

Kindness To One's Self

Rabbi Yehuda Shmidman

January 12, 2017

If you ask anyone to list the most esteemed, valued, cherished aspects of human character development, you can be sure kindness will be somewhere at the very top of the list.

Here is a question: Is it possible for a person to be involved in bestowing kindness every waking moment of his life? Sounds like quite a bizarre question. You may be wondering, how that can be possible? Let us examine a couple of sources that may give us some inkling into the answer.

The **מדרש** in **ויקרא** chapter 34, brings the following episode concerning **הלל הזקן** the great Talmudic sage. After finishing delivering his lecture to his students, he was walking, and they were accompanying him. They saw he was hurrying as if to hurry to perform some important good deed. They asked him, "Where is our master going?", and he said, "I'm going to perform a great mitzvah, a great, important, good deed". They asked him, "What good deed are you going to perform?", **הלל** answered, "I'm going to wash in the bathhouse". They asked, "Is this indeed a good deed?", and **הלל** said, "Yes, and we can prove this from what we see in our society, the statues of the king are placed in the theaters and the coliseums, all places of public gathering, and those who are in charge of washing them and keeping them nice and shiny and good looking, get a very good salary. They are awarded great honor, they're placed in the high places in the government, all because this is the means of giving honor to the king. That's what the statue represents". "Well in that case", said **הלל**, "all the more so, it is a great good deed to cleanse the body which houses the human soul which is created in the image of the Almighty. This is an act of great importance, great value."

Fascinatingly, this **מדרש** starts off by quoting a verse in **משלי**, Proverbs, chapter 11.

There it states, “One who bestows good to himself is a man of kindness.” It seems that הלל’s action of caring for himself was not simply focused on giving honor to the Almighty, but it was an action described by the מדרש as caring for himself.

The עץ יוסף in his commentary elaborates, that there were some very pious people who viewed the body with all its desires, and with all its needs, as essentially an enemy of the spiritual aspect of a person, in essentially an adversarial relationship. As such, it was necessary in a certain sense to attack the body, even disregard its needs as a way of reducing its influence, as a way of giving primacy to the spiritual component of a person. The עץ יוסף says this was not the way of הלל, this was not הלל’s path. הלל had a different approach. הלל’s approach was to care for his physical needs just like one would care for another individual. הלל saw beautifying the physical part of a person, caring for it, as an act of kindness, akin to bestowing kindness to another individual. The same characteristic, the same good quality that applies to other people, הלל applied and employed with regard to himself. The עץ יוסף adds, that הלל was not intending for his own pleasure, but rather he was having compassion, it was an act of compassion.

Now certainly it does not mean that הלל took a mindset of splitting off his physical existence from his spiritual self as if it was a totally distinct and separate being. That wouldn’t contain the aspect of giving honor towards the soul, because it’s totally separate and split off. Also, there wouldn’t be any place for compassion, because the body by itself is inanimate, it isn’t essentially even a cause for compassion. Certainly הלל was viewing himself as one fully integrated being, but he was viewing the physical needs of the person, even himself, in a manner that the quality of compassion and kindness could be applied to them.

To help understand this, it’s worth reading a little section, a quotation of a patient of Carl Rogers, quoted in his book *On Becoming a Person*, page 146. “And the patient expressed himself as such, he said, I could even conceive as a possibility that I could have kind of tender concern for me, still how could I be tender, be concerned for myself when they’re one and the same.” “But yet I could feel it so clearly, you know like taking care of a child, you want to give it this and give it that.” “I can kind of see clearly the purposes for someone else, but I

could never see them for myself.” “That I could do this for me, you know is it possible that I can really want to take care of myself and make that a major purpose of my life, that means I have to deal with the whole world as if I were guardian of the most cherished and most wanted possession.” “That this I was between this precious me that I wanted to take care of and the whole world, it’s almost as if I loved myself you know that’s strange but it’s true.”

It seems to unveil that a person has the capacity to relate to himself in a caring loving way. And whatever he is doing to care for his own real needs and even with regard to honoring and beautifying himself, it can be done in a manner of respect to himself out of being such a glorious magnificent creation, the one that represents his Creator, and doing it in a manner of giving, of compassion, of care, of kindness, of love.

We also find this idea very clearly in the מלבי"ם in his commentary on that same פסוק in משלי which the מדרש brings, where the מלבי"ם describes and defines the term איש חסד, “a Man of Kindness.” He says it’s someone who is not dependent on some visible, external inspiration, on seeing somebody in need. Rather, he will go, he will pursue, he will seek out those in need to bestow kindness to them. He’s not looking for any compensation for his actions, he’s purely motivated by the attribute of kindness.

Then the מלבי"ם adds, a person might think, “If I’m giving away my money there’s an aspect of cruelty to myself, I’m depriving myself of my material acquisition.” He says, nevertheless, it’s full and complete kindness because he’s benefiting the soul and benefiting his spiritual component, which is the primary part of a person and which will receive that benefit for all eternity. That certainly doesn’t mean that it should be done in a selfish fashion of using the bestowing of kindness to others as a device to be gaining for oneself. But rather, it’s just to eliminate any trace or appearance of harm being afflicted on oneself. It’s not harming me, on the contrary it’s benefiting me.

Then he adds, that the word גומל that the פסוק starts off with, “one who bestows”, means one who’s doing it with a powerful emotional drive. With love, with compassion, with caring. I want to benefit that soul that’s been entrusted to me. I

want to benefit others, to be the messenger to deliver the kindness of the Almighty. Of course the Almighty has many messengers, but I want to be the one to have the good fortune to be the one to deliver good to others, to give to them what has been entrusted in my care for their sake. And certainly, and maybe primarily, to benefit my soul that has been entrusted to me. Of course, the soul and the person are one, but we don't naturally sense our spiritual essence. Therefore, we talk in terms of "I have a soul", even though we know that it's really our essence. And we can relate to ourselves in that manner of kindness and compassion in whatever we are doing.

We are taking care of our physical needs, and certainly we care for our spiritual needs which is our primary existence. Whatever we are doing can take on that quality of bestowing a gift. We are not just fulfilling our obligations. We are caring for ourselves in a caring, loving manner. We are emulating the Creator in every single action that we do. We have that potential.

We find an amazing description in the *פסחים* in *גמרא*. The *תלמוד* relates that one of the great sages of the *תלמוד*, *רב ששת*, would review his learning every 30 days. Then he would lean against the doorpost and he would speak to his soul and he would say, "Rejoice my soul, rejoice. I have studied the written part of the *תורה* for your sake, I have studied the oral part of the *תורה* with the abundance of explanation, commentary, and clarification that is contained in it. I have put in all that effort for your sake. Rejoice my soul for you are worthy of all this." He is expressing and describing all the effort he put in, all the knowledge that he gained, as being a gift to his soul. I did it for you. Rejoice that you have received so much. Rejoice that I recognize how valuable you are. So, this is describing "giving to yourself", even though of course you and your soul are one and the same. But it needs this kind of description, as if you are doing a kindness for another person.

R' Chaim Volozhin in his commentary on *פרקי אבות*, says a person can actually be doing everything that he does in terms of performance and study of the *תורה* for the sake of accomplishing the ultimate reward, but in a manner that's the same as if he would be doing it for another person. I can do it in the manner that I would

be equally happy if someone else would get all the benefit from it. It happens to be it will be accrued to me. But it can be done in a completely non-selfish manner. If you're utilizing the תורה as just a device for your own sake that is considered a selfish motive. But if I'm doing it to achieve the Creator's purpose, He wants me to receive all that good, then I'm emulating Him and engaging in all the methods to create that good, to bring about the bestowal of that good unto myself. This can be an act of pure pristine kindness, and can elevate all our actions to the highest, most glorious, most enjoyable experience imaginable.