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 #31: Holiness and *Emuna*, Part II:  
The Eternal Betrothal**

**The Humanity of Holiness**

In the first part of this final lesson in our series on the ethics of interpersonal conduct, we will search for an underlying foundation for the *mitzvot* found in *Vayikra* 19 – the *mitzvot* that guide man to a life of holiness. We have seen that many of the chapter’s ritual *mitzvot* facilitate a proper outlook and understanding of God, thus permitting for a life of holiness and emulating God. As discussed previously, a major component of this outlook and of honest behavior in life is *emuna* (faith).

The question that will concern us in this lesson is, do the *mitzvot* found here share any underlying theme? The chapter includes some of the most basic ritual *mitzvot* alongside one of the longest listings of interpersonal mitzva obligations in the whole Torah. If that is not enough, it also intersperses these *mitzvot*, beginning with the ritual, shifting to the interpersonal, and then back again, with textual parallels throughout. The message of holiness ranges from a host of logical social laws to a list of forbidden relationships, to other *mitzvot* whose reasons are less understandable, if in fact knowable at all. Yet God states emphatically that it is these *mitzvot* through which “you shall be holy.”

On the other hand, perhaps it should not be surprising that the Torah lists both ritual and interpersonal behaviors here. As we have noted, the Torah’s conception of holiness does not entail running away from the physical, but harnessing it to the spiritual. As Alsheikh (to *Vayikra* 19:1) writes, it is clear from the Torah’s choice of words that holiness is not achieved merely by abstention or inactivity. The command is, “You shall be holy” (verse 2) – actively:

Man is composed of body and soul, and is given freedom of choice to determine which part will rule over the other. One whose soul is in the driver’s seat allows his body to attain holiness.

One might think that this can be achieved only by extraordinary individuals, but the command to gather all of the people for this message[[1]](#footnote-1) indicates that each and every individual can attain holiness. Everyone is capable.

The Torah’s message, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy,” indicates that to a certain degree, only insofar as man strives to achieve this goal of holiness is God in fact our God. Although one might think that the greatest level of holiness that man can attain is that of the angels, the truth is very different. Angels have no physical body; therefore defining them as holy is merely descriptive, denoting their lack of body and inability to become impure. Man, however, can achieve true holiness and become like God, far beyond the level of the angels. We recognize that God’s holiness is complete, unlike ours, but we strive toward it. This is expressed by the fact that the commandment to be holy is written without the letter *vav*,[[2]](#footnote-2) while the description of God as holy contains the letter *vav*,[[3]](#footnote-3) written in full to express its completeness.

Man is constantly exposed to temptation. Thus his resistance to temptation allows him to achieve the highest form of spiritual life, as unlike the angels, he can carry out the will of God even under adverse conditions.

When in the following chapter, the Torah states, “You shall sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy” (20:7), Alsheikh explains that when one works toward holiness, he can count on divine assistance to achieve it. God will ensure that he is not sidetracked in his efforts.

What, though, is the central core of this holiness? Is it interpersonal perfection? Is it a healthy ritual relationship with God? Are these separate but equal obligations, or is there an underlying connection between them?

**A Dual Core**

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 31a) tells of a would-be convert who asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while he balanced on one leg. While the man’s words generally understood as spoken in jest, according to *Keli Yekar* Hillel’s response indicates otherwise. The convert was asking for “one leg,” one principle, on which the entire Torah stands. He was asking whether all the *mitzvot* in the Torah were disparate revelations of the will of God, or there were an underlying theme uniting the *mitzvot*.

Hillel rose to the challenge with the cryptic statement:

That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. This is the entire Torah; all the rest is simply elaboration. Go and study it.

Though he did not quote it, Hillel was referring to a mitzva that appears in this chapter, “You shall love your friend as yourself” (19:18), as the essential underpinning of the Torah.

*Keli Yekar* points out however, that according to this understanding, Hillel’s response appears to contradict a passage in *Makkot* (24a). The Talmud there relates that although there are 613 *mitzvot*, a number of prophets, starting with King David, developed shorter lists of categories of *mitzvot*, focusing on the most important elements.

Rivan (to *Makkot* 24a, s.v. *ve-he’emidan*) remarks that in earlier generations, people were adept at performing all the *mitzvot* while conscious of their significance, but as time went on, the level of fulfillment waned. King David stressed certain categories of *mitzvot* in order to underscore the most fundamental elements of the Torah’s tradition, and to clarify what is required to merit a place in the World to Come (see [Year 1, Lesson 1](http://www.vbm-torah.org/chavero.html)).

After enumerating the fundamentals given by a number of prophets, almost always focusing on interpersonal ethics, the Gemara concludes with the one requirement used by Chavakkuk to sum up the essence of the Torah:

Mikha came and set them [i.e. the commandments] at three [ethical principles] … Then Yeshayahu came and set them at two … Chavakkuk came and set them at one [fundamental], as it says, “A righteous person (*tzaddik*) will live by his *emuna*” (*Chavakkuk* 2:4).

Chavakkuk’s concise formulation indeed seems quite different from the formulation espoused by Hillel to the would-be convert.

However, as *Keli Yekar* explains, there is no contradiction between the two. The basic principles of Chavakkuk and Hillel in fact demonstrate how *Vayika* 19 represents a merging of two principles that together form the foundation of the Jewish religious experience:

The words of Chavakkuk are not contradictory to those of Hillel, for the *mitzvot* of the Torah are essentially divided into two categories. Man’s obligations to God are rooted in the principle of *emuna* in God. The second category, man’s obligations to his fellow, is rooted in the mitzva of loving one’s fellow as oneself*.* Due to the interconnectedness of these ideals, the cherubim had their wings spread out above – their wings pointed upward, in the direction of man’s obligations to God*,* directed toward the heavens – while the faces of the cherubim were toward one another, underscoring the importance of man’s obligations to his fellow as well.[[4]](#footnote-4) Therefore Hillel indicated in his answer the underlying importance of both categories of *mitzvot* necessary for serving God … By quoting the verse, “… you shall love your friend as yourself; I am the Lord,” Hillel underscored both elements. “You shall love your friend as yourself” is indicative of the underlying principle of interpersonal *mitzvot*, and the end of the verse – “I am the Lord” – is indicative of the foundation of ritual *mitzvot*, as Chavakkuk noted: “A righteous person will live by his *emuna*.”

*Keli Yekar* then shows how both elements of religious observance also are spelled out in the Ten Commandments. The ten are grouped into two groups: the ritual, rooted in “I am the Lord …,” i.e. the mitzva of *emuna*, and the interpersonal, rooted in “You shall not covet,” which is the negative side of the positive mitzva of loving one’s fellow.

**The Power of Paraphrase**

We might add to these powerful words a twist that further connects the two principles. Hillel’s response to the convert, after all, is not actually a direct quotation of “You shall love your friend as yourself,” and there is no proof that he mentioned the second half of the verse, “I am the Lord.” All he stated is:

That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. This is the entire Torah; all the rest is simply elaboration. Go and study it.

Rashi offers two explanations of Hillel’s intent. The second is similar to the view of *Keli Yekar*: Hillel referred to perfecting one’s interpersonal skills, which are at the core of most *mitzvot*. Rashi’s first explanation, though, provides a very different understanding of Hillel’s statement. One’s “friend,” says Rashi, is not one’s fellow man, but God, as in *Mishlei* (27:10): “Do not forsake your friend and your father’s friend.” The implication is: you do not appreciate it when your fellow man does not do as you would like; view God similarly, and do not violate His will.

In essence, Rashi’s two explanations represent a debate as to whether Hillel’s remark focused exclusively on the interpersonal realm or exclusively on the ritual realm. Yet the fact that Hillel did not simply quote the verse, or else say directly that one should not violate God’s will, may indicate that his true intention was somewhere between the two extremes. The Torah does not have separate “legs”; rather, its two foundational principles are fully intertwined. One has human friends, and also should view God as a friend. Just as the Torah pays close attention to the way one treats a fellow human being, the Torah calls for developing a relationship with God and caring about His will as well. Hillel’s cryptic response allowed him to underscore the importance of both foundations of the Torah.

Chavakkuk’s principle also is amenable to dual interpretation. Following our lesson on how essential *emuna* is to a life of integrity, it is clear that *emuna* is not only the basis of ritual obligations to God, but also the foundation of the interpersonal *mitzvot*. One reason is that preserving one’s morals through trying times, when doing so seems to cause only hardship, requires the steadfast commitment that is the hallmark of *emuna*. Second, the interpersonal *mitzvot* go far beyond what the honest, ethical individual might be content with if left to his own devices: the Torah’s standard of interpersonal perfection is so high that it must be rooted in the *emuna* that guides man to a human existence of godly transcendence.

Thus when Chavakkuk states, “A righteous person lives by his *emuna*,” he refers to *emuna* not only as the cornerstone of ritual existence, but also as the essential element of interpersonal righteousness. The word for a righteous person – *tzaddik* – denotes an individual who does all that is incumbent upon him, and is related to *tzedek* (righteousness), one of the two trademarks of Avraham’s educational commitment to God’s message. It is impossible to be a ritual *tzaddik* but not an interpersonal *tzaddik*, and just as it is impossible to be a ritual *tzaddik* without *emuna*, it is impossible to be an interpersonal *tzaddik* without it.

*Parashat Kedoshim* carefully defines the path to holiness through both ritual and interpersonal *mitzvot*. As we pointed out in Lesson 2 of this year, the order of these elements is not rooted in separating different types of *mitzvot*, but in merging them, indicating that all are essential to a wholesome spiritual existence.

**The Betrothal of Holiness and *Emuna***

One of the most powerful verses describing the bond with God that we long to achieve depicts our relationship in the End of Days:

I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy. I will betroth you to Me with *emuna,* and you shall know that I am the Lord. (*Hoshe’a* 2:21–22)

In their treatment of these verses, the commentators primarily address two questions. First, why is this closeness described as engagement rather than as a full-fledged union between God and the Jewish people? Second, what is the reason for depicting the betrothal with these three particular images?

Rashi explains that betrothal with righteousness and justice refers to righteousness and justice practiced by the Jewish people, which will be met in kind by loving-kindness and mercy on God’s part.

He further observes that the righteousness and justice practiced by Jews are rooted in Avraham’s being chosen for his commitment to educating his progeny to these principles (*Bereishit* 18:19). Only when the Jewish people express their commitment to these ideals will God respond with loving-kindness and mercy. This, Rashi explains, is the significance of the verse, “Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and her returnees by righteousness” (*Yeshayahu* 1:27). The Jewish people may not be completely deserving of salvation, but their commitment to the ideals of Avraham will allow God to take them under His wing once more.

This initial step toward redemption will be followed by the culmination of the deep relationship between God and man, as described in the next verse: betrothal through *emuna*, and ensuing true knowledge of God.

Still, why is God’s relationship with Israel defined as betrothal, rather than as the pinnacle of full-fledged marriage?

The period of engagement, which precedes the consummation of marriage, is the period when there is the greatest longing on the part of the couple. While marriage does indeed represent a complete relationship, betrothal symbolizes that there is more and better to come. Coming just one stage prior to a profound deepening of the relationship, it expresses the state of wanted to advance a relationship further – which is not always the case in marriage – and being overcome with a desire to enhance the connection.

The betrothal of the verse is denoted with the word *ve-eirastikh*, which indicates the stage in the marriage process known as *eirusin*. This is followed by the stage of *kiddushin*, whose root is that of the word *kadosh* – “holy.” Properly pursued, marriage, though characterized in part by a physical relationship, is not antithetical to holiness, but an expression of it. *Kiddushin* and *kedusha* are best expressed by the period of betrothal, longing, and desire to reach new heights in the quest for holiness.

With this in mind, Malbim’s explanation of the verses in *Hoshe’a* comes to life:

The initial betrothal was only temporary, because it was performed with the understanding that the Jewish people would sin at some point. However, the future betrothal will be permanent, because it will be performed through righteousness and justice*.*

The wholesome completeness of man is dependent on two things: man’s obligations to his fellow,and man’s obligations to God. In order to perfect one’s character with regard to obligations to one’s fellow, one must engage in righteousness and justice, for justice is doing that which is required by the letter of the law, and righteousness is going beyond the letter of the law.

By virtue of the Jewish people’s bringing the two precious attributes of righteousness and justice into union, God will respond in kind with two gifts: loving-kindness and mercy … Obligations to Godare primarily dependent on *emuna*, viz. having faith in God, in his Torah, and in one’s purpose … On account of the Jews’ bringing *emuna* to the union, God will give the gift of allowing the Jews to know God, as He will reveal to them His signs and miracles, and rest His presence among them until they know God with complete knowledge, as though it were ingrained in their inner consciousness, to the point that there will be total clarity.

**A Future of Faith, Righteousness, and Justice**

Our future is dependent on the merging of Avraham’s tradition of interpersonal righteousness and justice with *emuna*. As we saw above, these principles are not at odds, but are jointly rooted in the foundation of a God-centered life. In fact, unrelenting and unwavering *emuna* also goes back to Avraham, who aside from his commitment to righteousness and justice is described (*Shabbat* 97a) as the first believer (see *Bereishit* 15:6).[[5]](#footnote-5) To achieve our place as a kingdom of priests and holy nation and to merit Hoshe’a’s vision of messianic days, we must implement both sides of the coin.

After the long-awaited betrothal, the earth and particularly the Land of Israel, previously defiled by man’s sins (see prior lesson), will spring back to life with unprecedented vitality:

It shall be on that day that I will answer, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain and the wine and the oil, and they shall answer Yizre’el. I will sow her for Myself in the Land, and I will have pity on Lo Ruchama,[[6]](#footnote-6) and I will say to Lo Ami,[[7]](#footnote-7) “You are My people,” and he shall address [Me] with, “My God.” (*Hoshea* 2:23–25)

Radak explains that the image is of the land desiring rain, and God declares that He will no longer withhold it. At the time of the redemption, the heavens will give their dew and the earth will give its produce, never again withholding the power of growth.

**Concluding Remarks**

Over the past three years we have studied together various aspects of the Torah’s treatment of interpersonal ethics. This year we have focused primarily on the interpersonal *mitzvot* of *Parashat Kedoshim*, which guide man to a life of holiness. In the process, we have learned about the importance of the realm of interpersonal *mitzvot*, and with God’s help we have succeeded in uncovering a small part of the beauty of these *mitzvot*.

I offer my apologies for the many interpersonal *mitzvot* – particularly the few left in *Kedoshim* – that we have not had an opportunity to discuss. Perhaps at some point in the future we will have the opportunity to fill in what we have missed. I enjoyed learning with you, and I thank you for providing me with the strength to continue writing.

We should keep in mind that holiness is not always apparent to the onlooker. At the end of Chapter 20 of *Vayikra* (verse 26), the Torah states that the Jewish people must not only be holy, but be holy “to me.” Alsheikh explains:

Should you ask why one cannot tell by looking at a person whether that person is Jewish, the reason is that holiness is a state similar to My state, i.e. one that is invisible. It is something that is not physical, and therefore not observable. Only God can observe it, i.e. your holiness is “to Me,” visible only to Me.

Only God knows who is truly holy. Hopefully we at least can take to heart that someone who is ritually adept but interpersonally deficient is not yet fulfilling his mission.

1. See verse 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. קדשים, rather than קד**ו**שים. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. קד**ו**ש. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I.e. the cherubim, which stood in the Holy of Holies atop the Ark, the holiest vessel in the Beit Ha-mikdash, indicated that both ideals are required for a complete religious existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Gemara there describes the Jewish people as “believers descended from believers,” with Avraham being the original bearer of this belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Unpitied,” one of the prophet’s symbolically named children. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Not My people,” another of the prophet’s children. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)