

Zedek – Righteousness

*What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.*¹

— 1 —

The close association that we spoke about in the previous *shiur* between *anava* and *shtika* prepares us to explore the *middah* of *zedek*. From *anava* we began to recognize how the *middot* can help us negotiate the transition from *kibbush* to *tikkun* and from *shtika* we learned to appreciate the encounter with another person as an opportunity to receive *tochcha*. Both of these elements are brought to bear in our exploration of *zedek*.

As in each previous case, our exploration of this *middah* presupposes that we are ever in tension between our *Yetzer Hara* and our *Yetzer tov*. It is in our natures to rightly be concerned with doing those things first that benefit ourselves before becoming aware of what we can do to benefit others. In fact, as we have seen, the very appearance of another on our horizon is at first perceived by us as a threat and our first fearful reaction is in the face of that perceived threat. Through *anava* we learn to view the other as our teacher and therefore to make room for that other within the extension of ourselves that forms our soul. Through *shtika* we learn to take in what the other has to teach, even when that teaching challenges our view of ourselves. However, we also have the opportunity to learn from the other what is not useful to the development of our souls and what, in fact, sometimes, triggers the defensive reactions that cause us to contract the space we make for the other thus moving back from having established ourselves as souls to the place where we are only selves. If we have sufficient *anava* then we can transform this teaching as well to good use. For it allows us to measure our behavior, our words and actions alike, that might cause the same contraction in others and thus to decide to avoid those very actions.

The *middah* of *zedek* is positioned at the center of the basic *middot*. This is because it possesses a number of dimensions. First, while it is ostensibly a *middah* principally of *kibbush*, it, in fact, also possesses a very significant element of *tikkun*. Second, in its *tikkun* form it is the principle *middah* of the *mussar* process and influences our approach to all of the other *middot*. We have already suggested the process of *kibbush* that is accomplished through *zedek*, but we will explore that below a bit further.

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 149.

Following that we will deal with the *tikkun* and its significance for the whole process of *mussar* practice.

When we encounter another, even when we encounter another through the filter of *anava* and *shtika*, the effort that is required to restrain our *Yetzer Hara* is significant. *Zedek*, at its most accessible stage, requires that we focus all of our spiritual energy on containing the fear that another poses to our self-preservation. The fact that, as we have suggested, we need to invoke the power of two previously practiced *middot*, neither of which is easy in itself to master, before we can accomplish *zedek*, reveals the spiritual strength needed to accomplish the *kibbush* of *zedek*. In practice this requires, first, transforming our initial encounter with another by constraining the defensive response of our *Yetzer Hara* as we try to appreciate what this person has to teach us. Then it requires that we make ourselves vulnerable to the content of that teaching, especially when it is critical. In doing all of this all we accomplish is the restraint of the *Yetzer Hara*. To not do to others what is hateful to us is an admirable goal, but only a first step.

The obverse of this *kibbush* is found in the central tenet of the Torah itself, *v'ahavta l'reyecha komocha*, Love the other as yourself. This then is the *tikkun* of the *middah* of *zedek*. How is it possible to love another as one loves oneself? What do we understand as “loving one’s self” such that we can learn from it what is required of us in regard to others? These have been perennial questions since these words were first articulated by Israel in her response to the commanding voice at Sinai. Through the *middah* of *zedek* this seeming mystery begins to be unraveled. The *kibbush* of *zedek* is precisely learning to love one’s self. The *tikkun* of *zedek* is precisely learning to love another as one’s self. I will explain each of these steps in turn.

As I have explained the *kibbush* aspect of *zedek* requires both *anava* and *shtika* (and assumes the practice of all the preceding *middot* as well.) But while we often understand *kibbush* conventionally as a negative, we learn in and through this *middah* that it is, in fact, positive. When we are able to restrain the *Yetzer Hara* we are learning how to better love ourselves. When we restrain the *Yetzer Hara* such that we can provide for the development of a soul in addition to a self (ego) we are truly learning to love our selves by providing ourselves with a soul. A self, not only properly restrained but appropriately protected, coupled with a soul, is a precursor to achieving *tikkun*, by which

the self learns that its most fulfilling nourishment comes through creating a soul in another by bearing him as her burden.

Thus the *tikkun* of *zedek, v'ahavta l'reyecha komocha*, is therefore predicated on developing a self that is complimented and fulfilled by its expansion into a soul first. Once this expansion has occurred by way of *kibbush* it is possible for that soul/self to find its fullest satisfaction in helping another find her full satisfaction as a soul/self. We will continue to explore this in our next *shiur*.

— 2 —

Zedek promotes our ability to love ourselves. Since it allows us to reflect on those actions that are pleasing and beneficial to ourselves and encourages us to thereby become aware of the ways in which we can be sure that we avoid causing in others any impediment to their benefit and enjoyment in the same way, it facilitates our expanding the space for the other within ourselves and therefore the expansion of our soul. Expanding our soul is precisely what we mean by loving ourselves. It is not the actions that are pleasing or beneficial that constitutes self-love. Rather the realization of how we can facilitate these things for others, strengthens our souls and strengthening our soul is the expression of self-love that becomes the necessary springboard to loving others as ourselves.

As I said last week, the process by which we encourage this expansion is initially through the act of *kibbush*. However, as our soul expands, and as the expansion of our soul promotes our ability to love ourselves; as the acts of restraining ourselves from doing to others what we would not have done to us rewards us with a feeling of joy that accompanies this *kibbush*, we can begin not only to love ourselves and thereby benefit the other, but we can actually love the other as ourselves. This is the goal of the whole Torah. What does this mean and what does this look like in practice?

We have said elsewhere that love is the act of fulfilling the command to bear the burden of the other. It is not, in this sense, an emotional state but rather the full engagement of both intellect and emotion in the fulfillment of an overwhelming sense of obligation. It was this overwhelming sense of obligation and the joy associated with accepting that obligation that our tradition describes as the moment of Sinai. To experience simultaneously the *yirah* associated with the magnitude of this obligation and

anavah associated with its fulfillment is a basic part of Mussar thinking. It is this simultaneous experience of *yirah* and *anavah* that is involved in loving one's fellow as oneself.

As the *middah* of *zedek* increases the reach of our soul, as it promotes our experience of self-love predicated on our experiencing the growth of our soul, we begin to undergo a transformation. Rather than acting to restrain our *yetzer hara* so that it does not do to others what we know is displeasing to us, it begins to energize our *yetzer hatov* so that we *desire* the further and further expansion of that part of us that we have called our soul, our *yetzer hatov*. In practice this very simply means the good of the other. When our satisfaction, our fulfillment, our joy, is predicated on the satisfaction, fulfillment and joy of the other, we have come to know the meaning of *v'ahavta l'reyecha komocha*. It is the growth of our soul that we desire, but the growth of our soul is dependent upon the growth of the soul of the other infinitely extended.

The work that this requires is, obviously, significant. However, the beginning of this work is within the reach of all of us. We must first come to recognize and acknowledge the experience of expanding our soul. This, as I've explained, requires *kibbush* at first. It requires our learning to recognize the joy that our expanding soul brings to us. Then it requires that we turn to those around us, the others to whom we are closest and with whom we interact most often in the most mundane of circumstances. Can we first put ourselves aside so that we do not do to them what we would have them not do to us? Can we acknowledge that moment and how it feels to grow a soul in that way? This requires *heshbon*, we must be aware of what we are doing and the effect that what we are doing is having on us. If we can do this, if we can keep this awareness before us, it is inevitable that, at least, in regard to those closest to us, the possibility of growing this feeling of goodness for them and therefore for us will continue in the way that I have suggested. And of course, once this *tikkun* of the *middah* of *zedek* initiates us into the joy of *v'ahavta l'reyecha komocha* in regard to one person or two people, we will continue to seek in regard to other people, further and further removed from us, until only an infinite other to serve will suffice. This is the fullness of *v'ahavta l'reyecha komocha*, that is, *v'ahavta et Adonai elohecha*, "you shall love Adonai your God..."