YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

For easy printing, go to:

[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero2/30chavero.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero2/30chavero.htm)

**Shiur #30: The Positive Aspects of Vengeance**

In our last lesson, we examined the prohibition of *nekima*, taking revenge. We noted that the Talmud presents an opinion accepted by a majority of commentators that the prohibition is limited to cases of monetary damage and does not include personal insult. Despite this explicit limitation, the Chafetz Chayim concludes that one should not be lenient. We concluded the lesson with a presentation of the Yad Ha-ketana's understanding. He points out some of the instances of permitted *nekima* and limits the prohibition to responses to uncomfortable acts which are not outright prohibited. Notwithstanding the exceptions to the prohibition and those who seek to limit its application, the overwhelming conclusion is that *nekima* is a bad thing, though at times it may be permitted as a necessary evil.

However, other sources seem to have a permissive attitude towards *nekima*, some even defining it as a Godly trait.

**The Revenge of a *Talmid Chakham***

Last week, we referred to the following passage (*Yoma* 22b-23a):

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: "Any Torah scholar who does not avenge himself and bear a grudge like a serpent is no true scholar." But surely it is written: "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge"! That prohibition refers only to monetary affairs… And not personal grievance? But it has been taught: “They may be humiliated, but they do not humiliate; they may hear their disgrace, but they do not reply; they act out of love and rejoice amidst suffering. Of them, Scripture says (*Shofetim* 5:31): ‘But they that love Him are like the sun rising in its might.’”

Thus, the Talmud explicitly states that in certain situations taking revenge and bearing a grudge may be viewed in a positive light. Though in instances of personal insult a scholar has the right to take revenge, it is proper to be forbearing if the other individual asks for forgiveness. If not, one may wreak vengeance like a serpent, until the other is ready to ask for forgiveness.

The Rambam does not mention this exception to the rule in his discussion of the prohibition of *nekima* (*Hilkhot De'ot* 7:7-8), but he does mention it in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (7:13) as part of the mitzva of giving honor to Torah scholars. Nevertheless, the Rambam seems to try to limit its application:

Even though a Torah sage may place a person under a ban of ostracism for his honor, it is not praiseworthy to become used to this practice. Instead, he should turn his ears from the words of the common people and not pay attention to them, as Shelomo wisely said (*Kohelet* 7:21) “Also, do not pay heed to all the words that are spoken.”

This was the practice of the pious of former generations. They would hear their shame and not answer; furthermore, they would pardon and forgive whoever insulted them. The great sages would take pride in their pleasant deeds, stating that they never issued a ban of ostracism or excommunication for their honor. This is the admirable path of the sages.

The above applies when the spurning or shaming occurs in private. However, if one spurns or embarrasses a sage in public, it is forbidden for the sage to forgo his honor. Indeed, if he does so, he is punished, because disrespect of the Torah is involved. Instead, he should seek vengeance and maintain enmity over the matter like a serpent until the offender requests to be pardoned. Then, he should forgive him.

Similarly, the Semag (Negative 12) rules that a scholar is required to take revenge if embarrassed publicly; an ordinary individual is permitted to do so, but it is not recommended.

With regards to regular individuals who are not scholars who quarrel with their friends, even though there is no prohibition against taking revenge in this case, nevertheless it is a pious attribute to forgo the right to take revenge, as the Talmud (*Yoma* 23a) says that one who forgoes the right to retribution is cleared of all his sins.

**In the Heat of a Fight**

Commentators point to a second exception: during the heat of an attack. In this case, the *Chinnukh* (338) writes:

We can learn this point, that we are permitted to respond to a fool, as the Torah permits us, when someone comes stealthily breaking in, to act first and kill him. For there can be no doubt that one is not obligated to endure injuries from the hand of his fellow; rather, he has the right to save himself from the other's hand. Likewise, [he may save himself] from the words of the other's mouth, filled with cunning and deceit, by any means through which he may rescue himself.

Nevertheless, there is a certain group of people whose kindly piety is of such a high degree that they would not wish to accept this ruling for themselves, to answer their calumniators any word, for fear that anger may overcome them, and they might unburden themselves unduly in the situation. Of them the Sages of blessed memory said: "They may be humiliated, but they do not humiliate…”

This idea is backed by the Chafetz Chayim (Introduction, Negative 8-9):

It is correct reasoning that at the moment when one is being insulted it is beyond the capabilities of human nature to be as an immovable rock if one is not among those whom God has blessed with unusually holy traits, as the Chinnukh writes. However, after his initial anger subsides, the Torah prohibits him to arouse this anger by taking revenge or even by bearing a grudge, rather, after a short time has passed since the incident, he should remove its memory from his heart.

The cases in which one is permitted to take *nekima* do not present a new outlook on *nekima* as a whole; they are still limited in practice, as we are told that one should ideally avoid vengeance. Still, as the Yad Ha-ketana notes, there are numerous *mitzvot* which are seemingly aimed at exacting revenge from the perpetrator. Moreover, some verses in Tanakh speak of vengefulness as not only a positive attribute, but an essential part of God's character. For example, Nachum opens his book with the declaration (1:2):

God is a zealous and avenging God. God is avenging and is full of wrath. He takes revenge on His adversaries and bears a grudge towards His enemies.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 33a) posits that whatever is mentioned in between two names of God is commendable. If so, asks the Talmud:

Shall we say that revenge is great, as it appears between two divine names, "A God of vengeance is God" (*Tehillim* 94:1)? Rav Elazar responded: "Indeed, where revenge is necessary, it is a great thing."

This idea that the vengeance is great indicates that the simple understanding of revenge as a cruel tool completely antithetical to the Torah's philosophy is in fact incorrect. As the Talmud indicates, *nekima* has its place; though it is not to be used all times, when called for, it is in fact great. Why would that be?

Turning to the Torah itself, we find an interesting passage towards the end of Bamidbar (31:1-3), where the Jews are told to avenge an injustice.

God spoke to Moshe, saying: "Wreak the Israelites’ vengeance upon the Midianites; after, you shall be gathered to your people." So Moshe spoke to the people, saying, "Equip from your midst men for the army, and they will be upon Midian to put God’s vengeance upon Midian.”

The Sifrei (*Mattot* 157) comments that Moshe's mention of the revenge being on behalf of God, even though God Himself speaks of it as being “the Israelites’ vengeance,” is actually an expression of his greatness:

This is in praise of the righteous, who do not depart this world until they take vengeance on behalf of Israel; this is the vengeance of He Who brought the world into being.

Here, the Midrash seems to laud one of Moshe's final acts in this world as an act of revenge. How can it be considered an act of the righteous? Isn’t it prohibited? Furthermore, the same passage explains the change in language of God's command and that of Moshe based upon the relationship of God and the Jewish people. God views the honor of the Jewish people as akin to His honor, and vice versa. The Sifrei thus explains that Moshe told the Jewish people:

This is not the vengeance of flesh and blood, but of He Who brought the world into being, as it says, "God is a zealous and avenging God."

So is vengefulness a positive thing or not?

One option is to say that *nekima* is a positive act when associated with God. God needs to use revenge at some times to maintain justice in society, to teach the world that crime doesn't pay. Man, when commanded by God as Moshe was, may use revenge, but otherwise it is off-limits. But why is this so? After all, we are commanded to model ourselves after God, and if God acts with vengeance as a righteous act of justice, why shouldn't we do the same with anyone who acts unjustly towards us?

The Chizkuni (*Vayikra* 19:18) addresses this issue and explains the distinction based on a fundamental difference between man and God:

“You shall not take vengeance” — for anger will overpower you; God, however, is able of controlling His anger…

Essentially, the Chizkuni seems to be indicating that were we able to control our anger and limit our revenge to what is necessary we would be capable of emulating God in this regard.

The Maharal explains that it is only in terms of acts of kindness that the mitzva of walking in God's ways is applicable, not regarding *nekima* or the like.

To better understand the positive aspects of vengeance, as employed at times by God, and how it impacts our understanding of the prohibition, we must analyze the story of King David and Shimi ben Gera.

In last week's lesson we saw the rationale of the Chinnukh (Mitzva 241) as to why vengeance is forbidden:

At the root of the precept lies the purpose that a man should know and reflect that whatever happens to him, good or bad, is caused to him by God; nothing which happens to man by any person or by a brother can occur without God willing it so. Therefore, should another inflict pain or suffering on him, let him know in his soul that his bad deeds have caused God to will this result upon him, and let him not set his thoughts to take revenge from him. Indeed, the perpetrator is not the primary cause of his trouble, since it is God that brought it about. Thus, King David said, "So let him curse, for God has told him" (II *Shemuel* 16:10); David attributed the matter to [his own] sin, not to Shimi ben Gera.

Thus, David recognizes as he flees across the Jordan that he is ultimately to blame for the sad turn of events; Shimi is merely an instrument of God’s vengeance. Nevertheless, David’s final words, addressed to his young son Shelomo, are the following (I *Melakhim* 2:8-9):

“Behold, there is with you Shimi son of Gera, the Benjamite, of Bachurim, who cursed me with a grievous curse on the day when I went to Machanayim; but he came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by God, saying, ‘I will not put you to death by the sword.’ Now therefore hold him not guiltless, for you are a wise man; and you will know what you ought to do unto him, and you shall bring his agedness down to the netherworld in blood.”

David’s final words order Shelomo to take revenge on those who wronged him, even though the end of one’s life is usually a time when people make amends and forgive others, rediscovering brotherhood and comity. Why does David choose to act quite differently? David’s last will and testament is nothing short of glaringly perplexing.

Immediately after, in the next verse (10), we read about King David's death:

David slept with his fathers, and he was buried in the city of David.

In truth, David’s last will speaks of two different forms of retribution. One is rewarding the children of Barzillai the Gileadite (who supported him in his final flight), while the other is administering justice to his nephew Yoav and to Shimi.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (*Sichos Mussar: Reb Chaim’s Discourses,* Mesorah Publications) dedicates an entire lecture to the theme of “great is vengeance,” explaining that we are only perplexed by David's behavior because we do not comprehend what vengeance really is, focusing merely on its simple and savage forms of lashing back at adversaries.

While King David seeks vengeance at death’s door, Rav Chaim notes, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 102b) tells us that another biblical character does so from the other side, as the spirit who deludes King Achav (see *Melakhim* I 22:19-21) is the spirit of the murdered Navot, seeking revenge. Evidently, even disembodies souls may seek vengeance. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz explains that the concept of disembodies vengeance indicates that revenge is not a physical need, but a spiritual one. He states:

*Nekama* in its real form is an act of spiritual character and essence. It is a sentiment of the soul rather than a coarse reaction to the body... It is an intrinsic part of the world of the spirit, making Navot and Dovid willing messengers to carry out the requisite *nekama*; not as a private act of vendetta, which has no place in the Heavens, but rather to show the world that the wicked are eventually punished for their wrongdoings. (*Sichos Mussar*, pp. 116-118)

He adds that proper vengeance is a manifestation and realization of justice in this world. True vengeance can bring unparalleled heavenly honor, showing that there is an ultimate Judge and that justice is eventually carried out. This vengeance could essentially be carried out by anyone; however, it is usually the injured party that is the most keenly aware of the need to do so.

This element of justice makes vengeance equally applicable to reward and punishment (see *Berakhot, ibid*.) because vengeance is a means of setting the score straight, for the positive or the negative. Therefore, David at the end of his life involves himself in ensuring that justice will be served, both by making sure those who had gone unpunished in the past would now receive their due and that those who had not been properly rewarded would be rewarded.

This also explains the tremendous reward Pinechas receives for his act of zealotry, killing Zimri and Kozbi (*Bamidbar* 25). However, in order for revenge and zealotry to be positive, it must be done with the proper mindset. The sole motive for which vengeance is allowed is to allow the manifestation of Divine retribution. If the motivations for revenge include any self-interest, such as a desire for personal vengeance, one may very well be a murderer. Pinechas could therefore not ask for permission from a court (*Sanhedrin* 82a); one must be driven purely by the cause, and even so, an act of zealotryis only permitted in three instances (*ibid*. 81b).

This also explains why, for his act of revenge and violence, Pinechas is rewarded with a covenant of peace and priesthood (*Bamidbar* 25:12-13); in essence, he was not acting out of vengeance, but the same cause which defined his grandfather Aharon: loving and pursuing peace.

The basic reason for advancing a positive view of vengeance is the fallout in a world where it seems that crime pays. In such a place, God's word is trampled over and over, and those who trample seem to be living with immunity from God's law. Such a world obscures God's nature as a judge and puts pressure on those who are tempted to abandon His call. There are those who are liable to get the wrong notion and feel that God is in fact incapable of helping them. When God’s honor is avenged, this is a call to understand that He is present and He will have the last word. Elsewhere, the Ramban (*Devarim* 7:15-16) notes how misplaced mercy can actually be destructive: "Through the mercy of fools, all justice is lost." *Nekima* means using what is necessary to remind the world that God calls the shots.

**When Applicable**

If we now return to the case of King David, we can understand his final act on this planet. David leaves the world as he sets the score straight, showing the world that justice always has the final word. But why does David wait until the end of his life to act in this manner? It is David himself who refuses to punish Shimi immediately and waits until his final moments to do so. What happened to the idea of Shimi being an instrument of God?

This question leads us to the essence of vengeance*.* Both actions of David, his original refusal to take revenge and his ultimate application of it can be understood in light of the sources we have already quoted. While vengeance is great when used properly, it is almost impossible for flesh and blood, driven by passion and anger, to commit an act of vengeance completely for the sake of Heaven, without any self-interest. King David was honest with himself, and though he knew that Shimi deserved punishment for his cursing, it could not be for the personal insult but because he was cursing the anointed of God. King David therefore applied the general prohibition of vengeance and explained its rationale. When one is unable to be directed by the desire for justice, one must focus on the evil done to him as part of God's plan and not seek to exact justice from the evildoer.

Nevertheless, David, as a king, had to be cognizant of the fact that Shimi's act was not only a personal insult to him but also an act against God that might cause others to think that crimes go unpunished. Therefore, David waits until the end of his life. When he has absolutely no personal vendetta at stake and can focus on the greatness of revenge for the restoration of justice, David gives the order. At this point, King David can leave the world with an act of Godliness, achieving what the Chizkuni defines as normally impossible, a human act of divine revenge.

**The Ultimate Revenge — Positivity**

If the great King David felt incapable of exacting retribution for the proper reasons during his lifetime, we should probably be honest with ourselves and realize that we too must necessarily fall short. However, if we are not capable of real, honest revenge, what can we do?

Psychologically, taking revenge or even bearing a grudge is ultimately allowing someone else's actions to occupy one’s mind. Since vengeance is almost impossible to fulfill properly, the most positive act of revenge might actually be improving one’s character and personality. The Orechot Tzaddikim (Ch. 8) advises:

Beware of taking revenge in ways that stem from feelings of cruelty. However, if you indeed wish to take revenge on your enemies, do so by working on developing your positive attributes and follow in the path of the upright. In so doing, you will be taking revenge from your enemy, for he will be distressed when he sees your pleasant manner and your good reputation, and he will be dismayed to hear good reports about you. If, however, you take cruel steps as revenge, then your enemy will rejoice over your shame and disgrace and in so doing, he takes revenge on you.

The Torah is not oblivious to the base inner emotional cruelty in man, and therefore it seeks to replace cruel vengefulness with the opposite type of behavior. Eventually, one may replace bitter vengefulness with the sweet revenge of proper conduct and a good name. One may hope that this will actually allow the other individual to realize that positive behavior always beats out negativity.

------

This lesson is the last one for the current VBM session; with God’s help, the series will continue for its third and probably final year. We have tried to articulate the centrality of interpersonal *mitzvot* in the overall context of Judaism in a way that also expressed the depth of these *mitzvot* and themes. The various interpersonal directives not only guide our behavior; they constitute the philosophical underpinnings of a sublime, holy tradition.

These lessons have focused on developing an elevated character which is able to deal with the various trials and tribulations in life while displaying total control. At the same time, we focused on how to deal with other members of society, even when treated by them with contempt.

Fortunately, the Torah expresses its commitment to providing the guidelines for religiously-driven interpersonal perfection in numerous contexts, enabling one who decides to study the subject matter to gain indispensable knowledge in this essential enterprise. However, the volume of material has made it difficult to delve into all the interpersonal, moral and ethical issues that I might have wished to discuss.

Next year’s lessons will deal with various topics that have not been covered, from truth-telling to tale-bearing and everything in between. We will also try to find a framework and a model for inculcating these elements and those already discussed within ourselves, supporting a life of interpersonal precision with Torah-based ethics. I hope to meet you again then.

Wishing you a pleasant summer,

Binyamin Zimmerman