YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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**Shiur #30: *Osek Be-tzorkhei Tzibbur* – Caring for the Community**

In the last two lessons, we have begun to discuss the great principle of “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha*,” loving one’s fellow as oneself, and its implications for balancing one’s own needs against the needs of the community. In truth, Rabbi Akiva’s consideration of “*Ve-ahavta”* as the great principle of the Torah is not fully accepted by all. Ben Azzai, a disciple of Rabbi Akiva, claims that there is another principle which is greater. The commentators discuss these two opinions, and their explanations have tremendous ramifications regarding our outlook on personal and communal needs.

**Ben Azzai’s Great Principle**

*Torat Kohanim* (*Kedoshim* 4:12) cites this dispute:

"*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha*" — Rabbi Akiva says: “This is a great principle of the Torah.”

Ben Azzai says, “*‘Zeh sefer toledot adam’* — this is an even greater principle."

Ben Azzai is citing *Bereishit* 5:1-2:

This is the book of the generations of man. On the day that God created man, in the likeness of God He created him. Male and female He created them, and He blessed them, and he named them “Adam “on the day they were created.

At first glance, Ben Azzai’s verse appears to be very deficient. Though a few lessons ago we might not have understood how “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* is so fundamental, certainly we can understand why a verse stressing loving one’s fellow Jew is important. Ben Azzai’s verse on the other hand appears near the beginning of the Torah, as an introduction to the lineage of mankind from the dawn of creation. What is so significant about this verse?

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 24:7) explains Ben Azzai’s reasoning in a rather understandable manner. Focusing on a verse speaking about the creation of all mankind from one “Adam” crystallizes each human being’s responsibility to others.

Thus, one should not say, “Since I am scorned, I should scorn my fellow as well; since I have been cursed, I will curse my fellow as well.”

Rabbi Tanchuma says, “If you do so, you should know who are you scorning — ‘in the likeness of God He created him.’”

A similar idea is mentioned by the Da’at Zekenim (*Bereishit* 5:1) who explains that the expression “greater principle” means that this principle applies to more people, as it includes people who do not care about their own honor.

The Yerushalmi (*Nedarim* 9:4) similarly brings the dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai, and the commentators give technical explanations to Ben Azzai’s opinion. The Korban Ha-eda there (s.v*. Zeh*) explains that “*Ve-ahavta”* refers only to one’s *reia,* his fellow, while “*Zeh sefer”* includes all of mankind, as we are all descended from the same source.

The Penei Moshe (s.v*. Zeh*) explains, furthermore, that even though “*Ve-ahavta”* is a “great principle” in treating one’s fellow with love and will certainly enable one to excel in one’s interpersonal obligations, one still may fall short in their religious obligations. However, the verse concludes by focusing on the religious perspective: one must honor one’s fellow man because mistreating another is an affront to God, who created man in His image.

Therefore, Ben Azzai maintains that this principle is greater, for it includes two elements: when one is careful with another’s honor because the other was created in the divine image, certainly one will also be careful not to affront God and will be zealous in fulfilling the commandments between man and God.

The Ra’avan (*She’elot U-teshuvot* 37) adds another beautiful layer while explaining the dispute:

It seems to me that this is the explanation: Ben Azzai expounds “*Zeh sefer toledot adam”* means that one should love his fellows as if they are his generations, his children. However, Rabbi Akiva says that every individual should love his fellow as if his fellow is himself.

This, in fact, is the dispute. Ben Azzai maintains that an individual loves his children more than he loves himself, while Rabbi Akiva says that one loves himself more than he loves his children.

According to the Ra’avan*,* there is not really a fundamental disagreement here. Both sages agree that one should love his fellow to the greatest degree possible. There is only a small disagreement as to the maximal capability of love.

These explanations present Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai as agreeing on the broader issues, with a minor disagreement regarding which verse better expresses the overarching principle. However, other commentators see Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai as disagreeing on a more fundamental level.

The Malbim (*Vayikra 8*) explains that philosophers constantly express the desire for an all-inclusive code of moral conduct, and this understanding lies at the heart of the dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai. The Malbim understands the mitzva of “*Ve-ahavta”* as a call to treat others in the same manner that one would want to be treated by others, similar to the dictum of Hillel (*Shabbat 31a*, see lesson #28). Rabbi Akiva’s identification of this verse as "a great principle of the Torah" proclaims that the Torah's ethical code requires that any action or trait is to be assessed by determining whether or not one would like all people to act in this way. The basic code of ethics, according to Rabbi Akiva, demands that one act personally in a manner which he perceives as the desired universal mode of conduct. A person acts unethically if he acts in a way which he would never want to become the universal norm. Therefore, acting in a manner where one treats others as he would want to be treated is the “great principle” that Rabbi Akiva teaches us that the Torah endorses.

Ben Azzai, on the other hand, the Malbim explains, maintains that this principle is still deficient because one is not acting out of noble motives; rather, his ethical standard is a self-serving one. If ethical conduct is based solely upon one's wishes for a universal standard, then ultimately, one’s concept of ethics is dictated by one’s own interests. The ideal approach, according to Ben Azzai, would be that one care for the needs and well-being of others for their own sake, not out of concern for one's own long-term interests. Therefore, Ben Azzai points to the verse "This is the book of the generations of man" as representing the essential basis of Jewish ethics. Ben Azzai views this verse as defining all of mankind as one being, a single entity that originates from the same source. All of mankind is created in the likeness of God; collectively, all people express the likeness of God, which unites all souls as if they are one being, similar to a human body being composed of various organs. The Malbim goes on to explain how Ben Azzai’s fundamental tenet of Jewish ethics is built on the view that all mankind is bound together into a single entity, and therefore one cannot imagine treating others differently than one would treat oneself, because all are bound as one.

One might add to the understanding of the Malbim that one who realizes that he is a part of one whole can in fact act like Rabbi Akiva and treat others as he would want himself treated, because one’s approach is not self-serving; his self includes the community as a whole.

The Alter of Slabodka is quoted as stating, “The greatest *chesed* you can do is towards yourself.” However, this outlook has its dangers. Ben Azzai’s view, focusing on needs shared with others and not viewing all of society through the eyes of one’s own needs, serves as a means of preventing the development of *anokhiyut*, self-absorption.

Rav S. R. Hirsch (*Bereishit* 5:1-2) explains the fundamental importance of these two verses while formulating the outlook that man must have regarding Creation in order to succeed in life.

This verse, which introduces a new phase in the history of man’s education, bears a marked resemblance to the verse (2:4) which introduced the history of the world’s development. That verse explains that all the phenomena after creation are the natural products of heaven and earth, as they all originate “*bi-hibaram,*” “when they were created,” from the laws set by the Creator for heaven and earth at the time of Creation…

Man would not be worthy of the name Adam, if all this diverse history could not develop from him. If man is required, on account of his freedom, to be greater than the angels, then he must also be given the ability — by virtue of his freedom — to be “worse than the devil” (to use a common expression). The possibility of descending to the lowest level was foreseen in Adam. It is inconceivable that God’s work did not turn out as intended. The diverse phenomena of human history are merely “*toledot Adam,”* what developed from the concept of Adam.

The foregoing helps us understand the words of our Sages *(Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:4); Rabbi Akiva says that “*Ve-ahavta”* is the “great principle of the Torah.” Indeed, in truth, there is only one sin: *anokhiyut,* selfishness, egoism. Once a person has freed himself from egoism, and his fellow man is as dear to him as his own soul, he is capable of performing all of his duties and fulfilling all of the *mitzvot*. Ben Azzai, however, says that “*Zeh sefer toledot Adam”* is a still greater, more comprehensive principle. This sentence expresses the unity of the human species. The greatest criminal and the lowest type of degenerate are also included in God’s book as “*toledot Adam”*; everything developed from one Adam, who was created in God’s image. “*Toledot”* is written without the letter *vav,* in order to indicate that even if man’s doings are deficient and flawed, they are still *“toledot Adam.”* Hence, as all human beings bear the name “Adam”, the image of God is never completely lost. This is the first truth, which stands at the very outset of human history.

Ben Azzai’s teaching of the importance of this verse, which describes God’s creation of mankind, underscores the spiritual potential in all of humanity and the requirement to express care for others as one obliterates egoism from his personality.

**Love of Jews and Unifying the Jewish People**

While Ben Azzai’s verse calls for the equal treatment of all of mankind and would call for community involvement in the needs of all of mankind, Rabbi Akiva’s verse is more exclusive. The verse “*Ve-ahavta”* calls for a unique relationship to one’s *reia,* one’s fellow and coreligionist. As the Malbim noted that the verse of Ben Azzai, addressing the creation of man, stresses the unity of humanity, the idea of treating one’s fellow Jew “*kamokha,*” “as yourself,” expresses a unique identification. This idea of the unity of the Jewish people is expressed clearly in Rav Moshe Cordovero’s *Tomer Devora* (1:4):

All Jews are blood relatives to one another, for their souls are all intertwined: each one has a portion of each other’s soul. Therefore, one cannot compare a situation in which one does a mitzva to one in which many perform a mitzva, because all Jews are one unit.

The unique relationship that each Jew has with his fellow Jew is expressed beautifully in his response to a query sent to Rav Soloveitchik by his friend, Rav Shlomo Zalman Shragai. His response, published in *Community, Covenant and Commitment* (page 333), is fascinating, as he writes that he does not even accept the question of how one can favor specific individuals.

I do not comprehend the nature of your inquiry regarding the love of one’s fellow Jew. What is the contradiction between the commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself” and the internal emotional instinct to love the members of the group one is connected to, in our case- the nation?

All interpersonal commandments (at least the overwhelming majority) correspond to internal emotional instincts that operate in the consciousness of the human being, and were they not given [as commands] they would have been worthy to have been given and we would have derived them from the natural world which surrounds and envelops us, and from our internal world, as is mentioned by *Chazal* in numerous places. Thus the command to love one’s neighbor is subsumed under laws that go hand in hand with the natural feelings of justice and mercy.

However, when the Jewish people were commanded regarding the rational laws, two new concepts were introduced: (1) an internal-natural instinct was transformed into a divinely revealed command. (2) The normative field of operation was expanded and deepened and reached the depths of the farthest boundaries of idealism, which are unknown to the psychological instincts and predilections. For example, the natural love of the members of one’s group is simply a feeling of solidarity that emerges from a shared sense of history and fate. In truth, this love is really, in its uniqueness self-love. The act of projection brings the I who is loved by himself, to the other, for he sees a mirror of himself in the other. This egotistical connection does not obligate the person in action toward the other individual. Only at the moment when the entire group is threatened with destruction does there emerge this sense of solidarity, causing the person to act even to the point of self-sacrifice.

However, the command “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (in all its meanings, whether as per Hillel the elder in its negative sense, or in its positive meaning as formulated in the Rambam’s code , *Hilkhot Avel*, chapter 14) demands of the individual a non-egotistical love toward the other, and obligates the individual to perform concrete actions. According to the Rambam (in *Hilkhot Avel*) the love for the other is the basis for all of society, therefore, the love of one’s fellow Jew is achieved only through sacrifice and hard work. It is an extremely exalted level of morality…

**Personal Growth and Communal Responsibility**

One of the most practical applications of expressing one’s concern for the community is through dealing with *tzorkhei tzibbur*, community service. The Yerushalmi (*Berakhot* 5:1) equates community service with the study of Torah in regards to one’s ability to continue their community service even if one will miss the recital of *Shema* in its proper time. The Mechabber (*OC* 70:4) codifies this principle, and he adds (*OC* 284:7) that it is a proper custom to bless everyone who acts as a caretaker of the community (*osek be-tzorkhei tzibbur*) during the Shabbat prayer service.

However, we often face a dilemma: how to balance one’s desire to assume communal responsibility with one’s personal desire for growth. While some sources would seem to indicate that one who is involved in Torah study should only do so when others are not taking the lead, other sources seem to maintain that everyone must be willing to put some personal growth aside for the good of the community.

The Mishna (*Avot 2:*5) states: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." Rashi explains:

Strive to occupy yourself with the needs of the community, but in a place where there is a man, you should occupy yourself in your Torah.

HaRav Yehuda Amital, of blessed memory, founded Yeshivat Har Etzion on the principle of ensuring that one’s aims of spiritual growth not lead one to ignore the community’s cry. He writes:

When Yeshivat Har Etzion was first established, I was asked what would be special about our yeshiva. I related the story told about Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the *Admor ha-Zaken*), author of the *Tanya*, who was once studying Torah in his room, when all of a sudden, he heard his infant grandson, the future author of the *Tzemach Tzedek*, crying in his cradle. The Rebbe closed his Gemara, went into the baby's room and soothed him back to sleep. He then went into the adjoining room, where he found his son, the baby's father (known as the "middle Rebbe"), steeped in Torah study. The Rebbe turned to his son in astonishment and asked: "Why didn't you get up to pacify your crying son?"

 The bewildered son looked up and answered: "I was so immersed in my study that I didn't even hear him cry."

 The Rebbe then declared: "If someone is studying Torah, and fails to hear the crying of a Jewish baby, there is something very wrong with his learning."

 This has been the message of our yeshiva from its very establishment: to be attentive to the crying child, in the widest sense of "crying" - that is to say, to be alert to the needs of the Jewish people.

*(Jewish Values in a Changing World*, p. 157)

Thus, one must put aside one’s studies in order to do hear the cry of the Jewish people.

Rav Shimon Shkop (In his introduction to *Shaarei* *Yosher*) understands “*Kedoshim* *tihyu”* as the religious calling for community involvement and a mindset constantly concerned with the needs of the community:

And so, it appears to my limited thought that this mitzvaincludes the entire foundation and root of the purpose of our lives. All of our work and effort should constantly be sanctified towards doing good for the community. We should not use any act or movement, nor should we receive benefit or enjoyment, from anything that does not have in it some element of helping another. As understood, all holiness is being set apart for an honorable purpose – this means that a person straightens his path and strives constantly to make his lifestyle dedicated to the community. Then, anything he does, even for himself, for the health of his body and soul, he also associates himself with the mitzva of being holy, for through this, he can also do good for the masses. Through the good he does for himself, he can do good for the many who rely on him. However, if he derives benefit from some kind of permissible thing that is not needed for the health of his body and soul, that benefit is in opposition to holiness. For in this he is benefiting himself (for that moment, as it seems to him), but no one else….

In my opinion, this idea is hinted at in Hillel’s words (*Avot 1:14*), as he used to say, “If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am I?” It is fitting for each person to strive to be concerned for his welfare; simultaneously, he must also strive to understand that “when I am for myself, what am I?” If he constricts his “I” to a narrow domain, limited to what the eye can see, then his “I” – what is it? It is shallow and inconsequential. However, if his feelings are broader and include [all of] creation, seeing that he is a great person and also like a small limb in this great body, then he is lofty and of great worth. In a great engine, even the smallest screw is important if it serves even the smallest role in the engine. For the whole is made of parts, and no more than the sum of its parts.

Rav Shimon Shkop concludes that “*Kedoshim tihyu”* is a directive to be community-oriented and community-driven. This call lies at the heart of numerous Talmudic statements with practical significance:

With this idea one can understand how charity has the effect of enriching the one who performs it, as the Sages say (*Shabbat* 119a), “‘You shall surely tithe’ (*Asser te’asser,* *Devarim* 14:22) – Tithe (*asser*), so that you shall become rich (*titasher*).” Someone who is appointed over a small part of the national treasury and does a good job fulfilling his duty, he will next be appointed to oversee a sum greater than that, if he is not promoted in some other way. If they find a flaw in his guard duty, no fine qualities to be found in him will help, and they will demote him to a smaller task. Similarly, the treasuries of heaven are given to man. If he tithes appropriately, he satisfies his job of disbursement as he is supposed to conduct himself, according to the Torah, giving to each as is appropriate, according to the teachings of the Torah. As a result, he will become wealthy and be appointed to disburse a greater treasure. And so on, upward and upward, so that he can fulfill his lofty desire to do good for the masses through his stewardship of the treasury. In this way, a man of reliable spirit does the will of his Maker… The allotment to individuals is only in their role as caretakers, until they divide it to those who need it, to each according to what is worthy for him, taking for themselves what is worthy for themselves.

**Willingness to Sacrifice Spiritually on Behalf of the Community**

Public service presents a dilemma: it often extracts a spiritual price, as the time spent achieving communal needs often comes at the expense of one’s own personal development. Rav Amital (*loc. cit*.) points out that the spiritual quandary of many who are communally active is expressed by the Mishna in *Avot* (2:2) by Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Yehuda the *Nasi*, but the promise is that God will analyze one’s achievements in a beneficial manner:

Let all those who occupy themselves with the community do so only for the sake of Heaven, for the merit of their fathers will sustain them, and their devotion to duty will endure forever. "But as for you, I credit you with great reward, as if you had accomplished it."

The Rambam explains (in his commentary to the Mishna, *ad loc*.):

"I credit you with great reward, as if you had accomplished it." These are the words of God to those who toil on behalf of the community, for they are sometimes prevented from performing a mitzvawhen they occupy themselves with the community. God, Blessed be He, says that He will credit them with reward as if they had performed the mitzva, even though they have not done it, since they occupy themselves with the heavenly affairs of the community.

Besides finding time to get personally involved in the needs of the community, there is also tremendous importance in showing appreciation of those who give extensively of their time for communal needs. This is seemingly part of the basis of the weekly prayer said on Shabbat:

And for all those who are involved faithfully in the needs of the community, may the Holy One, Blessed be He, pay their reward and remove them from every affliction…

This prayer acknowledges that God will “pay their reward,” but it is worthwhile to walk in God’s ways and to show appreciation and the willingness to reward the caretakers of our communities.

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This lesson is the last one for the current VBM session; with God’s help the series will continue next 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 behavior, but also develop the philosophical underpinnings for an elevated, holy tradition.  The lessons attempted to convey the unique contribution of the interpersonal directives in developing the overall religious character that a Jew should ideally espouse: “Walking in the ways of God,” as a “*Kadosh*” committed to finding the proper balance of individual growth and work on behalf of the community.

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 we wished to discuss..

Next year’s lessons will focus on various topics that have not been covered while simultaneously developing the framework for inculcating these elements along with the ones we have begun discussing into a life of interpersonal precision with Torah based ethics.  Hope to meet you again then. Wishing you a pleasant summer, Binyamin Zimmerman