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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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Drs. Irving and Roberta Strauchler  
in memory of Jonas Strauchler z”l

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**Shiur #08: *Mitzvot Bein Adam Le-atzmo* and Building Character**

**Three Elements of *Mitzvot***

In last week’s lesson, we arrived at the conclusion that interpersonal *mitzvot* in fact carry with them a threefold obligation. As divine commandments, they are *bein adam la-Makom,* obligations to God. Furthermore, they are also uniquely *bein adam le-chavero,* distinct from other commandments in expressing one’s responsibility to one’s neighbor. However, beyond these requirements, they also entail a unique responsibility to oneself. The source for the Jewish obligation of performing *chesed*, kind acts, is the biblical mandate of “*Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*," “And you will follow His ways” (Devarim 28:9), which focuses not only on action; it is essentially an obligation to develop an ethos of kindness. Following God’s ways is neither about one’s fellow, nor even God Himself (directly), but rather oneself and developing a godly persona.

This third element is defined as *bein adam le-atzmo,* between man and himself. Man is not only asked to develop his relationship with God and to achieve positive results on behalf of his friend, but to transform himself as well. Each Jew must maintain control over his or her environment and actions, behaving in a manner befitting the Jewish *tzelem Elokim* in which one is created.

**The Three Fundamental Aspects of the *Mitzvot***

The fact that there are some *mitzvot* which are dedicated solely to God, while others are directed primarily towards one’s fellow man, is well-accepted. The question then arises: what is the significance of this third class of *mitzvot*, those which are intrapersonal, *bein adam le-atzmo?* After all, should not the two categories of *bein adam le-chavero* and *bein adam la-Makom* include everything? What is the nature of these *mitzvot bein adam le-atzmo*?

In a number of contexts, a few of the great commentators have explained difficult passages based on the understanding of this third category, *mitzvot bein adam le-atzmo,* alongside the interpersonal and ritual *mitzvot.* Analyzing their explanations will help us understand the importance of this classification.

In our first lesson, we referred to the passage at the end of *Makkot* (24a) which details the various prophets who focused their generation’s attention on specific *mitzvot* in order to ensure that the people maintained a proper understanding of the wider Jewish tradition. There, the Talmud notes that Mikha stresses three elements:

The prophet Mikha came and established them [i.e., the fulfillment of the six hundred thirteen commandments] upon three [ethical requirements], as it is written: “He has told you what is good and what God demands of you: only [1] to do justice, [2] to love kindness (*ahavat chesed*), [3] and to walk humbly with your God” (*Mikha* 6:8)…

Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in his commentary *Arukh La-ner* (ad loc.), explains that the three requirements noted by Mikha are in fact synonymous with the three fundamental aspects of Jewish religious life referred to above.

Mikha lists three elements in accordance with three types of *mitzvot*; *mitzvot* between man and God, *mitzvot* between man and his fellow man, and reflexive *mitzvot* between man and himself. Regarding reflexive *mitzvot*, he mentions the requirement of justice, weighing one’s actions to ensure that one is wholesome. Regarding interpersonal *mitzvot,* he includes the requirement of “*ahavat chesed*;” regarding ritual requirements, he says that one should “walk humbly with… God.”

Essentially, Mikha is teaching the Jews of his generation that the three fundamental requirements of religious life are ensuring one is acting kindly towards one’s brethren, forging a humble relationship with God and developing a virtuous personality of weighing carefully one’s behavior. Doing so allows one to master the three elements of *mitzvot bein adam* *la-Makom, le-chavero* and *le-atzmo*.

Mikha refers to the element of *bein adam le-atzmo* as justice, properly and objectively evaluating one’s actions, a necessary ingredient for ensuring one can build a wholesome personality. While the other two types of *mitzvot* relate to the action itself and its object, be it one’s neighbor or God, the third element focuses on one’s thought process. It anchors itself in the command center of a person’s body, in the mind, allowing one to build a thoughtful and balanced personality.

**Three Elements of Becoming a *Chasid***

Acknowledging a third class of *mitzvot* might help us understand a fascinating discussion in the Talmud. This passage (*Bava Kamma* 30a) relates what seem to be three divergent opinions regarding what section of the Talmud must be studied and put into practice in order for one to become a *chasid*, a truly pious and righteous individual.

Rav Yehuda said: “One who wishes to be a *chasid* should fulfill the words of *Nezikin*.”

Rava said: “[He should fulfill] the words of *Avot*.”

And others said: “[He should fulfill] the words of *Berakhot*.”

At first glance, the passage seems to present three divergent opinions, albeit two of them rather original, as to the area of law most necessary for becoming pious. However, a number of commentators posit that these three opinions might not be arguing as much as presenting three necessary areas of expertise necessary for devoutly pious behavior, each focusing on a different fundamental aspect of Judaism.

The Maharsha (*ad loc.*) writes that all of a person’s actions relate to God, to others or to oneself. Each opinion expressed in the passage focuses on one of these three categories. The study of *Nezikin,* encompassing civil, criminal and commercial law, allows one to perfect those actions relating to others. The study of the ethical and moral dicta in *Avot* helps to develop one’s own character traits. Finally, the study of *Berakhot*, which details the laws of prayers and blessings, serves to govern the relationship between man and God. The three areas of concentration discussed in the passage do not represent three opposing opinions, but three necessary facets of religious life. A prospective *chasid* must pay close attention to the laws that govern the relationship between man and his fellow man, as expressed in *Nezikin*, must master the ethical teaching in *Avot* and must learn to appreciate the power and art of liturgy in *Berakhot*.

**Three Pillars of Existence**

The Gra, the Gaon of Vilna, in his commentary to *Yeshayahu* (*Beiur Ha-Gra,* *Yeshayahu* 1:2), takes this idea one step further. The Gra explains that the number three plays a pivotal role in the prophecies at the beginning of the book of *Yeshayahu*, for it represents the triad of Judaism. He points out that in the opening prophecy of Yeshayahu, the Jewish people are referred to by three names, “*banim*” (children), “*Yisrael*” (Israel), and “*ammi*” (My nation). The Gra explains that these terms represent the three basic elements of the Torah, and he delineates them.

First, the Gra explains, these are the three categories of *mitzvot*: *bein adam le-chavero, bein adam la-Makom* and what he calls “*middot”* (traits) that are *“le-atzmo*”. He adds, following the Maharsha, that these are also the three elements of perfection one needs in order to become the *chasid* mentioned in *Bava Kamma*; however, he expands this notion by arguing that not only are these the three elements of *mitzvot,* but they are in fact the three pillars of the world. As the mishna in *Avot* teaches:

Shimon the Righteous …used to say: The world stands on three things: Torah, serving God and acts of kindness. (*Avot* 1:2)

The Vilna Gaon (ibid.) states: “These three elements of *mitzvot* are the three pillars of the world…Torah is *le-atzmo*; serving God is *bein adam la-Makom*; and acts of kindness are *le-chavero.*”

Interestingly, the Gra identifies the pillar of Torah as the one that relates to personal perfection. While we might have identified the pillar of Torah with ritual *mitzvot*, the Gra seems to understand that the essence of Torah study is directed towards opening up one’s character to create a deeply wholesome personality.

**The Transformative Power of *Mitzvot Bein Adam Le-atzmo***

We have seen that these great commentators, the Vilna Gaon, Maharsha, and Rav Ettlinger, invoke the concept of *bein adam le-atzmo* in contexts where the Talmud stresses three fundamental elements of religious observance. They also indicated that the idea of *bein adam le-atzmo* is detailed in *Avot,* defined by weighing one’s actions objectively (doing justice) and serves as a major focus of one’s living in accordance with the Torah. With this in mind, let us return to last week’s discussion and deepen our understanding of this issue.

In last week’s lesson, we pointed out that the source for the obligation of the *bein adam le-atzmo* element is *“Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*," following in the ways of God. The Rambam, as we saw, understands this as an obligation to develop a virtuous personality.

This idea is not academic; it allows us to take a completely new look at the *mitzvot* as a whole. Often, we think of them in terms of obligations and responsibilities, forgetting the spirit of the law. While this is always unfortunate, in the area of interpersonal behavior this may be devastating, as a major element of the mitzva will not be realized. The *bein adam le-atzmo* element is aimed at ensuring that we do not limit our focus to the actions; instead, we may look at the inner source and evaluate ourselves.

This also extends our obligation above and beyond specific *mitzvot*; we are bound to develop the personality of one who is capable of walking in the ways of God consistently and constantly. What character serves as the source of these actions? We must learn not only what the Torah wants from us, but who it wants us to be.

In the area of ethics, the *bein adam le-atzmo* element teaches us that even if we excel in bringing happiness and pleasure to others, we are still spiritually lacking if we fail to develop a personality to which these actions comes naturally. In order to do so, we must look deeper in the Torah, weigh our actions and identify those character traits which must be developed in order to nurture this divinely inclined ethos.

**The Thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy**

The idea of walking in the ways of God by modeling our characters after His attributes may be behind the idea of reciting the thirteen attributes of mercy (*middot shel rachamim*), as they appear in *Shemot* 34:6-7. They are the central refrain of the *Selichot* service of penitential prayers, and they are a pivotal part of the Yom Kippur liturgy. At first glance, the significant role of the repeated recitation of the 13 attributes in achieving forgiveness is surprising. However, the Talmud is quite adamant about its remarkable powers. God teaches Moshe this “order” as an antidote for sin, as expressed in Rabbi Yochanan’s statement concerning the 13 *middot*:

"And God passed before him and proclaimed” (*Shemot* 34:6) — Rabbi Yochanan said: “Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing! This verse teaches us that God wrapped Himself like a cantor and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him: ‘Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this order before Me, and I will forgive them.’” (*Rosh Hashana* 17b)

The passage continues and goes one step further, expounding the verse which describes God’s making a covenant with Moshe (ibid. v. 10), that “There is a covenant made with the thirteen attributes, that they do not return empty-handed.”

What is the source of their power? What appears to be some mystical formula capable of evoking Divine forgiveness may in fact be an expression of the power of the idea of *bein adam le-atzmo*. Only once we analyze how God interacts with the world may we translate it and apply it to our activities; only then may we understand how to inculcate it into our personalities. Understanding the word “*middot”* will hopefully make this more clear.

***Tikkun Ha-middot —* Character Development:**

The Hebrew term *middot* is sometimes used to refer to attributes, while at other times it is used to refer to one’s character. The Rambam describes at length in his *Guide to the Perplexed* the discussion between Moshe and God about the former’s desire to understand the attributes of the latter, when he asks to be shown God’s glory and His way (*Shemot* 33:13,18).

The Rambam (1:54) describes what Moshe is asking for:

It is therefore clear that the ways which Moshe wishes to know, and which God teaches him, are the actions emanating from God. Our Sages call them *middot* and speak of the thirteen *middot* of God, but they use the term also in reference to man, e.g., "There are four different *middot* among those who go to the study hall" (*Avot* 5:13).

The Rambam continues by defining the relationship between the *middot* of man and the *middot* of God.

They do not mean to say that God really possesses *middot*, but that He performs actions similar to those actions which we may perform as a manifestation of certain qualities, i.e., in certain mental dispositions, not that God has in fact such mental dispositions. Although Moshe was shown "all His goodness," i.e., all His works, only the thirteen *middot* are enumerated, because they include those acts of God which refer to the creation and the government of mankind. To know these acts was the principal object of the prayer of Moshe…

We have thus shown that the biblical “ways" and Mishnaic "*middot*" are identical, denoting the acts which emanate from God through the universe.

But why is it so important to translate the actions of God into *middot* understandable to our perception? The Rambam explains that doing so allows us to model our characters upon those godly attributes accessible to man.

Whenever any one of His actions is perceived by us, we ascribe to God that emotion which is the source of the act were we to perform it, and we call Him by an epithet which is formed from the verb expressing that emotion. We see, e.g., how well He provides for the life of the embryo of living beings; how He endows with certain faculties both the embryo itself and those who have to rear it after its birth, in order that it may be protected from death and destruction, guarded against all harm and assisted in the performance of all that is required. Similar acts, when performed by us, are due to a certain emotion and tenderness, called mercy and pity. God is, therefore, said to be merciful, e.g., "Like as a father is merciful to his children, so the Lord is merciful to those who fear Him" (*Tehillim* 103:13).

The Rambam concludes the chapter by explaining that while God is unchanging and His *middot* are merely the ways in which we perceive His actions, the importance of knowing them lies in our being able to model our characters after them.

We have shown why it suffices to mention only these out of all of His acts: namely, because these are the ones required for the good government of a **country; for the chief aim of man should be to make himself, as far as possible, similar to God: that is to say, to make his acts similar to the acts of God, or as our Sages expressed it in explaining the verse, "You shall be holy" (*Vayikra* 19:2), as they said (Sifrei *Devarim* 11:22). “Just as He is called ‘merciful,’ so should you be merciful; just as He is called ‘gracious,’ so should you be gracious.”**

Based on the understanding of the Rambam, we may reappraise the power granted to the recitation of the thirteen attributes in the Talmud; we may at least begin to comprehend. These are thirteen attributes which we identify in God’s actions that are guidelines upon which to model ourselves. These *middot* are what God teaches Moshe will bring our forgiveness. The recitation of the thirteen attributes is not meant to be a magical formula as much as a prescription for developing our characters. We cannot suffice with the mere recital of the attributes; we must model our lives after them and inculcate them into our very beings.

In fact this seems to jibe with a careful reading of the language of the text in the Talmud. Rabbi Yochanan has God saying to Moshe: “Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this order before Me, and I will forgive them.” Their power does not lie in mere recitation, but in action and inculcation into one’s being. It is the actions which impress upon one’s character the *middot* of God that engender the godly personality which the Torah desires. *Tanna De-vei Eliyahu Zuta* (Ch. 23) goes one step further mentioning that the power of the recital depends on the Jewish people “standing united in one band.” The *middot* cannot be mere lip service; only when they are practiced until brotherhood is created are they potent.

The element of *bein adam le-atzmo* seeks to transform one from merely knowing how to deal with others and make them happy to actually caring about others. The end result is a person who knows that the greatest moments in history are always in private, without fanfare; who is aware that the real yardstick of character is not how one acts with others — however important that may be — but the type of person one is. Does one maintain fidelity to the godly character within himself or herself?

This may also explain why sometimes the recital of the thirteen attributes does not seem to achieve the desired result. Its recital, however many times it may be repeated, is just as much a message to ourselves as a prayer to God, empowering Him to act with His attributes of mercy, as we develop our personalities based upon them.

**How to Treat the Canaanite Slave**

The understanding of the *bein adam le-atzmo* element allows us to understand a fundamental phenomenon expressed by the Rambam. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Avadim* 9:8) points out that in terms of the letter of the law, one may treat his non-Jewish slave rather severely, as he writes: “It is permissible to have a Canaanite slave perform excruciating labor.”

The license to treat one’s slave harshly is hard to comprehend at first glance; we must therefore continue reading the ruling.

The Rambam continues:

Although this is the law, the attribute of piety and the way of wisdom is for a person to be merciful and to pursue justice, not to make his slaves carry a heavy yoke, nor cause them distress. He should allow them to partake of all the food and drink [he serves]. The earlier sages would give to their slaves from every dish of which they themselves would partake. In addition, they would provide food for their animals and their slaves before partaking of their own meals.

Moreover, it is written (*Tehillim* 123:2) “As the eyes of slaves to their masters’ hand, as the eyes of a maidservant to her mistress’s hand [so are our eyes to Lord our God].” Similarly, we should not embarrass a slave by our deeds or words, for the Torah prescribes that they provide service, not that they be humiliated. Nor should one shout or vent anger upon them extensively. Instead, one should speak to them gently, and listen to their claims. This is explicitly stated with regard to the positive paths of Iyov for which he was praised (*Iyov* 31:13, 15)…

Essentially, the Rambam tells us that though it is permitted to treat a non-Jewish slave harshly, Jewish tradition is to treat one’s slave as an honored guest in one’s home, providing the royal treatment.

However, the Rambam does not stop there; in fact, he presents a fundamental tenet of Jewish values in the process.

Cruelty and arrogance are found only amongst idol-worshiping non-Jews. By contrast, the descendants of our patriarch Avraham, i.e. the Jews, to whom the Holy One, Blessed be He, grants the goodness of the Torah and prescribes righteous statutes and judgments, are merciful to all.

Similarly, with regard to the attribute of the Holy One, Blessed be He, which He commands us to emulate, it is written (*Tehillim* 145:9) “His mercies are upon all of His works.” Furthermore, whoever shows mercy to others will have mercy shown to him, as it says in (*Devarim* 13:18): “‘And he will give you compassion and love you and increase you.”

The Rambam begins by delineating what is permitted act, but he concludes his discussion by championing the Jewish tradition, based on Israel’s unique ancestral heritage: the Jew emulates God by walking in His merciful ways. Had we limited Jewish ethical duties to the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow or man and his God, than one would have stopped after the opening statement of the Rambam, because there is no direct requirement to treat one’s Canaanite slave with honor. However, the character of a Jew — “the attribute of piety and the way of wisdom” — makes a Jew especially merciful, so that it is impossible to show undeserved cruelty to another human being.

As the conclusion of the Rambam informs us, when all is said and done, a Jew who is in touch with his spiritual DNA, inherited from Avraham, is incapable of treating a fellow human being, even his slave, harshly. All the more so, if one walks in the ways of God and develops a righteous personality, one realizes how unthinkable this is. The element of *bein adam le-atzmo,* the requirement to develop a virtuous personality, refines his character and teaches him that the focus is not acting, but being. A given action may be permitted, but if it is not conducive to one’s divinely-inspired personality, the Jew who strives to achieve a godly character must eschew it to remain on track.

True, one might be nice to servants even without the goodness of the Torah; however, the extent of one’s generosity, putting their needs before one’s own, is connected to the beneficence of the Torah. It is the result of emulating God, Who, as it were, puts the needs of the Jews, His own servants, before His own. (See *Likkutei Sichot* Vol. xxxvii, p. 72.) This godly character can help us become godly beings.