YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

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In Loving Memory of

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לע"נ יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #04b: When Does Insincere Humility Have Value?

This shiur will examine a legal discussion that lies on the border of the halakhic and aggadic realms.

Rabbi Yehuda the son of Rabbi Shimon asked of R. Shimon ben Pazi: "Which is preferable: rebuking for the sake of heaven, or humility not for the sake of heaven?"

He [R. Shimon] said to him: "Don't you agree that humility for the sake of heaven is preferable? As the master said, 'Humility is greater than all of them.' Humility not for the sake of heaven is also preferable, as R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: 'A person should always involve himself in Torah and mitzvot, even if for ulterior motives, because performing mitzvot not for the sake of heaven will lead to fulfilling them for the sake of heaven.'" (Arakhin 16b)

What precisely is the case under discussion in the gemara, in which a person must choose either to rebuke out of the best motivations, or to express humility for an ulterior motive?

Rashi explains that when the falsely humble individual justifies his or her refraining from rebuking another with the claim of "Who am I to rebuke," that person truly desists from rebuke due to fear of becoming disliked. Let us remember that the gemara concludes in favor of insincere humility. Tosafot challenge Rashi's interpretation: refraining from rebuking those who need rebuke is simply wrong and an abdication of an explicit biblical command! It cannot be that the gemara means to grant every phony a lifetime exemption from this mitzva.

R. Yehuda Leib of Gur, in his Sefat Emet, provides a nice explanation of Rashi. He explains that our falsely humble fellow does, in fact, offer rebuke when necessary. As such, he fulfills the biblical mandate. However, he avoids investigating the behavior of his friends and acquaintances, so that he will not enter into a situation where he will have to rebuke them. This lack of interest in finding causes for rebuke can be an expression of authentic humility or of an ersatz humility. R. Shimon concludes that lack of interest in discovering the religious shortcomings of others is worthwhile even when it stems from motivations of personal benefit.

Apparently, there are certain mitzvot that must be fulfilled when they come up, but which should not be searched out. Indeed, we would find something religiously objectionable about a person whose favorite mitzva was rebuke, and who constantly searched for new opportunities to rebuke with great enthusiasm. Our reluctance to rebuke others finds expression in this talmudic decision that refraining from investigating the religious backsliding of others too closely has value, even when the motivations are not the purest.