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 #24: The Uniqueness of Jewish Character and Ethics**

**Knowledge of God and Character**

In last week’s lesson we saw that the Rambam concludes his monumental work *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* by indicating that the mitzva of knowing God is the ultimate perfection, and it carries with it the need to adopt the Godly approach to morality and justice. Only one who has internalized God’s attributes of mercy and His ways of dealing with mankind can truly be considered a Knower of God.

Rabbeinu Yona begins his commentary to *Avot* with a similar idea. In his commentary to the first *mishna*, he explains the first teaching of the Men of the Great Assembly:

“Be deliberate in judgment (*din*)” — this is directed to those individuals who arbitrate justice, that they should not decide based merely on their initial reasoning, but only after great deliberation… One who judges too quickly is a negligent individual… Therefore, one who rules on Torah law should think extensively before arriving at conclusions.

Rabbeinu Yona goes on to note that the use of the term “*din*” for judgment is quite significant, since this term “*dinin*” is often used to refer specifically to monetary and civil law, rather than to ritual and religious law.

This makes the admonition stronger for *dinin* than for other verdicts, for they are a great principle of the knowledge of God. As Yirmiyahu the Prophet said (9:22): “‘He understands and knows Me, that I am God, who exercises mercy, justice and righteousness on earth; for in these things I delight,’ says God.” How can someone know God? Is it not impossible to do so? But this is the way to know Him, through judgment and justice, for God also renders such judgments. This is the meaning of the verse (*ibid*. 22:16): “‘If one does justice to the poor and destitute, it is good; is this not knowing Me?’ says God.”

The judge must be precise, because adjudicating interpersonal conduct requires tremendous knowledge of God. God does justice and is good, and only adequate understanding of His ways can truly allow us to apply His moral teachings to our interpersonal issues.

**Can We Learn Character from Non-Jewish Sources?**

We concluded our last lesson by linking one’s interpersonal development to the knowledge of God, leaving us with a question. The question relates to an interesting anomaly in the understanding of the Rambam, and it will hopefully serve to clarify for us the issue of whether there is a uniquely Jewish tradition of character development and refinement. It is the Rambam who expresses unequivocally the relationship between knowing God and perfecting one’s character, yet it is the Rambam as well who seems to champion the idea of learning character from other sources. At the start of his work *Eight Chapters*, his introduction to Tractate *Avot*, in which he begins to develop his teachings on character, he writes explicitly that many of the ideas contained in this work are culled from outside sources, even non-Jewish ones:

It is important to know, though, that I did not originate the ideas expressed or the explanations offered either in these chapters or in my commentary. Rather, they have been collected from the words of the Sages in the Midrash, the Talmud and in their other works, as well as from the words of earlier and later philosophers [Jewish and non-Jewish], and from the works of many others. Accept the truth from whoever utters it.

Once in a while, though, I will quote verbatim from a well-known work [without indicating that it is a quote]. There is nothing wrong with this, since I am not taking credit for what someone else already said, and because I hereby acknowledge [what I will be doing].

I also will not say “So-and--so said this”… because that is unnecessarily wordy. Furthermore, it might make a reader who does not accept the author reject it… Therefore, I have decided to leave out the author’s name, for my aim is to help the reader and explain what is hidden away in this tractate.

The Rambam’s unabashed dictum, “Accept the truth from whoever utters it” [see *Rav Avraham Ben Ha-Rambam* in *Ma’amar Odot Derashot Chazal* regarding accepting truth no matter what the source], tells us that he is not afraid to learn even issues of character development from non-Jewish sources. The Rambam continues that the only reason he will not inform the reader of the exact source is for the sake of clarity and so that the idea will not be rejected, even if the thinker is not appreciated by the reader.

Many have searched for the exact sources of the Rambam and have found that the Rambam bases much, if not most, of his explanations regarding the proper character traits and the golden mean on the works of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Al-Farabi’s *Fusul al-Madani* (See Raymond L. Weiss’s *Maimonides' Ethics: The Encounter of Philosophic and Religious Morality,* p. 23, for comparisons of the works.) At some points, the Rambam quotes extensively from these works, as he himself admits. It has been pointed out that some difficulties within the Rambam’s words are understandable by looking at the sources (see *Yad Le-Rambam* by Rav Elchanan Samet, p. 22, footnote 23), as the Rambam is not afraid to tell us that he culled from sources he deems true.

The Rambam’s message “Accept the truth from whoever utters it” would seem to be evident from a number of statements of the Sages. The Mishna (*Avot* 4:1) determines that: “Who is the wise one? The one who learns from every man.” The simple understanding would be that everyone in the world has what to teach us (see the commentaries ad loc.). Furthermore, the Midrash seems to say explicitly that one can find wisdom in the nations, though they do not possess Torah.

If someone tells you that there is wisdom (*chokhma*) amongst the nations, you shall believe them, as it is written (*Ovadya* 1:8), “I will eradicate wise men from Edom and understanding from the mountain of Esav.” However, if someone tells you that there is Torah amongst the nations, you shall not believe him, as it says (*Eikha* 2:9): “Her king and her officers are amongst the nations; there is no Torah.” (*Midrash Rabba Eikha* 2:12)

The appreciation of the wisdom of non-Jewish scholars is further expressed by the blessing recited upon seeing a non-Jewish scholar (*OC* 224:6), “Blessed… Who has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood.” (See *Teshuvot Ve-hanhagot* 4:197 and *Meshaneh Halakhot* 7:116 regarding public praise of non-Jewish knowledge).

However, the same Midrashic source cited above recognizing the nations’ wisdom states that “Torah” cannot be found among the nations. If the source of personal conduct were doing that which the wise say is beneficial, one can imagine accepting guidance from the nations of the world; but if the definition of moral and ethical behavior is that which is Godly, then the source should be restricted to those who are in touch with the Godly ideals. This idea may be expressed efficiently by the verse in *Tehillim* (147:20): “He did not do so for any nation; they know not such precepts.”

How can the Rambam seemingly play both sides? How can he express refining one’s character as an aspect of religious worship and the knowledge of God, yet derive it from non-Jewish sources? Essentially, the bottom line question remains: is character development *chokhma* or Torah?

**The Chazon Ish on Non-Halakhic Moral Teachings**

We might contend that one has nothing to lose, other than the time better spent doing and studying other things, by learning the wisdom of outside experts on morality. However, the Chazon Ish explains otherwise. He even goes so far as to enumerate the dangers of studying ethical works, the books of *musar*, if they are composed by Jewish authors who are not adequately versed in the teachings of Halakha.

Some have spent their time since youth perfecting their character traits by studying books that teach people how to do so, but they have not learned the laws of judicial matters. Therefore, they have not acquired the love of justice and are more susceptible to moral illness and the perversion of justice than those simple people who have not studied the matters of Fear of God and the ways of perfecting one’s traits. The evil inclination has a way of placing undue pride and firmness of opinion in the heart of the person who seeks perfection, so that such a person looks on the masses from above. He feels much superior to them, and all his actions are, in his eyes, the most generous and perfect deeds. He will be amused to think that he is being suspected of robbery — “for my deeds are always beyond the letter of the law,” he thinks, “and are straight and good. The need to observe the law does not apply to me! It is meant for people who love themselves and whose deeds are imperfect and who lust for money; it is not meant for those who possess Fear of God and who have perfected themselves.” Moreover, anyone who suspects him is considered by him to be showing disrespect towards Torah scholars and desecrating the honor of God. (*Emuna U-vitachon,* p. 82; see also p. 70)

The Chazon Ish is expressing the need to perfect one’s character in a way aligned with the halakhic definitions of proper behavior. The danger of thinking one has perfected oneself without having done so, as the Chazon Ish describes, is very acute indeed. It is often the individuals who speak constantly about justice and fair play who are the greatest forces of divisiveness. The *halakhot* of interpersonal relations and the analyses of God’s recipe for good character are both necessary for successful character refinement. Being aware of the Rambam’s usage of worldly knowledge in this arena is useful: we may note the limitations of learning from outside sources as well as see the ways in which these sources may be helpful or may be harmful.

**The Rambam’s Selective Use of Outside Wisdom**

A further look at the Rambam’s culling from outside sources will reveal that some aspects of character development are in fact *chokhma*; like all types of wisdom, they may be gained from outside sources. At the same time, the understanding of the unique “Torah” teaching of Jewish character development requires an entirely new outlook. Independent of the question of whether it is recommended or worthwhile to view outside sources instead of focusing on the Jewish ones, analyzing the approaches of those who admittedly cull from outside sources will help enlighten us.

The Rambam accepts many of the ethical teachings of Aristotle and Al-Farabi; at the same time, he adds to and rejects others based upon Jewish sources. When one looks at the works side-by-side, one finds striking similarities between Aristotle’s words and the Rambam’s. Indeed, at some points, we seem to find precise word-for-word quotations of these non-Jewish sources. However, Rav Elchanan Samet (*Yad La-Rambam,* ch. 1) notes that what may be qualitatively minimal differences actually display a complete deviation from the foundational tenets of Aristotelian ethics. In terms of one’s outward behavior, the Rambam seems to accept a lot from Aristotle. However, regarding one’s inner feelings, the Rambam presents a completely different model.

Rav Samet notes that the Rambam differs from Aristotle not only regarding the ethical foundations of morality, but also regarding the purpose of refining one’s character. Aristotle determines the basis of character perfection by those actions which meet society’s approval, and he claims that the purpose of refining character is to bring mankind to its ultimate happiness. These theories lie at the heart of Aristotelian ethics: one must live based on the ethical principles that reflect man’s virtue and will lead to happiness.

The Rambam’s point of departure in studying ethics is not the pursuit of happiness but the religious ideal of “*Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*,” following the ways of God (*Devarim* 28:9, see lesson #07) as accomplished through “y*ediat Hashem,*” knowing God (see lesson #23). Therefore, the Rambam will, by definition, only accept the qualities that reflect God’s system of character perfection and those that enable man to fulfill his Godly mission on Earth. The Rambam, therefore, stresses repeatedly (*Hilkhot De’ot* 1:5-6; *Eight Chapters*, end of ch. 4; *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* I, 54) that man must model his character after God’s precedents and use all of his faculties to reach the one goal of knowing God. A flaw in one’s character does not just limit one’s happiness; it reflects a religious blemish, what the Rambam terms a “sickness of the soul,” which will prevent one from receiving prophecy.

The Rambam’s selective use of Aristotle’s teachings is also reflected by his need to find sources in Jewish tradition for lessons he wants to accept. Unlike Aristotle, who arrives at his conclusions through philosophical analysis and logic, the Rambam requires Jewish sources to be the final arbiter of the veracity of his conclusions. Aristotelian ideas may express the Torah’s teachings, but if they do not have a source or contradict tradition, than they cannot be accepted.

Based on these principles, the Rambam’s *halakhot* of character development become completely different than those of Aristotle. The Rambam not only finds sources for the ideas he accepts, but he chooses to veer from Aristotle’s teachings in certain instances in a way that reflects a rejection of the basic premises. Though the Rambam, like Aristotle, praises “the golden mean,” also known as “the middle path,” which prescribes the ideal as a balance in one’s character traits, he teaches that there are exceptions to the rule. Regarding the need for humility and distancing oneself from anger (*Hilkhot De’ot* 2:3), the Rambam teaches that there is no middle path; one must eradicate from oneself all vestiges of anger, and one must be completely humble. The Rambam does not merely deviate from Aristotle’s requirement for balance in anger and haughtiness; he thereby departs from the fundamentals of Aristotle’s outlook on life.

Rav Samet (p. 25) notes that Aristotle teaches that the ideal man, “the great soul,” is full of the awareness of his greatness, giving off the impression of his greatness wherever he goes. As Aristotle writes, “The great soul is radical in the way in which he appreciates himself… for he requires for himself that which he is entitled to (because of his greatness).” Aristotle, who views perfection of character as a means to the end of achieving happiness and as a means of elevating oneself above the masses, believes that one must act with the haughtiness that is appropriate, and one has the privilege of being angry when necessary.

The Rambam, though, accepts the Torah of the Sages over the wisdom of Aristotle, and teaches that the Mishna’s lesson, “One should be exceedingly humble-,” (*Avot* 4:4) is addressed to great men as well. Ethical conduct is part and parcel of building a Godly personality and, therefore, just as one can never become God, one can never allow oneself the privilege of haughtiness. Character perfection is the product of modeling oneself after God and recognizing the constant need for continued development, never allowing oneself to bask in the glory of one’s ethical achievements. It is specifically the scholars and “great souls” to whom the Rambam looks to reflect the ideals of humility and modesty, for that is the Godly ideal.

The Rambam’s selective use of Aristotle, to the point of rejecting the tenets, seems to be giving us an important message. It is true that reflection and experimentation, empirical investigations and the research of non-Jewish scholars may be very helpful in providing information about behavior and feelings. This information can be very helpful in understanding and formulating the concepts that our Torah teaches us regarding proper ethical action and character development. However, the determining factor as to whether this information can and should be accepted or applied is whether it gives expression to concepts that we find in the Torah. The one studying the information must begin by asking: “Is there a verse or source to back up this point?” After further investigation, the student must determine if this knowledge fits into the Torah’s outlook of proper development and fits into the halakhic guidelines of behavior.

According to the Rambam, plagiarizing Aristotle’s ideas would be subjecting our outlook to the wisdom of the nations; selective acceptance, coupled with altering concepts, allows a deeper understanding of the Torah’s true guidance. While outward behavior may be understood well by those who dedicate their lives to studying it, the Torah focuses on the soul of an individual. The primary objective in Judaism is not to perform actions that bring happiness outwardly or to enable achieving things with others; it is to craft one’s personality. One’s ethical personality must be a reflection of one’s knowledge of God and walking in His ways, and this makes all the difference.

Similarly, in our study of contemporary works regarding behavior and personality, we may take the Rambam’s methodology to heart. We may discover, as the Rambam suggests, that once we analyze the research based on the Torah’s outlook of etiquette, the result may stay the same, but the underlying principles and attitudes may be very different. Often the actions praised by other sources express values which do not only differ from those of the Torah-based outlook; these values may in fact be entirely antithetical. Though understanding them may be somewhat beneficial, it is only when viewed through the Torah’s prism that they become truly worthwhile and effective.

**The Tiferet Yisrael’s “*Av*” of Character Development**

A source for this understanding may appear in the Mishnaic commentary of the Tiferet Yisrael (1782-1860). In his introduction to tractate *Avot,* the Tiferet Yisrael explains:

Early sources have written that this tractate is called “*Avot*” (fathers) because all the moral teachings cited in all of the works of Jewish scholars, as well as those of the scholars of other nations, are included in this text — if one reads it carefully. Therefore, its teachings are the *avot* of those things which are hinted in it...

Thus, upright thinking and character are the “fathers” that engender adherence to the Torah, through which one can purify his body and soul and fulfill his obligations to God and man.

The Tiferet Yisrael notes that the teachings of *Avot* act as the categories and chief principles not only of the dicta of morality expressed by our Sages, but by non-Jewish scholars as well. The nations of the world may have much to enlighten us with regarding ethical conduct, but the message is only beneficial and acceptable if it can be placed in the context of the teachings of *Avot*. One cannot accept blindly the ethical wisdom of the nations, though one can use their experience and wisdom amidst the lessons of the teachings of “The Father” of ethical considerations.

In his explanation of the first *mishna*, the Tiferet Yisrael explains why Tractate *Avot* begins by mentioning Moshe’s receiving the Torah from Sinai:

One should not think that in order to attain the World to Come it is sufficient to work on perfecting one’s soul by learning Torah and fulfilling its teachings without improving one’s character. This is not true, for the punishment for faulty character traits is extremely severe [see *Yevamot* 21a]…

Therefore, *Avot* begins with the order of the transmission of Torah … to teach you that *derekh eretz* is also Torah, and all is from Sinai.

Furthermore, it also seems to me that it begins with the transmission of Torah, because “If there is no *derekh eretz,* there is no Torah…”

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein (*Alon Shevut Bogrim* 5 [5755]) expresses the fundamental distinction between the Jewish outlook and the modern one in a similar vein:

In the modern world, the pervading perception is that *musar* is a discipline that is applicable between man and his fellow man, *bein adam le-chavero*. Moral behavior is understood as treating ones friend morally — caring about his honor, his finances and the like. However, the Jewish perception rejects this approach completely. Anyone who has the spirit of Judaism emanating from him understands that *musar* is not a discipline that is applicable only between people. Rather, man is required to be honest in speech, *dover emet*, not because his friend will be hurt by his dishonesty, but rather because the attribute of truth unto itself is so desirable and proper. *Musar* is determined by standards independent of interpersonal needs. We must stick to truth for the simple reason that the “seal of God is truth.” (Author’s translation)

The Torah values expressed by the Tiferet Yisrael and Rav Lichtenstein are what cannot be learnt from the nations, even if we accept their wisdom pragmatically.

This understanding is also in line with the approach of Rav Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin. He explains the distinction between *chokhma* and Torah in the following way: only the latter affects one’s inner soul. This is why the Torah takes precedence over the wisdom of the nations: the Torah represents God’s wisdom, and it is the ultimate *chokhma.* (See *Peri Tzaddik, Va’etchanan,* no. 9; he writes about this extensively elsewhere as well. See also Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael,* ch. 31)*.*

This series of *shiurim* is dedicated to taking that first step in understanding the Torah’s unique message, empowering the writer and the readers, giving them some of the tools necessary to accept the truth from the wisdom of the world, but ONLY THE TRUTH. Indeed, as the Chazon Ish writes, “perfecting” one’s character in a way incongruous with Jewish principles can be disastrous.