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 #09: “*Gadol Ha-metzuveh”* and the Proper Mindset**

**What Should We Be Thinking?**

What is the proper mindset for one about to perform an act of kindness for another? What should one be thinking when giving charity or doing other kind deeds? Should the focus be on fulfilling the divine decree, on benefitting the friend or on elevating one’s character? In more day-to-day terms, should one say “I am giving charity because God commanded me to do so,” or “I am giving charity because my friend is in need,” or “I am giving charity because I want to make myself a charitable person”? Which one of these mindsets, if any, is to be viewed as preferable?

Logically, to answer this question, one must seek to identify the nature of interpersonal obligations. But here is where it gets sticky. We have seen that interpersonal commandments are rooted in a threefold obligation: a divine command makes them *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom*; a focus on benefiting one’s fellow makes them uniquely *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero*; and a transformational element directed towards the individual performing these acts makes them *mitzvot* *bein adam le-atzmo.* However, if all three elements co-exist, which should one be thinking of when performing acts of kindness?

In order to grasp the proper mindset for performing acts of kindness, it pays to take a moment to investigate the proper outlook for performing *mitzvot* in general, which then may be applied to *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero* in particular. This question, in fact, relates to a more general issue regarding the proper outlook and intention for one performing *mitzvot* in general and rational *mitzvot* in particular: should one be actively cognizant of the command while performing a given mitzva or not? In order to deal with these issues, let us take a short look at the general discussion surrounding the proper attitude for performing *mitzvot*, and then relate it to our specific questions regarding logical, interpersonal *mitzvot*.

**Greater is the One Who Is Commanded**

How should we look at God’s commands in the first place? The Talmud teaches that Avraham fulfilled the entire Torah without being commanded to do so (*Kiddushin* 82a). *A priori*, one would probably view this as the most noble of behaviors; after all he followed God’s will without being required to do so. Nevertheless, the Talmud seems to provide us with a different outlook regarding God’s commands. The Talmud tells us, in a number of instances, Rabbi Chanina’s ruling and philosophy regarding *mitzvot*: “*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh mi-mi she-eino metzuveh ve-oseh*,” “A person who does something being commanded is superior to one who does it without being commanded.” In *Bava Kamma* 87a, the Talmud relates the story of Rav Yosef; as a blind man, the nature of his obligation in the *mitzvot* he was performing was subject to a Tannaitic dispute. Therefore, he would make a celebration when the opinion that gave greater significance to his performance of *mitzvot* would be mentioned in the study hall.

Rav Yosef said: “At first I used to say that if someone told me that the Halakha accords with the view of Rav Yehuda, who said that a blind person is exempt from observing *mitzvot*, I would make a holiday for the rabbis. What is the reason? Because [it would mean that since I am blind] I am not commanded to perform *mitzvot*, and yet I do perform *mitzvot*. However, now that we have heard this dictum of Rabbi Chanina, who said, ‘A person who does something being commanded is superior to one who does it without being commanded,’ if someone tells me that the Halakha does not accord with Rav Yehuda, I would make a holiday for the rabbis? Why? Because [it means that] being commanded, I deserve a greater reward.”

In our day and age it is easy to understand Rav Yosef’s initial inclination, that by performing *mitzvot* when one is under no obligation to do so, one demonstrates a greater commitment to God; the statement of Rabbi Chanina, which he seems to accept ultimately, is harder to comprehend. We usually assume that voluntary noble behavior is to be preferred above what one does, however honorably, out of a sense of obligation. Yet after hearing the statement of Rabbi Chanina, reflecting the opposite approach, Rav Yosef seemingly changes his view, at least somewhat (see commentators on *Bava Kamma* ibid). What is the meaning of this cryptic statement, that one who is obligated to perform *mitzvot* is deemed greater than the volunteer?

In fact there are many commentators that view this Talmudic passage as the source of celebrating a child’s becoming bar or bat mitzva (see Yam shel Shelomo *Bava Kamma* 7:37). When a child reaches the age of Jewish adulthood, he or she now becomes obligated in *mitzvot*. The whole celebration is dedicated to rejoicing in the child’s ability to perform *mitzvot* as a *metzuveh*, a commanded being, rather than as an apprentice. Again, we may ask: what is so great about being commanded?

At first glance, this might seem a little counterintuitive, but after further analysis, it becomes quite reasonable. A number of Rishonim explain certain advantages that are only applicable to one who performs *mitzvot* as a *metzuveh*.

Tosafot (*Kiddushin* 31a) explain that one who is obligated to perform a mitzva is more worried and anxious about failing to do it properly, as opposed to one who volunteers and has nothing to lose. The additional pressure of the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination, is magnified by one who is trying to fulfill an obligation. This greater difficulty in performing the mitzva is rewarded with greater divine remuneration.

Other Rishonim (see Tosafot Ha-Rosh and Ritva ibid.) focus on the fact that the individual who is commanded is fulfilling the word of God in performing the *mitzva*, while the individual who volunteers is doing something God appreciates, but which He has not asked him to do.

**Self-Actualization or Commandment**

One might take these explanations of the commentators to their logical conclusion and explain that a command enjoins responsibility, and thus it may even weigh down on one as overbearing.

While one may easily offer their services when no obligation exists, a sense of requirement often causes one to reevaluate and sometimes even sidestep the obligation. The oft-heard line “Nobody tells me what to do!” is viewed by some as applicable even to God’s word.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein explains that the fundamental teaching of this Talmudic maxim is in fact a statement of Judaism’s stress on being commanded as opposed to achieving self-fulfillment.

Presumably, one who is *eino metzuveh ve-oseh*, who is not commanded but nevertheless performs, acts in accordance with his personal inclination and therefore attains more self-fulfillment than one who is simply commanded, “Do this!” No one asks the commanded individual whether he likes what he is doing. Yet *Chazal* said, “*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh*,” thus placing at the center or even at the apex of our spiritual lives the sense of being called and commanded. This is what religious existence in general is about, and certainly applies to Judaism more than to most other religions. (*By His Light,* p. 51)

Rav Lichtenstein expounds on the benefits of experiencing the element of command in *mitzvot*, tracing it back to the Garden of Eden and “*Va-yetzav Hashem Elokim al ha-adam,*” “And Lord God commanded the man” (*Bereishit* 2:16):

A *metzuveh* leads a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric life. He is guided by God’s will, not by his own likes and preferences.... If you are commanded, you do not pick and choose among commands— that would be living an anthropocentric life, placing yourself in the center and building everything around yourself. “*Va-yetzav Hashem Elokim al ha-adam*” means, first and foremost, that God’s will is at the center; your will may be factored in, but only secondarily.

…Furthermore, we should seek to relate to mitzvot as being intrinsically good; in this sense, we identify with the mitzvot on a personal level. But at the same time, we must not lose sight of the element of command within them. This can explain why *Chazal* say, “*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh mi-mi she-eino metzuveh ve-oseh.*” If someone is a *metzuveh ve-oseh*, then in addition to doing something which is good, he also acts out of a sense of response to God’s demands. The experience of being commanded is something which he has in addition to the fact that he does something right and good, and this makes him greater than one who is *eino metzuveh ve-oseh.* (*By His Light,* pp. 53-56)

This explanation may find psychological backing in Frankl’s fascinating explanation of the need for a command for true self-fulfillment.

[M]an is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life. … The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or a person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is only possible as a side effect of self-transcendence. (Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, p.133)

When all is said and done, the idea of *“Gadol ha-metzuveh”* is focusing on the element of command, extolling the virtue of every mitzva as being *bein adam la-Makom*, stemming from a divine decree. If we would stop here, the proper answer to our initial query would seemingly be that one should definitely focus on the element of command when performing *mitzvot*, and one should be cognizant of the fact that one is doing an act of kindness because God commanded them to do so. However, when it comes to *mitzvot bein adam la-chavero*, one might wonder if this is indeed applicable — true, the reward might be greater, but is the element of command so central?

**When Does This Apply?**

The Talmud applies “*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh mi-mi she-eino metzuveh ve-oseh*” to certain *mitzvot* in particular, but it does not explicitly limit the concept to these cases. However, some commentators express the sentiment that it should be limited in its application. Rabbeinu Tam’s somewhat cryptic opinion falls in this category.

As cited in *Shitta Mekubbetzet* (*Bava Kamma* 87a), Rabbeinu Tam explains that the dictum “*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh*” is only applicable to *mitzvot* “that would have been worth writing, even had they not been written, such as the seven Noahide commands.”

This statement of Rabbeinu Tam was originally assumed to limit this rule to the seven Noahide commandments, and it was therefore questioned by a number of commentators who pointed out that the Talmud applies this principle to other commandments as well. Rav Moshe Feinstein deals with this statement of Rabbeinu Tam and says that his intention is not to limit the concept to the seven Noahide commandments *per se*; indeed, these bind everyone, including non-Jews, and to say otherwise would be against the Talmud. Rather, Rabbenu Tam’s intention is that the rule of Rabbi Chanina does not apply by all commandments.

If *mitzvot* have an understandable reason, it is not clear that one is performing the mitzva to fulfill God’s desire, for it is possible that the individual is only performing this deed due to the logical reason — e.g., *tzedaka* and honoring one’s parents. Regarding these *mitzvot*, it is specifically the commandment that gives divine significance to the act.

This principle applies specifically to logical *mitzvot*; there, one must feel a sense of obligation, as otherwise the fulfillment of these commands will be dictated by logic and not by religion. (*Iggerot Moshe, YD* 1:6)

Rav Moshe Feinstein’s explanation seems to underscore the difficulty at hand. What should be the mindset of someone about to perform a command? Rav Moshe Feinstein seems to indicate that specifically when fulfilling logical *mitzvot* one should be cognizant of the command, or else they erase any divine element.

However, his comment seems not to be agreed upon by all. In fact, other commentators seem to take the opposite approach, preferring the natural fulfillment of logical interpersonal *mitzvot* in place of a sense of commanded responsibility.

Rav Ovadya Yosef (*Yabbia Omer, YD* 6:29) deals with question of whether one can perform *mitzvot* in a dirty area which is unfit for making blessings. After quoting some sources, he questions those who attempt to prove that one can do so from the fact that one can give *tzedaka* in an unclean area. He explains that the reason not to perform a mitzva in an unclean place is that it is not proper to think about the Creator in an unfit area, so one cannot have proper *kavana* (intent). Yet regarding *tzedaka*, one need not think about the Commander of the mitzva; rather, one should focus on providing benefit to his friend. He cites the following explanation in the name of the Noda Bi-Yehuda:

The reason why one must perform [other] *mitzvot* in order to fulfill God’s word, as opposed to *tzedaka,* for which this is not necessary, is because all [other] *mitzvot* are meaningless if not done for to fulfill their Divine command. If one were to shake a *lulav*, to wear *tefillin* or *tzitzit*, without intending to do a mitzva, then one would provide no benefit for himself, for it is the commandment itself which engenders significance to the act; therefore, the mitzva must be performed with the intent to fulfill God’s word. However, regarding *tzedaka,* even though there is no mitzva, there is still benefit for the poor individual who receives it [and therefore the act is significant even without the proper intention]…

In the responsum, Rav Ovadya continues to quote other sources which seem to express the same idea and apply it to all interpersonal *mitzvot*. As we explained in lesson #06, the uniqueness of *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero* is that the aim is to benefit one’s friends and neighbors; the Noda Bi-Yehuda, therefore, claims that one need not think of the command in the process. If *kavana* is required for a given mitzva, then one would be limited in its fulfillment, restricting one’s ability to provide for the poor to a place where one could fulfill the divine command properly. Since the mitzva is significant even without a command, the proper intent may include benefiting the poor even without intending to fulfill the word of God. Similar differences of opinion can be seen regarding the discussion of why interpersonal *mitzvot* do not contain a blessing; let us examine this.

**Relationship between the Commandment and the Blessing**

In lesson #06, we saw a number of opinions as to why there is no blessing made on interpersonal *mitzvot*; some of them are particularly pertinent to our current discussion. Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (*Seridei Esh* I, 61) relates his explanation to limiting the applicability of *”Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh”*:

It is true that regarding all the *mitzvot* we say, “A person who does something being commanded is superior to one who does it without being commanded” and we recite the blessing [which includes the words], "and [He] commanded us." Nevertheless, in the case of sending food to others on Purim, it is better that a person give of his own free will, out of a feeling of love for his fellow Jew. If he gives only because God has so commanded, he diminishes the measure of love. The same applies to charity; if a person gives out of compassion or love for his fellow Jew, it is better than one who gives because of the command and out of coercion… It may be [also] on this account that we do not recite a blessing over honoring one's father or mother.

The Arukh Ha-shulchan and others (see lesson #06) explain this differently. They maintain that the reason interpersonal mitzvot lack a blessing is not because we cannot say “And commanded us” when our fulfillment does not discharge an obligation; rather, it is because these *mitzvot* apply elsewhere as well, so that the commandment is not readily recognizable. Others explain that since the fulfillment of these *mitzvot* requires the acceptance of the recipient, one can never be sure of their fulfillment until it is too late to recite a blessing. These opinions seem to recognize the element of command as significant regarding interpersonal *mitzvot*, but they hold that the lack of a *berakha* is the result of a technical limitation.

The Seridei Eish, while explaining why no *berakha* is recited, explains the outlook of one who benefits his friend only because he is commanded to do so. The question of the proper mindset regarding interpersonal *mitzvot* puts us in a catch-22. In fact, whichever direction we go on this issue seems to bring us to a halt. If we were to perform charity or other *mitzvot* out of a sense of obligation and coercion, we would be showing that we lack compassion, as the Seridei Eish seems to indicate. Conversely, as Rav Moshe Feinstein explain Rabbeinu Tam’s view, if we were to give charity because we have compassion for the poor individual, with no thought to the Godly command, are we really performing a mitzva at all? Are not we merely giving charity to satisfy our feelings of concern for another?

The Maharal explained that this dichotomy is in fact referenced in the Torah, when it presents the mitzva to give charitable, interest-free loans.

**“If You Provide a Loan…”**

The Torah expresses the mitzva of providing free loans in a rather unusual language.

If you provide a loan to My people, to the poor person who is with you, do not act toward him as a creditor; do not lay interest upon him. (*Shemot* 22:24)

Rashi comments on the first word, *im*, which is usually translated “if”. This would seem to indicate that one has a choice. He explains that this is one of the three cases in Scripture where the word *im* is used to introduce an obligation.

The Maharal, in his *Gur Aryeh* supercommentary (*ad loc*.), asks: why indeed does the Torah use the term *im* if it is in essence placing an obligation upon us to provide loans to the needy? He explains this with a principle relevant for our discussion:

For if a person would fulfill these dictates because he is obligated to fulfill the decrees of a king, this would not be the desire of God, for God wants man to fulfill the command out of his own desire to do so…

Indeed, if a person would do these three acts out of a sense of being decreed to do so by the king, unwillingly, this would not be something for God to be proud of.

The Maharal continues and explains why these three commandments in particular, although binding, should not be performed out of a sense of obligation but rather a sense of desire. Regarding providing interest-free loans, he explains:

If someone would loan money because he is commanded to do so, it would not be a mitzva, as the mitzva of providing loans must be done out of the desire of a good heart, as it is written (*Devarim* 15:10), “And your heart must not be bad.”

The Maharal in general champions the approach that all commands should be performed with an understanding of their essence. He explains that the very name of the Torah, which literally means teaching, is significant: it is not called the Mitzva because the essence of a mitzva is to carry out the order of the commander. God has a completely different intention in giving the Torah to the Jewish people, “for He desired that we understand and comprehend the essence of each mitzva” (*Derush al Ha-mitzvot* 50a). Nevertheless, the Maharal here seems to go one step further: although every mitzva should be performed with the understanding of its background, the performance of these *mitzvot* is predicated upon one’s mindset, and for that reason the Torah begins “*Im”* (see *Gur Aryeh Ha-shalem*, fn. 232).

What the Maharal expresses regarding the Torah’s formulation of giving loans may be true for all interpersonal *mitzvot*. The mitzva must be performed out of a desire to provide for one’s friend; otherwise, the one doing the mitzva have missed its very point.

**To Be Continued**

After being faced with divergent opinions which seem to negate each other — should we should focus our fulfillment of interpersonal *mitzvot* on the glorious sense of being commanded or on the inner calling of our kind nature? — we might wonder aloud: can one really assume that all *mitzvot* are created equally, requiring the same mindset?

Is the generosity and love of the human heart to be subject to the same halakhic formalization as the laws of Shabbat? Are the dictates of law and obligation going to reduce what should be the overflowing goodness of spirit to a matter of fulfilling one's duty, according to the sections and subsections of the Code of Jewish Law? Is there not a contradiction between the very idea of *chesed*, of loving-kindness, and law, obligation, and duty? Is this not an area where halakha should have retreated, so as not to overwhelm the very virtue it is trying to promote? (Rav Ezra Bick, VBM, [*Tzedaka and Chesed*](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/undhalak/16undh.htm))

On the other hand, we began with Avraham’s performing *mitzvot* without a command. Though his behavior was a sign of nobility, it would not necessarily be as noble in our day. Avraham knew that the Torah represented the will of God, and he transformed his nature to desire its fulfillment. The world was not yet ready for the Torah because it required a nation, which was only in its infancy then. However, in our day, after the revelation at Mt. Sinai, when commandment is part and parcel of our existence and identity, the element of command is essential. Can we really be kind without relating to it?

In next week’s lesson, I hope to show how this dispute seems to have actually begun much earlier; indeed, it can be found in a number of comments of the Rishonim. I will attempt to arrive at an outlook that will satisfy all approaches. We will just conclude with a story which illustrates the dilemma.

The tale is told of a man who gave a poor man some money and, after walking away, ran back and gave the poor man another set of coins. When asked afterwards what the reason for this was, he responded, “When I originally gave him the money, I did it because I could not allow myself to pass by a pauper without providing him with something. After walking away, I realized I had not performed the mitzva of *tzedaka*, as I did not think of the command; therefore, I ran back to give him money with the proper intent.”

Did this man do the right thing? What would you have done?