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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Dedicated in memory of   
Joseph Y. Nadler, z”l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi

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**Shiur #12: *Maavir al Middotav***

**When on the Defensive**

In last week's lesson, we dealt with the ramifications of the severity of *halbanat panim* (embarrassing others) and the steps that must be taken to ensure that one doesn't humiliate another Jew. The simple understanding of the Talmudic ruling is that one must be willing to give up one's life in order to prevent another's embarrassment. While this understanding is generally not viewed as authoritative, it is clear that one must go to great lengths so as not to cause unnecessary pain to others.

In truth, the responsibility to hold one's temptation to embarrass others back is very understandable and certainly laudatory. However, that is not always the case. Sometimes, the urge to embarrass another arises in the midst of fighting. After being called names or verbally attacked, must one really be silent?

This scenario is discussed by the Chinnukh(Mitzva 338) in his discussion of the prohibition of *onaat devarim*, verbal abuse:

However, as it would seem, this does not mean that if one Jew comes along and wickedly begins to inflict pain on his fellow with evil words, the listener should not answer him, for it is impossible for a person to be as a stone that has no one to turn it over.Moreover, with his silence, he would seem to be confirming these calumnies.

In truth, the Torah does not order a person to be a stone, silent toward his slanderersas if they were blessing him. It rather commands us to move far away from this behavior, that we should not start to quarrel with and defame people. In this way, a person will be saved from all that: for whoever is not a quarrelsome person, people will not defame him – unless they be utter fools, and no attention need be paid to fools.

The Chinnukh does indicate, however, that if compelled to respond, one should do so in a dignified manner, without anger. He then goes on to explain the precedent for this behavior.

Now, should some slanderer among the people compel us to reply to his words, it would be best for a wise man to answer him in a way of dignity and pleasantness and not become veryangry, "for anger rests in the bosom of fools" (*Kohelet* 7:9). Let him excuse himself to those who hear the slanders about him, and let him throw the burden upon his defamer. This is the way of good people in society.

We can learn this point, that we are permitted to answer a fool, as it were, from the fact that the Torah permits us, when someone comes stealthily breaking in, to act preemptively 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. The same applies to the other’s words, filled with cunning and deceit: [one may save himself] by every means through which he may rescue himself.

HaRav Yehuda Amital explains (*Jewish Values in a Changing World*, p. 201): “In any event, the words of the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* point to the Torah's recognition of humanity, and to the fact that it does not demand of a person to relate with equanimity to those who insult him.”

The Chinnukh concludes with a startling remark, strikingly different from his earlier tone:

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 and to say a word in response to their defamers, for fear that anger might overcome them and they would unburden themselves unduly in this situation. Of them the Sages of blessed memory said (*Shabbat* 88b): "They may be humiliated, but they do not humiliate; they may hear their disgrace, but they do not reply… Of them, Scripture says (*Shofetim* 5:31): ‘But they that love Him are like the sun rising in its might.’”

Rav Amital (*ibid*.) makes an important point:

It should, however, be noted that it was never said even about the pious that they should not feel anger. Rather, that because of their heightened trait of watchfulness, lest they be overcome by anger, they do not respond to those who insult them.

Let us turn to the Chinnukh's source for this description, *Shabbat* 88b:

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.”

The commentators (*ad loc.)* ask: what is the comparison of those who are silent in the face of insult to the sun? The Tosafot Ha-Rosh explains that this is an aggadic reference to the sun’s silence when the moon complained to God at Creation (*Chullin* 60b), “Can two kings use the same crown?”

Similarly Rav Yoshiya ben Yosef (Rif) Pinto writes in his commentary on the *Ein Yaakov*:

Praiseworthy are those who remain silent when insulted, as are those who do not hit back when humiliated by a friend's rebuke for some misdemeanor. Their silence is not due to fear of the other, but to their love of God, Whose creatures they do not wish to humble. Moreover, he happily accepts the humiliation in atonement for his sins; to such people does the verse apply: "“But they that love Him are like the sun rising in its might."

Their silence is the silence of greatness, of might (*gevura*), expressing the inner strength of one who loves God and does not want to exacerbate the situation.

This idea is also expressed by the Ritva, who bases this on a textual analogy, namely the two times that the word “*Va*-*yiddom*” appears in all of Scripture, *Vayikra* 10:3 (referring to Aharon) and *Yehoshua* 10:13 (referring to the sun).

The verse uses the word "*Va-yiddom*" to refer to the sun, which reminds us of the same term used in connection with Aharon, who was silent when faced with the tragic death of his two older sons.

The power of the sun lies in its role as the silent messenger of God, which rises without any musical interlude or any fanfare but lights up the world. So too, the individual who follows the personal example of Aharon expresses the power of staying silent in the face of pain and attack, recognizing the *gevura* of one who feels no need to announce his or her greatness but enlightens the world.

***Maavir al Middotav***

This brings us to the concept of one who is “*maavir al middotav*,” forgoing of his or her rights, forbearing, restrained and longsuffering. According to numerous sources, embracing this attribute has tremendous powers to balance one's spiritual ledger.

The Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 17a) states:

Rava said: “Anyone who is *maavir al middotav*, they forgo his sins, as it says, “forgiver of iniquity and forgoer of transgression’ (*Mikha* 7:18). For whom is He a forgiver of iniquity? For one who is a forgoer of transgression.”

The Talmud is clear that one’s being *maavir al middotav* is extremely potent, but it is a little unclear exactly what is subsumed under this category. The continuation of the passage may provide a clue.

The Talmud continues with a story:

Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshua was once ill. Rav Pappa went to inquire about him. He saw that he was very ill and told those present, “Make ready provisions for his journey.” Eventually, however, he recovered, and Rav Pappa felt ashamed to see him. He said to him, “What did you see [in your illness]?” He replied, “It was indeed as you thought, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, ‘Because he is *maavir al middotav*, do not be severe with him…’”

Rashi elucidates:

One who does not mete out judgment to those who mistreat him but rather overcomes his normal behavior… so too, the Heavenly attribute of strict judgment passes over him.

The Talmud (*Yoma* 23a) seems to apply this trait in a second context as well, referring to one who doesn't take revenge when entitled to but holds off until the other individual sincerely attempts to achieve forgiveness.

Rashi's explanation is an outgrowth of this outlook of not demanding all that one is entitled to when dealing with others who have done one wrong.

Still, what is the power of being *maavir al middotav*? Of all of Rav Huna's great qualities, it is this that saves him from death, and it is this quality that allows one clemency for all of one's sins. But why?

***Midda Keneged Midda***

The most basic understanding dovetails with the use of the term “*midda*,” which we recognize well from the concept of *midda keneged midda*, measure for measure, tit for tat.

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 90a) addresses this when dealing with the severe punishment for one who denies that the resurrection of the dead is a biblical concept: disinheritance from the World to Come.

Why to this extent? It has been taught: “Since he denied the resurrection of the dead, therefore he shall not share in that resurrection, for all the attributes of God are *midda keneged midda.*”

God acts with man in a way that reflects the way in which man acts with others. Thus, in *Tehillim* 121:5, we read, “God is your shadow on your right hand.” Therefore, the degree in which we are exacting with others God will be exacting with us.

The Maharal (*Chiddushei Aggadot, Sanhedrin* 90a) explains why *midda keneged midda* is so essential:

Understanding that all the actions of God are *midda keneged midda* essentially tells us that no bad comes from God, only good. It is man, based upon his actions, who can bring bad upon himself, by requiring a similar response. It is akin to the case of a borrower who merely pays back money he was lent, and it would be foolish to consider his paying back as if it is an independent action in itself.

This then, explains Rashi, is the basic understanding of the significance of one’s being *maavir al middotav*. One who is willing to forgo others’ responsibilities to him and not to demand all of his entitlements merits a measure-for-measure treatment by God, who is similarly willing to forgo misdeeds and not exact full payment for human misbehavior.

**Part of the Community**

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (*Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu* Vol. V, p. 70) provides an additional explanation for the power of one’s being *maavir al middotav* to allow God to pass over one's sins. He explains that one who is *maavir al middotav* connects himself or herself to the community and forgoes his or her own personal drives for the good of the greater whole. For this reason, one who does so is not judged by the strict judgment deserved; rather, one is judged as part of the community and merits a much more meritorious evaluation.

Rav Dessler continues that for this reason, even under circumstances in which one is permitted to treat others with a more strict level of justice, the Torah recognizes that it is preferable to be forbearing and act in a manner which demonstrates self-control. For this reason, even when one must act with a level of hatred towards evildoers, one must not reach levels of extreme hatred (based on Tosafot, *Pesachim* 113b, s.v. *She-raa*). All situations require a level of self-control; one must care for the greater good of bringing about a unified community.

**Equanimity**

The Maharal of Prague (*Chidushei Aggadot* I 44) provides a different outlook, vis-à-vis the relationship of the Jewish people to God.

It is said here that the nations of the world take notice of Israel’s sins and accuse Israel of prostitution under the wedding canopy. In response, Israel simply remains silent, and regarding them it is said, "They may be humiliated, but they do not humiliate..." The humiliated people who receive the brunt of an action but do not act against others demonstrate that they have reached the level of complete equanimity. However, one who humiliates or responds to humiliation acts with brazenness that removes him from the distinguished state of equanimity, even if he acts only in response to the humiliation and abuse to which he was subjected. We have already explored this concept many times: material and physical things clash with equanimity. That which is in equilibrium and balance is simple and distinguished; that which is not abandons simplicity. Therefore, "They may be humiliated, but they do not humiliate," choosing not to act with the brazenness that can remove them from equanimity. As long as a person can withstand the pressure of humiliation and disgrace without responding with audacity, he remains on the level of equanimity and even acquires a distinguished level of simplicity.

The Maharal states here that the level to which we aspire is the "level of equanimity," which separates a person from the material and which allows him to reach the loftiest simplicity. The Maharal explains that one who is balanced, maintaining composure, is able to be silent in the wake of insult and expresses his or her focus on the spiritual world. One who fails to do so is rooted in the natural physical drives that usually cause one to respond to distress outwardly. (See Rav Itamar Eldar's “Introduction to the Thought of Rav Nachman of Breslov” 16b, at the VBM, for a beautiful exposition of this teaching of the Maharal.)

**Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Akiva and the Power of One's Prayers**

The power of one’s being *maavir al middotav* is expressed in a story recorded in the Talmud (*Taanit* 25b) regarding the prayers of two great men during a severe drought:

Rabbi Eliezer once went before the Ark and recited twenty-four blessings and was not answered. Rabbi Akiva went after him and said, “Our Father, our King, we have no king other than You! Our Father, our King, for Your sake have compassion for us!” Immediately, it started raining. The rabbis started speaking negatively [about Rabbi Eliezer]. A Heavenly voice emerged and declared, “It is not because this one is greater than that one, but because this one is *maavir al* *middotav* and this one is not *maavir al middotav*.”

The Talmud thus attributes Rabbi Akiva's success to his being *maavir al middotav*. Yet, if this is such an important trait, why does Rabbi Eliezer not act this way as well? Secondly, why does the Heavenly voice say that Rabbi Akiva is not greater than Rabbi Eliezer — doesn’t this very trait of forbearance provide sufficient reason to consider him greater?

Rav Yisrael Salanter (*Or Yisrael* #28) explains that these sages’ behavior is the natural outgrowth of their belonging to two different schools of thought: Rabbi Akiva is a student of Beit Hillel, while Rabbi Eliezer belongs to Beit Shammai. The various deliberations and discussions between these two schools regarding sundry halakhic issues are familiar, but they also differed regarding the proper way of serving God.

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 31a) describes Shammai as one who was very quick to point out inconsistencies in behavior, as opposed to Hillel, who was a truly humble individual. Rav Yisrael Salanter explains that the Talmud is not defining their innate attributes but rather their attitudes toward proper service of God. Shammai felt that strict adherence to the honor of the Torah is necessary, and he therefore was very strict in his trying to uphold and protect the Torah. Hillel, on the other hand, felt the proper path is one built on a different attribute, that of humility, being forbearing to those who have mistreated one. Each founded an academy dedicated to the way of life he saw as the most fitting.

In the episode in *Taanit*, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer each follow the master’s teachings: Rabbi Akiva is forgiving of insult, *maavir al middotav*, while Rabbi Eliezer lives by a code of strict justice. As this dispute is for the sake of Heaven, both approaches are equally valid for the service of God, and therefore, the Heavenly voice assures all that neither can be considered definitively "greater" than the other.

Yet, though both approaches are equally valid, Rabbi Akiva's prayers are answered and Rabbi Eliezer's are not, for a different reason. As mentioned above, God treats all according to the principle of *midda keneged midda*, measure for measure. Rabbi Akiva's behavior, being forbearing towards others, allows God to accept his prayers in the same way; even though the community may not deserve it, God can be forbearing and grant rain. On the other hand, Rabbi Eliezer's strict justice requires that the community be fully deserving of rain, which, in this case, they are not.

This fascinating explanation of the passage concludes with one caveat provided by Rav Yisrael Salanter. At the time of Shammai and Hillel, there was a legitimate difference of opinion as to whether it was preferable to be strict or forbearing. Yet, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 31a) concludes:

One should always be humble like Hillel and not be strict like Shammai.

The Talmud testifies that the proper approach is that of Hillel. If so, acquiring Rabbi Akiva's trait of being *maavir al middotav* is mandatory. It is an extension of living a life of humility, driven by the teaching of forbearance and forgiveness.

***Gevura***

One might ask: why is this attribute so great? We must now return to the verse quoted by the Talmud, *Shofetim* 5:31: “But they that love Him are like the sun rising in its might.”

The standard translation of *gevura* is might, but Rav Yosef Dov Ha-Levi Soloveitchik points out, that this is a little too simplistic. There are two different terms used for a show of strength: one is *koach (*power*)*, the other is *gevura*. Clearly there is a difference between the two, as the morning blessings contain a separate blessing for each of these qualities. If so, what is the distinction?

*Koach,* we may see, is the power to move forward and conquer, readily understandable to modern man, who is used to viewing the conqueror as the victor. However, the Mishna (Avot 4:1) provides a different explanation for *gevura*:

Who is mighty? One who conquers his desire.

*Gevura* consists primarily of the capacity to withdraw, to overcome oneself, to purge or to purify one's existence. Whenever, for a more lofty cause, one can hold back and stop, conquering one's desire for total victory, one expresses *gevura*. Thus, *gevura* may more accurately be rendered “heroism”.

Rav Soloveitchik adds that in fact, this is the defining factor of the Torah's view of heroic action and the character of the hero. The strongest does not receive this title; rather, it is the one who is driven by a calling and has the inner strength to live within self-imposed limits.

An example of the tremendous inner strength and heroism necessary for one who lives by the calling of Halakha is expressed in this moving description of Rav Soloveitchik, regarding the heroism of a bride and groom who withdraw from each other when the bride sees a speck of menstrual blood:

Bride and bridegroom are young, physically strong and passionately in love with each other. Both have patiently waited for this rendezvous to take place. Just one more step and their love would have been fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and groom make a movement of recoil. He, gallantly, like a chivalrous knight, exhibits paradoxical heroism. He takes his own defeat. There is no glamor attached to his withdrawal. The latter is not a spectacular gesture, since there are no witnesses to admire and laud him. The heroic act did not take place in the presence of jubilating crowds; no bards will sing of these two modest, humble young people. It happened in the sheltered privacy of their home, in the stillness of the night. The young man, like Jacob of old, makes an about-face; he retreats at the moment when fulfillment seems assured. (*Catharsis,* pp. 45-46)

This Jewish heroism is so significant because it doesn't only express itself in a moment of victory, but in a lifelong expression of one's personality.

It is perhaps the central motif in our existential experience. It pervades the human mind steadily, and imparts to man a strange feeling of tranquility. The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy or excitement. Biblical heroism is not ecstatic but rather contemplative; not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero. (*ibid*. p. 42)

This *gevura* of “the sun rising in its might” is the ability to express true heroism, along with the power to remain calm to insult. It is an expression of a lifelong pursuit of the composure to answer to a higher calling, and this represents true heroism. This trait of forbearance, of one’s being *maavir al middotav*, is extremely difficult, and for that reason it is so powerful. Next week, we hope to continue analyzing this trait and to speak of the practical ways of attaining it.