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 #16: The *Chesed* of Love & *Chasidut***

**The *Tzaddik* and the *Chasid***

In our previous lesson, we discussed the distinction between *tzedek* and *chesed*. While *tzedek* encompasses behaviors of righteousness that one might feel an inner obligation to perform, *chesed* is kindness in excess of any requirements. This distinction also applies to those who excel in each of these qualities respectively, the *tzaddik* and the *chasid*: a *tzaddik* is one who performs all that is required exactly, but a *chasid* is one who goes above and beyond the call of duty — *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din,* beyond the letter of the law. As we saw, therefore, contrary to the common understanding, the *chasid* is the preferable personality, for he strives to go beyond his responsibilities as he provides for others. For this reason, we noted, classic Jewish works stress the importance of achieving (small-c) *chasidut*, and the (big-C) Chasidic movement of the past 250 years has attempted to help individuals develop themselves as *chasidim*, developing a relationship with God not limited to what is required, but based on what is proper.

In order to appreciate the ramifications and underlying goals of these principles, we must analyze the description of *chasidut* in the classic early 18th-century treatise *Mesillat Yesharim*; then, we may understand the nature of *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*. Once we have done this, we may turn in our next lesson to a seeming anomaly in the teachings of the Chasidicmovement which arose a few decades later. On the one hand, as we have explained, this movement sought and seeks to develop *chasidim,* not just *tzaddikim*, but the teachings of Chasidism recognize the need for seeking counsel and being in the court of a leader. This leader, who is supposed to be exceptionally sincere in his worship, is known as “the *tzaddik*.” If the whole goal is not to limit ourselves to righteousness but to strive for more, why is the one who has succeeded in this endeavor referred to by what seems to be a lesser title?

**The Perils and Difficulties in the Search for *Chasidut***

 In order to understand the path to *chasidut* in all of one’s endeavors, and how it plays itself out uniquely within one’s interpersonal obligations, let us look at the road describe in *Mesillat Yesharim*, The Path of the Just. Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto (known affectionately by his Hebrew acronym, “the Ramchal”) is the author of this manifesto, which was credited by the Gra, the great Rav Eliyahu of Vilna, with not containing any extra words in its first chapters. In the introduction, he explains that the purpose of life, which he identifies as wholesomeness and *chasidut*, is rarely achieved. Because *chasidut* is the root of the character of the *chasid,* we must follow carefully the words of the Ramchal in order to understand what *chasidut* is and how to succeed in acquiring it.

The Ramchal explains, in his introduction to *Mesillat Yesharim*, that, unfortunately, morality and ethics are not studied properly by those who are capable of understanding them and are left to those who are not capable.

There are those who go more deeply into sacred studies, into the study of the holy Torah, some occupying themselves with halakhic analysis, others with Midrash and others with legal decisions. They leave the study of achieving perfection and *chasidut* to those who do not succeed in their advanced studies. There are few, however, who devote thought and study to the perfection of their divine service — to love, fear, devotion and all of the other aspects of *chasidut*. It is not that they consider this knowledge unessential; if questioned, each one will maintain that it is of paramount importance and that one who is not clearly versed in it cannot be deemed truly wise. Their failure to devote more attention to it stems rather from its being so manifest and so obvious to them that they see no need for spending much time upon it. Consequently, this study and the reading of works of this kind have been left to those of a not particularly sensitive, almost dull intelligence. These you will see immersed in the study of *chasidut*, not stirring from it. It has reached the point that when one sees another who acts like a *chasid*, he cannot help but suspect him of being a dullard. This state of affairs results in evil consequences both for those who possess wisdom and for those who do not, causing both classes to lack true *chasidut* and rendering it extremely rare. The wise lack it because of their limited consideration of it, and the unwise because of their limited grasp. The result is that *chasidut* is construed by most to consist in the recitation of many psalms, very long confessions, difficult fasts, and ablutions in ice and snow - all of which are incompatible with intellect and which reason cannot accept.

The Ramchal reveals that the devastating result of this situation is that no one truly achieves *chasidut*: one who is capable of understanding does not engage in its study, so that it has no place in his mind. Therefore, he maintains that this must be studied: “It is inconceivable that we should find time for all other branches of study and none for this study!”

 However, the Ramchal is aware that one cannot jump or skip steps. Developing the character traits of wholeheartedness and *chasidut* requires work. It also requires one to follow a path, which he delineates based on Rabbi Pinechas ben Ya’ir’s statement on *Avoda Zara* 20b:

Torah leads to watchfulness; watchfulness leads to zeal; zeal leads to cleanliness; cleanliness leads to separation; separation leads to purity; purity leads to *chasidut*; *chasidut* leads to humility; humility leads to fear of sin; fear of sin leads to holiness; holiness leads to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit leads to the Revival of the Dead.

He concludes:

After we have recognized the truth of this principle, and it has become clear to us, we must investigate its details according to its stages, from beginning to end, as they were arranged by Rabbi Pinechas ben Ya’ir in the statement which has already been referred to in our introduction. These stages are: watchfulness, zeal, cleanliness, separation, purity, *chasidut*, humility, fear of sin, and holiness. And now, with the aid of Heaven, we will explain them one by one.

***Chasidut* Defined!**

In chapter 18 of *Mesillat Yesharim*, the Ramchal is finally ready to detail exactly what is included in the trait of *chasidut*. While many feel that *chasidut* is rooted in fasting and self-abnegation, the real foundation of *chasidut* is something else. Here he refers to the specific *chasidut* that we are discussing, based on an attitude. He explains:

Instead of exerting and wearying themselves to know the way of God with clear, rational knowledge, they act like a *chasid* on the basis of what first occurs to them, without submitting their ideas to an examination in depth and without weighing these ideas upon the scales of wisdom.

Unfortunately, he laments, people have gained a misimpression of *Chasidut:*

They have made *chasidut* repulsive to most people, the intelligentsia among them. For the pseudo-saints give the impression that *chasidut* lies in foolishness and runs counter to intelligence and logic; and they lead people to believe that *chasidut* consists entirely in the reciting of many supplications, in lengthy confessions, in exaggerated wailings and bowings, and in esoteric flagellations (such as immersion in ice and snow, and the like) by which a person mortifies himself.

He expresses the need for study based upon the *mishna* which we cited in the last lesson (*Avot* 2:5), which states that an *am ha-aretz* (ignoramus) cannot be a *chasid.* One must study in order to reveal how to truly become a *chasid*.

The root of *chasidut* is epitomized in the statement of our Sages of blessed memory (*Berakhot* 17a), "Fortunate is the man whose toil is in Torah and gives pleasure to his Creator." The underlying idea is this: it is known which *mitzvot* are binding on all of Israel and to what extent one is bound by them. However, one who truly loves the Creator, may His Name be blessed, will not endeavor and intend to fulfill his obligations by means of the duty which is acknowledged by all of Israel in general, but will react in very much the same manner as a son who loves his father, who, even if his father gives only a slight indication of desiring something, undertakes to fulfill this desire as completely as he can. And though the father may air his desire only once, and even then incompletely, it is enough for such a son just to understand the inclination of his father's mind to do for him even what has not been expressly requested. If he can understand by himself what will bring pleasure to his father, he will not wait to be commanded more explicitly or to be told a second time.

Thus, one’s relationship with God is meant to be similar to any other relationship of love; he will not limit himself to that which he is commanded to do. Rather, he will read between the lines to know what would make the Other happy. In *chasidut,* one must be driven by a love of God.

If one is bound with a love which is truly strong, the lover will not say, "I have not been commanded further. What I have been told to do explicitly is enough for me." He will rather attempt, by analyzing the commands, to arrive at the intention of the commander and to do what he judges will give him pleasure... Such a man may be called "one who gives pleasure to his Creator."

With this in mind, the Ramchal summarizes the concept of *Chasidut*:

Thus*, chasidut* is a comprehensive performance of all the *mitzvot*, embracing all of the relevant areas and conditions within the realm of possibility… To what has been explicitly stated, we add that which we may deduce from the explicit commandment in order to give pleasure to the Blessed One.

**The *Chasid* in Interpersonal Relationships**

*Chasidut,* as defined by Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, is indicative of one’s bond with God. It is rooted in a relationship of love, which leads one not only to seek to identify what is required but what is wanted and desired by the object of one’s love, in this case God. It is seeking to please God by showing one’s expressed desire to do His will, even what is not required of him.

Beyond this pervasive *chasidut* in one’s service of God, there is a unique form of *chasidut* in the interpersonal realm. This involves interacting with other individuals with that same ideal of going above and beyond the call of duty. This is the basis of the classification of a *chasid* as one who goes *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*. The *chasid* is driven by the same desire in the interpersonal realm, but this time, he seeks not only to make God happy by going that extra mile, but to benefit his fellow in the process as well. The *chasid* does not ask “What am I required to do for my friend?” but rather: “What should be done? What would make God and my fellow man happy?”

*Chasidut* is expressed in how one does *chesed*. Contrary to the *baal* *chesed*, who merely performs kind acts, the *chasid* lives a life of *chesed*. As we saw in lesson #08, the Rambam explains the source of the obligation to perform acts of loving-kindness as two-fold: “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18) obligates one to perform acts of kindness; “And you will follow His ways” (*Devarim* 28:9) commands one to develop a personality of kindness.

Interestingly enough, through the words of the Ramchal, the two obligations essentially merge. The Ramchal explains that the source of *chasidut* is love; therefore, one must analyze the expressed desires of one’s object of love to see all that one can provide to please the beloved. Thus, when it comes to *chasidut* as practiced toward one’s fellow man, the obligation of loving one’s fellow is essentially a guiding principle for achieving the desire to benefit the other. Being driven by this feeling of loving his fellow, one is able to do much more than is required for others, thereby also developing the character that God so desires of us when He commands us to “follow His ways.”

This will also explain the Rambam we quoted in lesson #08 that says that while all acts of kindness are fulfillments of the mitzva of loving one’s fellow, they are only rabbinical obligations. Due to the fact that loving one’s fellow is a charge to develop the attribute that will allow one to do more than obligated, the biblical focus is not on the specific requirements. The question now becomes the following: how do we develop this love, and what does it truly entail?

**Growth in *Chesed***

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, in his famed work *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu*, discusses at great length various aspects of *chesed*. He argues that one must have the goal of transforming oneself into a loving giver, emulating God. (In a future lesson on loving one’s fellow, we will develop Rav Dessler’s idea that the derivation of *ahava* (love) is the root *hav* (to give); giving instead of taking lies at the basis of all relationships of love). However, being aware that one cannot develop these feelings overnight, he illustrates a plan of action for how one can train oneself to cultivate this personality. Before one possesses the noble urge of giving that reflects the innermost satisfaction and joy, he has to nurture it. At first, one might perform acts of *chesed* to satisfy even personal or selfish desires, if the goal is to train oneself in acts that will accustom him to a new outlook.

For example, in his service of God he may act *she-lo lishmah*, that is to say, out of concern for himself (but acting *she-lo lishmah* leads one to act *lishmah [Pesachim* 50b]). He may do things… for a reward for himself. In *mitzvot* between man and man, in addition to these motivations, he will act out of compassion and sympathy, which are not motives of pure, unselfish love, since basically they are self-centered, their aim being to avoid the pain caused by seeing the other person’s distress.

Though the real goal of *chesed* is giving, one may begin the process of cultivating a personality of *chesed* by taking. Still, despite it being the opposite manner of the established goal, Rav Dessler advises:

Nevertheless, it is highly advisable to make use of all motivations of this kind for spiritual purposes. This is the meaning of that difficult saying of the Rabbis (*Berakhot* 54a): “’You shall love Lord your God with all your heart’ (*Devarim* 6:5) — with both of your inclinations, the good and the bad.” A person on the way up must make use of his bad qualities themselves — that is, his selfish urges — for the sake of his spiritual progress.

 Rav Dessler continues to advise one on methods of slowly cultivating the love of giving. One might explain, that the line one crosses from his *chesed* based on selfish taking to his *chesed* based on giving is line differentiating between doing *chesed* and being a *baal* *chesed*. However, the goal of a *chasid* is to take it even one step further.

**The Torah’s *Chesed***

 A *chasid* is one who lives by *chesed*, who is driven by a sense of love so deep that he always wishes to provide more and more, *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*. This understanding may be driven home by the Alter of Slabodka’s explanation of why the Torah need to command us to perform *chesed* even though logic dictates its necessity (see lesson #02). He explains that the *chesed* of Torah is a new form.

The *chesed* of the Torah is to feel a person’s pain even if he himself does not feel it (because of education or environment). The *chesed* of the Torah is to reach inside a person’s profoundest depths, where there is cause for his pain. Man’s submerged needs are also part of life. In his innermost depths, he feels them. They too require fulfillment. (*Or Ha-tzafun*, p. 230, *Chesed shel Ha-Torah*)

Without the Torah’s urging us to practice a different form of *chesed* and become a *chasid*, we might have easily stopped the process of cultivating *chesed* at the early stages Rav Dessler describes. It is our search for *chasidut*, to provide more than one could possibly have asked for, that defines our unique tradition. A *chasid* is not only someone who is willing to help or even who wants to help; he must help. He searches for opportunities to provide *chesed*.

**Understanding the Needs of People**

As a final remark, let us note that a *chasid* in interpersonal relationships knows *chesed* and knows people. *Mishpatim*, the interpersonal laws, are principles which require different actions in different contexts. For this reason, knowledge is important; one must understand how to apply the exact principles of behavior. Simultaneously, knowledge of other people and their needs is also essential. In fact, one might explain that this is contained in the deeper meaning of the aforementioned mishna in *Avot*.

An ignoramus cannot be a *chasid.*

As we explained, to go beyond the call of duty, one must be knowledgeable in the Torah in order to understand the guidelines. To know how to glean from God’s commands what he really would want us to do, we must study His word. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, one must also understand the unique needs of the object of his love — in this case, his fellow man. It is here that we must recall the Talmudic dictum: “Just as their faces are different, so their characters are different (*Berakhot* 58a).” A *chasid* in interpersonal relationships realizes that he must study human character in general and the person he wants to help in particular to be sure that he knows what will really benefit the other

In fact, if we go one step further, we can see that studying one’s fellow Jew is not necessarily different from studying Torah. The Talmud states:

One who is present in a room when a Jew dies is obligated to rend his garments. What can this be compared to? It is like a Torah scroll being burnt (which obligates the one witnessing it to tear his garments). (*Moed Katan* 25b)

Rav Soloveitchik, in a beautiful homily entitled, “The Jew is Compared to a *Sefer Torah*,” brings numerous other proofs to this idea. For our purposes, if a Jew is like a Torah scroll, one must not be an *am ha-aretz* in the needs of his fellow Jew; just as he would not want to be an ignoramus in Torah, one must also be knowledgeable about one’s fellow man.

The same holds true for the need to understand oneself. Sometimes, one’s desire to provide *chesed* can surpass normal boundaries and be unhealthy and even detrimental. The *chasid* has to be cognizant of his own needs, the needs of his friend, and the *mitzvot* of the Torah; these also act as guidelines for the one who, driven by love, will want to do more. Uneducated love can actually develop into hatred, so the level of *chasidut* is the level of a knowledgeable individual.

In the next lesson we will discuss the halakhic parameters of acting *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*. Interestingly, we will find that sometimes going beyond the letter of the law is not left for the *chasidim* alone*;* sometimes, it is encourage and may even be obligatory.