

The Chareidi Community and the Pandemic

Rav Menachem Zupnik

1.

Pirkei Avos is the only tractate that Rabbenu Hakadosh begins by affirming *Moshe kibail torah misinai*. The Bartenura explains that it is not necessary to begin every tractate by reaffirming our belief that all of Torah is from Sinai. Pirkei Avos is different, because it touches upon a new question.

Other nations - that do not possess a G-d-given Torah - nevertheless, have developed systems of ethics formulated by the great thinkers among them. Although our sages were certainly wise enough to do the same, our *mesorah* does not incorporate such man-made moral systems. By beginning Pirkei Avos in this way, Rabbeniu Hakadosh emphasizes that not only is the entire body of Torah divine, but even the system of ethics that we have received and transmitted is divine as well.

It is well known that even the minds of very intelligent men are capable of great perversity, and terrible errors of judgment in moral matters. Throughout history, almost every imaginable evil has been defended in some time or place by educated, sophisticated people as morally justifiable. Thus we rightly cherish the Torah, whose teachings are true and - if properly understood - will never lead us into grave errors of the kinds we have witnessed among the nations.

However, there is another extremely important respect in which the ethical system of the Torah differs fundamentally from the ethical teachings of great men. It is well known, for example, that many of the most famous ethical systems are built upon a single principle, which is taken to be the ultimate value by means of which all moral questions must, in the end, be judged. For the last two centuries, there has been a widespread consensus that right and wrong can ultimately be reduced to *individual freedom* or to *the infinite dignity of the individual*. Alternatively, another school of thought assigns maximum ethical credit to systems that result in *the greatest good for the greatest number*, or manifestations of the concept 'love of one's fellow man', or the related "golden rule."

All these principles have some truth in them, and each does have a place within the ethics of Torah. But, when we see that each of these principles, in turn, has been mistaken for the ultimate standard by which to measure moral behavior, we cannot

help but recognize a consistent failing of human reasoning, brought about by a *desire* to reduce complicated and delicate matters to facile simplicity. Time and time again the intellectual excitement of identifying an important and valuable principle leads great minds to fall in love, and to insist on enthroning only this as the ultimate standard. So true is this love, that they will carry this banner even under the most extreme circumstances, whereas a pursuit of truth would have demonstrated that their beloved core principle was neither absolute nor perfect.

It is for just this reason that today's progressive liberal society tends to embrace such ludicrous, dangerous and immoral extremes. There is usually some valuable principle with which these extremists begin. But they allow this one principle to become the one, ultimate truth in their eyes. In this way, a principle that might have had some truth is corrupted and perverted, until it ends up taking those who follow it to unspeakable places.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer provides a compelling example of how brilliant souls can be seduced by excessive regard for their own moral imperative. An Alsatian physician, musician, and philosopher who was famous for giving benefit concerts in Europe to raise money for hospitals in Africa, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 "for his altruism, reverence for life, and tireless humanitarian work which has helped to make the idea of brotherhood between men and nations a living one."

Dr. Schweitzer developed his own philosophy, upon which he based his life of good deeds, which he regarded as "an all-encompassing moral theory." He referred to his ethics as "Reverence for Life," and wrote: "it is good to maintain and further life. It is bad to damage and destroy life." Schweitzer was concerned not only with human life, but with all life. He wrote that "Until people extend their circle of compassion to include all living things, they will not themselves find peace."

These sentiments are obviously noble and worthy. But elevating this one principle of "reverence for life" to the level of the ultimate standard by which to judge all things, Schweitzer ultimately promoted it to an exaggerated degree, teaching that it was wrong to swat mosquitoes, or to spray pests with chemicals. Humans simply should endure them, in obedience to his core principle of revering life. Indeed, Dr. Schweitzer believed that if a construction project came across an ant-hill, the project should be reconfigured around it, so the ants would not be killed or disturbed.

Eventually, when confronted with the fact that to halt the spread of malaria, it would be necessary to kill large numbers of mosquitoes, Dr. Schweitzer realized that even his philosophy could not deal successfully with all the complexities of the real world, nor carried through without exception to address every question, for there comes a point where every man-made principle must give way to another.

Unfortunately, most people who pursue a justified moral principle continue to apply it to every situation, without recognizing this crucial fact.

In contrast, students of the Torah and Halacha know that our holy teachers went to great lengths to insure that the process of studying Torah SheBaalPeh would equip us with the ability to establish G-d's will by weighing conflicting principles or values. No one principle or value can be utilized to answer every question under any circumstance. There are always equivalent and important values that must be considered.

Thus for example, the divinely-commanded construction of the Bais Hamikdash in Yerushalayim was the most profound aspiration of our people. The Torah, however, did not allow the desecration of the Shabbos to build it. Yet, while this limitation gives the impression that observance of Shabbos is the supreme principle in the Torah, it is well known that when the life of a Jew is in danger, we must desecrate the Shabbos to preserve it. Is preserving human life, then, the supreme value in the Torah? No, because murder – and other offenses having nothing to do with preserving life – is punished by execution. This in turn would suggest that the principle of eradicating evil from our midst is the supreme value in the Torah, except for the fact that the Torah imparts a vast number of stratagems and technicalities to employ in order to acquit the accused in a capital case wherever possible – even when his guilt, and the evil of his conduct, is otherwise obvious.

And so it continues. The pages of the Talmud, and works of Halacha, are filled with cases in which we must balance and reconcile the often-conflicting principles of the Torah. Moreover, this process of checks and balances is itself entrusted only to those who have mastered all of them. In this way, the Torah systematically trains us not to be blinded by the self-righteous pursuit of any single principle.

Of course, in a sense the Torah, too, can be reduced to a single principle: the will of the Creator. But when we speak of subordinating human will to God's will, this is not a mere "principle" but the axiom that both justifies and prohibits men from adopting any particular moral or ethical principle as supreme. When we have the will of the Creator before our eyes, we see the limitation of principles that seemed to be supreme, and this tames our own pride, preventing our own understanding and personal commitment to a chosen path from becoming the sole criterion for making moral choices.

Put another way, establishing God's will as the axiom of our ethics means that the virtues or detriments of our conduct are determined by Him alone. In a practical sense, this entails being prepared to accept Halachic rulings even when they don't conform to our way of looking at things.

All this can present a challenge to our devotion to particular principles that seemed supreme before we encountered the Torah's contrary teaching. It means yielding our own sense of righteousness to submit to the Ultimate Authority, Who alone can truly balance right and wrong. That acceptance of one unquestionable higher authority is the true morality of the Torah.

2.

Following the Torah's ethics unequivocally means that we should be able to find the right answers for ethical questions (assuming we follow correctly the God-given system of Halacha). But like anything else in the hands of mortal man, the Torah's ethics can also – unfortunately – be corrupted. This explains why even the most well-intentioned Jews, though aware that accepting that God's will is the ultimate principle, and that Halacha is the only way of discerning God's Will at any given moment – can nonetheless go astray.

Let us consider some examples

Kibud av voeim is one of the greatest of the *mitzvos*. Chazal tell us it is one of the first five of the *aseres hadibros* because the honor of one's parents is equated to the honor of Hashem. Yet we all know that this principle – like all others – has limits. We do not obey our parents if they ask us to compromise our performance of Hashem's commands. Our children are all taught this. In contrast, Eisav, who is considered the greatest paradigm of this mitzvah, takes this lofty principle to an evil end, asking his son Elifaz to murder his brother Ya'akov. His son, who has been taught to obey his father, nonetheless recoils at the prospect of taking the life of Yaakov Aveinu. The *kibud av voeim* that he has been taught by his father leads him to ask a question that rightly strikes us as entirely insane: "What should I do about my father's command to kill you?"

The fact that this question should even come to his lips teaches us to what extremes the great *mitzvah* of honoring one's father and mother will go when one attempts to live by this principle without the larger ethical system of the Torah

Similarly, hospitality and *chessed* is the underpinning of all that Avrohom Aveinu stood for. Indeed, the Alter of Slabodka teaches that his *chessed* and *emunah* were one and the same. Like Elifaz, who learned *kibud av voeim* from Eisav, Avrohom's nephew Lot adopted his uncle's way of life with respect to *chessed* and hospitality, remaining dedicated to this holy principle even after he rejected Avrohom and his G-d¹ and moved to Sodom.

Where does the practice of *chessed* take us without G-d and his Torah? It ends with Lot handing his own daughters over to a raving mob to maintain his own "devotion" to the 'ultimate principle' of welcoming strangers into his home, and the corollary that protecting those guests was his highest duty.

These two incidents remind us that the greatest devotion to even a righteous principle of the Torah can end in the most terrible of crimes if pursued without the "checks and balances" of the Halachic ethics – and without the recognition that our own fierce devotion to any principle must be subordinated to God's will, which is not necessarily

¹ בראשית יג: יא רש"י ד"ה מקדם

the same as our own. We must always be cognizant of the overriding and one and only moral truth - "the will of Hashem", or we face the danger of making similar mistakes.

3.

I was originally asked by the editors of *Dialogue* to respond to an outside observer who criticized our community in a secular publication. The writer commented that during this pandemic, the Chareidi community's greatest strength had become their greatest weakness. Rather than responding directly, I would prefer to write about my own insider experiences, as one of those Chareidim. From my vantage point, I had come to suspect that he had a point, because one of our greatest strengths had indeed turned against us.

We Chareidim have succeeded in creating a large, thriving society whose priorities are based on the principles and the ethics of the Torah. We have established our own way of life.

I have often defended our community in the face of outside criticism by pointing to this extraordinary achievement.

I have often been challenged by non-observant people who question the honors we bestow upon donors to community institutions and projects. These outsiders are critical of the names splashed on our buildings in big letters, the elaborate dinners, the advertisements, and all that goes along with these excesses.

I respond, by saying: "Despite your criticism, the Chareidi world should be highly respected. We have our priorities straight. Wealthy individuals in the secular world attain prestige and honor by owning a yacht. We, in contrast, have built our society based on the values of the Torah. We are human, and perhaps we do bestow a bit too much public honor for the gifts the wealthy provide, and the righteous works they do. But in our community, prestige is accorded to someone who is charitable."

I add, "We aspire that our children become *talmidei chachamim*, and we want our children to establish families and homes based on the Torah's teachings. We gather at the funerals of others to show respect for the way they led their lives in accordance with these principles. We rejoice at our children's weddings, because another family, a golden link in this chain from Sinai, is being created. We gather in stadiums to celebrate the *siyum* of the Shas, not sporting events, and we study Torah daily instead of watching movies".

"We have our own stores and our own way of dress. We have really done the impossible: We have established a way of life based on our own ideals, which is nearly

free of the value system of the outside world. This is an incredible accomplishment that can only elicit marvel and deep respect. This is certainly one of our greatest strengths”.

I have presented this perspective often, and seen it understood and accepted by people who had never seen things that way.

However, here is the caveat: as we have seen, even the best principles must be applied properly at all times. This means that they must be employed only in order to serve the will of the creator, but not so that we take pride and pleasure in ourselves, or flaunt our success at carrying out our beloved principles. It means understanding at times that the principle we correctly acted upon yesterday may no longer be the will of our Creator today.

Yes, our community has succeeded in many ways. The Torah’s mandated activities (Torah study, *chessed*, *tefilah*, and all the rest of the *mitzvos*) have become our very way of life. Indeed, it is a sign of success that we want nothing more, and we would be proud and pleased to continue this way of life that we have chosen. But we need to be constantly mindful that this great strength should not become our undoing. If we lose sight of the ultimate principle - the will of Hashem - and defend our lifestyle at all cost because we are personally invested in it, we risk the same mistake that has led to distorted behaviors by adherents of other philosophies.

The Chazon Ish tells the story of a pious man who was vigilant in the mitzvah of *hachnosos orchim*, which in his case meant having less fortunate people at his Shabbos table each week. One week, the gabbai in shul sent all the guests elsewhere, and the pious man was left without any Shabbos guests to host in his home. His family was disappointed when he came home from shul alone. But he reminded them that guests are not like merchandise to be traded. “My only concern is that the needy in our community will be taken care of for Shabbos. It makes no difference to me if it is I, or another person, who cares for their needs.”

The Chazon Ish emphasizes that this degree of self-fulfillment is not attained easily. When a person likes to do good deeds, he will be instinctively jealous when others do an act of *chessed* that he had wanted for himself.

Thus, while Hashem asks *ahavas chessed* from us – that we should love doing *chessed* – we must make sure that, deep inside, we love *chessed* because it is the will of Hashem, not because of the pride we feel because ‘I am a Baal Chesed’.

If we fail this test of sincerity, even the very love of torah, tefila and *chessed* can bring us to jealousy, as the Chazon Ish teaches. And jealousy is the path to hatred and *machlokes* as well.

The personal investment in our Torah way of life can rise up and corrupt all aspects of a Torah life. Our tremendous dedication to My yeshiva, My shul , or My gemach can

bring rise to jealousy and worse when individual Mitzva performers, and/or Jewish institutions get in each other's way.

4.

The pandemic of this past year has brought much hardship and grief, and introduced us to unfamiliar circumstances. We were drawn into unprecedented debates as to how to conduct ourselves. The Torah commands us to be scrupulous in safeguarding our own lives, in protecting others, and in making whatever sacrifices the Halacha demands so that these things are done. All this is agreed upon within our community.

Given that the circumstances were unprecedented, legitimate debate about how best to apply our principles was understandable. The situation required much discussion for Klal Yisroel to know how to act in accordance with God's will under new conditions.

Yet, all too often, it seemed that our conduct during the year of this terrible plague did not take into account the weighty and urgent *chiyuvim* required under these conditions, nor even our elementary responsibilities *bein adam lichaveiro*. Time and again, great *talmidei chachamim* found themselves unable to counter a tidal wave of facile arguments justifying dangerous and reckless behavior. Responsible people related, in obvious pain, how their *kehillos* no longer wanted to listen to reason. Too often, the argument was that "everyone just wants to get on with their lives," with seemingly little regard as to what Torah and Halachah mandate.

It is saddening to hear such reports, as well as their many tragic consequences. It is frightening to consider that even worse may, God forbid, be coming in the future if we fail to learn from our mistakes.

But, this was not simple ignorance, nor selfishness. Indeed, our behavior can be attributed to a passionate commitment to our beloved way of life, which we think of rightly as a reflection of God's will. However, what on other days might be applauded as a zealous commitment to a life of Torah was transformed into something very different under the conditions of plague and *pikuah nefesh* that we have experienced.

To insist on continuing our beloved way of life – to "just get on with things" – under such conditions, comes dangerously close to the *kibud av* of Elifaz, or the *hachnosas orchim* of Lot. Far indeed from the balanced consideration and measured nuance of principles needed to discern the true will of Hashem, and what G-d demands in varied circumstance.

It is true that during these dark months of pandemic our patience for taking competing factors into account has sometimes worn thin. All our striving, and all our learning, seemed at times to have been reduced to just one "supreme" principle: continuing our beloved way of life at all costs.

Our way of life has perhaps become just a bit too beloved.

When we find that we are unwilling to consider the voice of Halacha under new conditions, it may be due to our strong personal view in the matter, and it is that strong, personal view that takes charge: **We** want to get back to the way of life that **we** love, rather than pursuing a path that Hashem has chosen for us – a life that we do not love as much.

Even the principles of our cherished Torah can be misapplied and distorted if we relate to them as expressing our own choices in life, rather than as expressing God's preferences. Recognizing this leads to a discomfiting, but terribly important, truth: the Halacha does not always endorse all the ideals and virtues we have rightfully pursued with *mesiras nefesh* in the past.

5.

It is difficult to identify the source of an individual's pursuit of particular goals in life. *Our great master, the Chovos Halevavos*, dedicates a complete section of his work to teach us how to recognize the true motivations for our behavior.

A learned person has an even more difficult challenge in this regard than a simple Jew. Rabbenu Bachya explains that the arsenal of knowledge which we amass for good purposes, and with best intentions, is available equally to our *yetzer horah*, who uses this knowledge in sinister ways, leading us to error. (The Chafetz Chaim cites as example how the *yetzer horah* pushes someone to study Torah throughout the night, though as a result he will miss the morning's *tefilah bitzibur*).

In our generation, *baruch Hashem*, the average Torah Jew has a solid Torah education. But as we grow more sophisticated, so does the *yetzer horah*, and we learn how to use our Torah knowledge to clothe self-serving behavior in principled religious arguments.

Even a person of great accomplishment in Torah and *yiras shomayim* can succumb to personal desire, all the while believing – in all earnestness – that his actions are not only a fulfillment of the Torah, but a model of *mesiras nefesh*. This is an elaboration of the famous dictum of Chazal: כל הגדול מחבירו יצרו גדול הימנו – “Whoever is greater than his fellow, his *yetzer horah* is greater as well.”

It is hard to recognize the *yetzer horah*, its manifold powers, and the constant threat of its meddling in our affairs. The teachings of the *Chovas Halevavos* in *Shaar Yichud Hammaseh* bring an awareness of this problem, and train the individual to identify the workings of the *yetzer* in his own behavior.

Perhaps this terrible year of pandemic is the occasion for us to address our obliviousness, perhaps by including these teachings, with the lessons of our mussar masters, into the curriculum of our *mesivtas*.

This would be a good idea at any time. Today's world especially cries out for us to open our hearts to these teachings.

We should incorporate *Shaar Yichus Hammaseh* as part of the basic education of our children, as well as in adult education. It is deep, it is important, and perhaps this is its moment – a time when so much confusion reigns, where a general lack of direction regarding principles, choice and consequence has been as profound as any in our lifetime.

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