reading of the Rambam indicates that one must in fact love others as himself. There are those who bring support to this assertion from the way in which the Rambam addresses the various sources brought above that seem to indicate otherwise.

The Rambam does not codify the law of two individuals walking in the desert, nor does he codify the law regarding an upper and lower city sharing a river. This leads certain commentators to conclude that the Rambam rules against Rabbi Akiva’s statement that one’s life takes precedence over another’s. There is good reason to doubt that this is in fact the Rambam’s position, as Rav Moshe Feinstein rejects this understanding completely (see *Iggerot Moshe,* YD 1:145). Nevertheless, even if we accept that the Rambam does not embrace this ruling, the question returns to Rabbi Akiva: how can the same sage who makes “*Ve-ahavta*” the core principle of Judaism rule that one is to give precedence to his own needs over those others?

A second look at the verse might provide some information regarding this issue. As we saw in the previous lesson, a number of commentators discuss the unique formulation of the verse of “*Ve-ahavta”*: why is the language of the commandment “*le-reiakha”* (with the prefix *lamed,* which normally indicates an indirect object) instead of “*et reiakha*," the formulation found regarding the obligation to love God (*Devarim* 6:5)? The Hadar Zekenim (*Vayikra* 19:18) explains this in the following way:

If it had written “*reiakha*” without the *lamed*, I would have understood that God commands man to give to his fellow his own money and all of his possessions until they are equal. Therefore, it says “*le*-*reiakha*”, meaning: “Love that which your friend has” — i.e., do not take from him without permission, et cetera.

The Hadar Zekenim explains that the purpose of the verse is to ensure that one does not have to create parity with his friends. One must love his neighbor, certainly, but not exactly as one takes care of oneself. If this is true, then even the “great principle” puts one’s love of others behind one’s love of oneself.

**The Chatam Sofer and Rav Moshe Feinstein on Spiritual Responsibilities**

Notwithstanding the difficulties involved in understanding the requirement to care for other’s needs as opposed to giving precedence to one’s own needs, the Chatam Sofer (*Torat Moshe* 84, s.v. *Ve-ahavta*) deals with the contradiction between the two statements of Rabbi Akiva and explains:

Rabbi Akiva states that “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* is “a great principle of the Torah.” Yet it is Rabbi Akiva who also states explicitly that preserving one’s own life always takes precedence over the lives of others! Clearly, this verse cannot be referring to a situation wherein a person if facing physical danger along with his fellow. If so, how may one accomplish loving one’s neighbor as himself?

One must explain that “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* is referring to spiritual matters and “Your life comes first”to physical matters. Regarding physical matters, matters of this world, one’s own needs take precedence, but regarding the eternally important matters of learning Torah (and spiritual pursuits), one is obligated to love and study with others, even if it will cause him to accomplish less. It is regarding this that Rabbi Akiva teaches, “This is a great principle of the Torah,” because regarding Torah study, this is a great principle, directing one to learn with others even if one could achieve more on his own.

The Chatam Sofer concludes in parentheses:

Of course such altruism is hardly in vain. The Torah emphasizes “*kamokha” —* by loving one’s fellow and studying Torah with him, one will benefit just as the other does. The mitzva of teaching Torah (whereby one gains as well) is adequate compensation for any neglect of personal study that occurs as a result of learning with another. “*Kamokha”* refers to the fact that both individuals gain.

Furthermore, his son and student, Rav Shimon Sofer (in *Pittuchei Chotam,* the introduction to *Responsa Chatam Sofer, YD*), expresses the greatness of Avraham Avinu in this fashion:

In truth, even before him there were unique individuals who knew God and desired knowledge of His ways. Who was greater than Chanokh? …and 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.

While the Chatam Sofer certainly views the will of God as demanding that one give of himself spiritually in order to help others, Rav Moshe Feinstein takes issue with this teaching of the Chatam Sofer in a responsum (*EH* 4:26). Rav Moshe brings a series of proofs establishing that there is no distinction between physical matters and spiritual matters regarding the question of who takes precedence. In fact, he proves that in spiritual matters and issues related to Torah study, it is most important to make decisions based on one’s personal needs, even if it comes at the expense of others.

It is clear that regarding Torah study, the individual himself takes precedence over others, considerably more than regarding *tzedaka*. Regarding *tzedaka*, it is clear that only his bread comes before other’s bread, but if he lacks meat and his friend has no bread, he must provide bread for others instead of providing meat for himself… Regarding physical matters, there is no prohibition to provide for others in place of one’s own needs. However, regarding Torah, it is forbidden to give precedence to others’ learning in place of his.

However, Rav Moshe Feinstein continues that even though he disagrees with the Chatam Sofer and says that one must give precedence to one’s own spiritual development, there is one caveat.

Still, I have ruled that every scholar, even though he is still involved in his own personal growth, must take some of his time to teach others, even if it will limit his spiritual growth… and it seems to me that this should probably be a tenth of his time, like the tithing obligation of *tzedaka*, though possibly if one wishes, one can expand this until a fifth of his time, but I am not convinced regarding the actual amount of time.

Rav Moshe Feinstein further clarifies his understanding (*YD* 1:145) when he explains that the meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s statement “Your life comes first” is that one has no obligation to provide for others before one’s own needs are met. Only after one has fulfilled his own needs is one then obligated to provide for others.

The one question which remains is how to define the fulfillment of one’s needs. At what point can one say that his basic needs have been met and his *tzedaka* obligation to provide for others has begun? This may be part of the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Petura as well as the discussion of the upper and lower cities on the river. At what point is one considered to have taken care of the needs of one’s own life so that the obligation of loving one’s fellow may begin?

**“No Poor among You”**

In order to understand the upshot of the Torah’s directive for balancing one’s needs against the needs of others, we must find the source of the Torah’s giving precedence to one’s personal needs.

Rav Yitzchak Berkowitz (*Ahavat Rei’im*, recording) identifies a source for the obligation and the parameters of one’s responsibility for one’s own needs before taking care of others. The Mishna (*Bava Metzia* 33a) states:

If one spots his own lost object and his father’s lost object, retrieving his own lost object takes precedence over his father’s… and over his teacher’s…

The Talmud brings the source for this surprising ruling that one’s own lost object takes precedence over others:

From where is this ruling derived? Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “The verse states ‘There shall be no poor among you’ (*Devarim* 15:4) — this teaches that your concerns take precedence over those of everyone else.”

In fact, Rav Moshe Feinstein (*loc. cit.)* proves from here that the Rambam, who codifies the responsibility to give precedence to one’s own lost object, essentially rules that one’s own needs take precedence, for it is the same law.

However, the Talmud continues that while this is the letter of the law, living a life of constant preference for one’s needs over others’ will boomerang and cause difficulties.

But Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “Although one has the right to give greater weight to his own financial concerns than to others’, whoever establishes such a way of life will, in the end, come to endure the very poverty he seeks to avoid.”

While the context of the Talmudic passage is monetary loss, requiring one to protect himself from poverty and financial loss, the same would apply to not taking care of any of our personal needs. Rav Berkowitz explains that the Talmud is in fact telling us that man has a responsibility not to impoverish himself. For this reason, the focus is on one’s attitude. Rabbi Akiva requires a verse in order to derive the principle of surviving in the desert at the expense of another’s death, because in fact one should care for others the way one cares about oneself. This indicates that one’s own needs do not always take precedence over the needs of the other, whom one loves. Man has the responsibility to ensure that all of his caring for others does not bring him to the point at which he forgets himself.

Thus, in certain circumstances, one’s personal needs take precedence because one has a responsibility not to make oneself poor. This is not an expression of caring for oneself more, but of the greater obligation to maintain one’s own mind and body over those of another, as God gave them to one as a sacred trust.

Similarly, regarding *tzedaka*, one’s responsibility is first towards one’s relatives before others. However, a man’s closest relative is himself, and he is his chief responsibility. One does not make a living for others but for himself, not because one cares about others less, but because one has a responsibility to provide for oneself and cannot overlook his own needs.

Though there is a responsibility to ensure that one does not become poor, the Talmud also expresses that living by this rule only is even more dangerous. Someone who is always involved in his particular needs and therefore unable to find time to help others has thrown off the yoke of *chesed*, and he will be punished ultimately by needing to rely on others.

What determines whether one is fulfilling or overdoing his personal responsibility is determined by whether helping others takes its toll on one’s own health or not. If one makes himself needy, then one is in violation of the responsibility to oneself, and that is not altruistic but self-destructive. One cannot be a *baal chesed* at the expense of himself and his family, and for that reason one must be honest with oneself about meeting all personal needs before expressing one’s love for others.

**The Importance of Loving Oneself**

While one might view the Torah’s stress on taking care of one’s own needs as undermining true caring for others, the opposite may in fact be the case. God has created man in a way that he cannot be fully altruistic, but by expanding his understanding of his own identity and that which is important to him, his “self-love” can be the guiding principle that brings him to care for others. Rav Shimon Shkop develops this idea in his seminal introduction to *Shaarei Yosher* (see lesson #21). He explains that in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 90:2), God states that “My holiness is higher than your holiness” to impress upon man that, unlike God, he cannot be totally altruistic; his caring for himself is necessary to allow him to truly care for others.

However, what of a person who decides to suppress his nature, to reach a high level, so that he has no thought or inclination in his soul for his own good, only a desire for the good of others? In this way, he would achieve his desire of reaching the sanctity of the Creator, as His Desire in all of the creation and management of the world is only for the good of the created, and not for Himself at all. At first glance, one might say that if a person reaches this level, he would reach the epitome of being whole. But this is why our Sages of blessed memory teach us, in this Midrashic passage, that it is not so. We cannot try to emulate His Holiness in this respect.

This is because His Holiness is greater than ours. His Holiness is only for the created and not for Himself, because nothing has ever been added to or could ever be added to the Creator through the actions He has done or is doing. Therefore, the entirety of His Desire can only be to be good to the created; however, this is not what He wants from us. As Rabbi Akiva taught us, “Your life comes first.” [Our Sages] left us a hint of it when they interpret the scripture “You shall love your fellow as yourself” in a negative sense: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your peers.” In terms of the obligation, it is fitting for a person to place his own good first.

There are also grounds for asserting that in the very foundation of the creation of Adam, the Creator planted in him a very great measure of propensity to love himself. The Sages of truth describe the purpose of all the work in this language, “The Infinite wanted to bestow complete good, in which there would not even be the embarrassment of receiving.” This notion reveals how far the power of loving oneself goes…

In my opinion, this is true despite all the evil and sin that the world is full of because of this trait of self-love. Added to the challenge of wealth, this trait will cause one to stumble into the depths, as it is written, “Lest I grow full and deny” (*Mishlei* 30:9)…

Although at first glance it seems that feelings of love for oneself and feelings of love for others are like competing sister-wives to each other, we have the duty to try to delve into it, to find the means to unite them, since God expects both from us. This means that one must explain and accept the truth of the quality of his “I”, for with it the statures of people are differentiated, each according to their level.

The entire “I” of a coarse and lowly person is restricted only to his substance and body. Above him is someone who feels that his “I” is a synthesis of body and soul. And above him is someone who can include in his “I” all of his household and family. Someone who walks according to the way of the Torah, his “I” includes the whole Jewish people, since in truth every Jewish person is only like a limb of the body of the nation of Israel. And there are more levels in this of a person who is whole, who can connect his soul to feel that all of the world and the worlds are his “I”, and he himself is only one small limb in all of creation. Then, his self-love helps him love all of the Jewish people and all of creation.

It is may be for this reason that one’s own needs take precedence. Only one who truly cares about himself will be able to provide for others.

In next week’s lesson, we will identify the connection between the obligation to “love your fellow” and the obligation to provide for the needs of the community. An analysis of this topic will help us define the parameters of weighing one’s own needs against the needs of others.