



The Middot Hayom Series

Lecture 1: חסד שבחסד – Being-Expressing-Being

Introduction

The time between **פסח** and **שבועות** is that of **ספירת העומר**, and is generally considered to be a period of preparation for **קבלת התורה**, and on a simple level, is meant to be a step-by-step process through various **מידות** that make a person suitable for **קבלת התורה**. In some ways, the relationship between **פסח** and **שבועות** can be seen as almost a single **חג** in which the time between **פסח** and **שבועות** is viewed as a sort of **חול המועד**.¹ Another way of looking at it is **אין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתורה**,² that only those who are engaged in the pursuit of **תורה** study are truly free. What this suggests, then, is that the entire period between these two holidays is one ensconced in the learning of freedom.

Freedom is a function of the choices that are available to a human being – the greater the choices and the differences between those choices, the greater the potential for that person to define and create himself in various ways, and therefore, the more he is free. The relationship of freedom to **תורה** actually begins on **פסח** itself, and that is why we make statements such as **ברוך המקום ברוך הוא ברוך שנתן תורה לעמו ישראל**, even though we have not yet arrived at the point of **קבלת התורה** or in **דיינו**, where **קבלת התורה** is referenced as part of the development of freedom. And the reason for this is that without a detailed ability to be able to see in each element of life an issue which has to be understood in a context that gives it a moral imperative, one way or another, we really have no choices far more than 99% of the time – decisions, yes – but no real moral imperatives. And therefore we cannot be creative about them in any way, because there is no particular reason to go one way or another. The thing that provides those moral imperatives is the breadth of the context or the *matrix* within which each element is embedded, which is what makes something that appears to be very minor on the surface to be something that is indeed very powerful and very meaningful because it needs to be understood as an application of one's vision of reality as a whole as embedded in this moment's decision or act. And that is why everything that a Jew does is so replete with a sense of importance and destiny so that he can take any small act and see it as being

another step towards freedom (or the loss of freedom) because it is embedded in an immense memory and, more than that, an immense matrix.

This matrix, although it is given to us in terms of the תורה, began in אברהם's time as a דרך which was called, ושמרו דרך ה'.³ And that דרך became, afterwards, embedded in the תורה itself, and therefore ה' talks about ושמרתם את משמרת ה' – that שמירה is what the תורה is.⁵ Indeed this שמירה becomes representative of a broader structure: ושמרתם-זו משנה.⁶ משנה is the סדר, the structure, סדר"י משנה, the matrix of the ideas as they are embedded in a way that allows us to see how each thing relates to every other thing. It is only a matrix that allows us to have a determination of reality and non-reality. If there is no matrix, then a person can have an *ad hoc* explanation for anything as he chooses. So that if we take science as an example, the reason that we can distinguish between quackery and science, is not simply because science works, it is because even if we haven't experimentally developed something based on some new technology that we are conceiving, the reason that we will invest ourselves into a particular approach and dismiss or ignore others as quackery is because one approach is part of an overall matrix in which if I have a suggestion, that suggestion needs to hold water across the entire vision of what truth and reality is, while the other approach cannot. This is the same when it comes to the דרך ה'. Anyone can say this is the best way to live or the like – the explosion of self-help books is a clear indication of this – but it's only where one has a well developed structure of reality, which is a דרך, that he can actually discuss meaningful choices. Therefore, the initial process of freedom itself – פסח – can only lead to a קבלת התורה for one who has become aware of the way in which all things are interrelated.

The דרך ה' has two different elements. The first is that of a roadway. In this context, we make references to such things as being on or off the path, so that the image here is of a horizontal plane with discernable edges. In this sense, the path is defined by one's locus vis-à-vis his relationship to these opposite edges. In the context of the mind, we see, as רמב"ם discusses,⁷ the implications of this image on the way in which the human mind and personality works, so that it is easy to fall off the path by going to extremes. What this means is that the Aristotelian "mean" is itself the way one knows he is still on the road, but that doesn't mean the דרך is going anywhere, because we are only defining it horizontally. But if we define a path as leading *somewhere*, that is vertically, going from a simple thing to a more complex and developed vision, then the quality to characterize the path is that of one point leading to another. And this is indeed what we discovered in science: one discovery inevitably leads to another, so that as one discovers something about one thing, the next step is to discover something about that thing, and overall you are led to a more fundamental description of reality. Though similar, the דרך ה' is somewhat the opposite, because it begins with the most fundamental assumptions and goes on to see how those fundamental assumptions lead to greater and greater detail in which all things now become expressions of certain basic choices. And therefore, when one chooses a particular thing that seems to be unrelated to anything else, he is in fact dealing with fundamental reality at any stage.

Now those two elements of the דרך ה', its horizontal and vertical trajectories, are generally seen as just a description of מידות such as those רמב"ם has in הל' דעות, but this is clearly not רמב"ם's full vision of the דרך ה', because he says explicitly in מורה נבוכים that the דרך ה' that was given over to משה when he asked את דרכיך נא included the knowledge of the entire universe of all of its possible interrelationships and permutations:

אחרי-כן ביקש להשיג את עצמותו יתעלה שנאמר הראני נא את כבודך (שמות לג:ח). ונענה באשר לבקשה הראשונה, דהיינו, הודיעני נא את דרכיך ונאמר לו: אני אעביר כל טובי על פניך (שמות לג:ט). ונאמר לו בתשובה לשאלה השנייה: לא תוכל לראת את פני [כי לא יראני האדם וחי] (שמות לג:כ).

ואילו דבריו: כל טובי רומזים שהציג לפניו את הנמצאים כולם, שעליהם נאמר: וירא אלהים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד (בראשית א:לא). ב"הציג לפניו" כוונתי שהשיג את טבעם והתקשרותם זה בזה, כך שהוא ידע את הנהגתו [של האל] אותם, כיצד היא בכלל ובפרט. אל עניין זה הצביע באומר: בכל ביתי נאמן הוא (במדבר יב:ז). כלומר, הוא הבין את מציאות עולמי כולו הבנה אמיתית בת-קיימא שהרי לדעות הלא-נכונות אין קיום מתמיד. השגת מעשים אלה היא אפוא [השגת] תארו יתעלה אשר מבחינתם הוא יתעלה נודע.

והראיה לכך שהדבר אשר השגתו הובטחה הם מעשיו יתעלה, היא שהדבר אשר בו נודע (הקב"ה למשה) הוא תוארי פעולה גמורים: רחום וחנון ארך אפים (שמות לד:ו). התברר אפוא שהדרכים אשר ביקש לדעתם, והובאו לידיעתו, הם המעשים היוצאים מלפניו יתעלה. החכמים קוראים אותם: מידות. (רמב"ם מורה נבוכים חלק א' פרק נד)

Moshe prayed to God to grant him knowledge of His attributes, and also pardon for His people; when the latter had been granted, he continued to pray for the knowledge of God's essence in the words, "Show me thy glory", and then received, respecting his first request, "Show me thy way," the following favorable reply, "I will make all my goodness to pass before thee"; as regards the second request, however, he was told, "Thou canst not see my face."

The words "all my goodness" imply that God promised to show him the whole creation, concerning which it has been stated, "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good"; when I say "to show him the whole creation," I mean to imply that God promised to make him comprehend the nature of all things, their relation to each

other, and the way they are governed by God both in reference to the universe as a whole and to each creature in particular. This knowledge is referred to when we are told of Moshe, "he is firmly established in all mine house"; that is, "his knowledge of all the creatures in My universe is correct and firmly established"; for false opinions are not firmly established. Consequently the knowledge of the works of God is the knowledge of His attributes, by which He can be known.

The fact that God promised Moshe to give him a knowledge of His works, may be inferred from the circumstance that God taught him such attributes as refer exclusively to His works, "merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness," etc.,. It is therefore clear that the ways which Moshe wished to know, and which God taught him, are the actions emanating from God. Our Sages call them middot (qualities).

God's response to משה of כל טובי means that all of the potential of the universe was expressed within the דרך ה'. So the fact that there is a הלכות דעות does not mean that they are הלכות מידות. It is הלכות דעות because they define the way in which we are supposed to relate to reality, which is what a דעה is, not a מידה. Speaking about מידות as just having a good personality, as some discuss and overly simplify the מידות of the ספירת העומר, is a very limited approach in terms of the nature of the דרך ה' and doesn't explain, really, its identification with תורה, and at best, only functions as a preparation for תורה, whereas in actuality it is the תורה. And simply the דרך ה' that is embedded in the עץ החיים is the דרך עץ החיים, it's a way to get to the עץ החיים. The תורה is the עץ החיים and therefore embeds within it all of the things that אברהם was looking for in being able to have an עץ החיים, the reconstruction of life. So that the דרך עץ החיים is very much the equivalent of תורה itself: in order for us to have the עץ החיים, it is necessary to approach it through the various דעות that this allows us to discover.

When we proceed, then, from פסח to שבעות, we're not simply preparing ourselves for קבלת התורה, rather we are relating to the elements that we need to be aware of that are relevant to human freedom in such a way that allows us to stand on הר סיני and recognize that the תורה that we were given is a matrix that includes within it reality as a whole.

The Nature of חסד

People have the mistaken notion that חסד means 'loving-kindness.' And therefore, it is essentially the Christian idea of being good and kind and sweet and warm and caring and so on that people associate with the notion of חסד. If we take a look at אברהם and what his life was involved in, it is clear that this definition is not going to be sufficient. אברהם was someone whose focus was on עבודת כוכבים – not on being a "nice guy." And yet, we know that everything about אברהם is expressed in terms of him being the

consummate “nice guy.” This image is so salient that the ספר הבהיר actually states that חסד אברהם was חסד incarnate:

כך אמרה מדת החסד כל ימי היות אברהם בעולם לא הוצרכתי
לעשות מלאכתי שהרי אברהם עמד שם במקומי וישמור משמרתי
כי אני זאת מלאכתי שאני מזכה העולם וגו' (ספר הבהיר פ"ו
[קצ"א])

The attribute of חסד stated: all the time during which Avraham existed, I did not have to do my work, as Avraham stood in my place and maintained my guard, for it was this personal duty I merited to have over the world.

Now if this is the case, how is it possible that the most advanced paradigm of what it means to be a Jew should be involved in the multifaceted and unrelated expression of being “Mr. Nice Guy” and the future of Christianity, as it were, and at the same time is involved in the battle against עבודת כוכבים a pursuit so antithetical to Christianity. There is something odd about that. But if one considers further, the answer is actually quite simple, because the source of the idea of אברהם’s monotheism was the recognition that if one continues to apply Occam’s Razor for any secondary level explanation of reality, one is ultimately led to realizing that it seems to be built into the nature of existence that complexity can emerge from it. And so, if you discover Being and you note that all of what we view as being expressions of Being, which are essences rather than existences, are all ultimately somehow the expression of the fact that things exist, then in discovering what רמב"ם calls מצוי ראשון, primal or elemental Being or existence, אברהם discovered חסד itself. And the only reason this could be true is because *involvement in existence* is what חסד itself means.

Obviously, this is a rather cold understanding of the concept חסד, as it doesn’t seem to talk about compassion or any commitment – it’s just sort of the fact that there is some point at which there is a transition between a מצוי ראשון and existence as we find it. Yet, where does this transition deal with the nature of חסד?

חסד שבחסד

The transition is actually in חסד שבחסד.⁸ חסד, as we understand it now, is the expression of existence itself. The חסד שבחסד, then, is something like this: in order for existence to be seen as expressing itself, rather than simply being an arbitrary will to express חסד,⁹ we need to perceive that it is in the nature of the existence that is expressed that it be expressive. And that leads us to the discovery that *Being expresses being*. Essentially the recognition that self-organization is the way in which the world (and by extension, all species, complexity etc.) has come into being, has totally changed our sense of what it means to exist within the universe and be human. The thought that was fundamentally Christian, that God needed to put things into particular formats in order for them to be, was a violation of חסד שבחסד, because what it meant was that nothing could ever be taken as a description of reality but rather as an implication of an

act of will. And an implication of an act of will is always, to some extent, going to be arbitrary from the Jewish point of view. On the other hand, any existential expression which turns out to be based in the format of "what existence implies," is no longer seen as arbitrary. So that if one says, as אברהם discovered, given that if I strip away layer after layer, I end up finding nothing but what appears to be completely random processes behind the most incredibly complex phenomena, what that teaches me is, that given existence, I ultimately can recognize that a universe can come about that expresses the most immense complexity, that appears to have been ordered by an act of will, despite the fact that no will need be apparent at any point.¹⁰ Which means that given Being, we end up with the most incredible details and complexity and it arises from Being itself in a completely self-organized fashion. This was the most fundamental battle that אברהם had with עבודת כוכבים.

עבודת כוכבים is ultimately being Creationist, and in being Creationist, it doesn't necessarily have to posit different gods, although it usually will (because any *ad hoc* explanation will accept the most *ad hoc* explanations), as there is no need to strip away complexity and try and make it elegant. Why make it elegant or understandable? Once one is ready to accept second order explanations, why not say in a universe that is a product of arbitrary applications of will, that everything is applications of multiple wills. So that if there is a war it's because there is a war in the sky. Any *ad hoc* explanation of secondary level phenomena is absolutely unconcerned with elegance. The point of a monotheist is that he is one who sees existence as theism, one who recognizes that the מצוי ראשון is the only name that one can ultimately be given to God himself, Primal Being. So that all elements of that being as expressed in the giving over of Being, are now seen as being extensions. In other words, since I see that even what is not primal being – my own experience of life – nonetheless, even as it is, it expresses the idea that Existence will express itself, which is an astonishing thing. And this is the greatest revelation of the underlying nature of the אחדות ה', because what it means is that the multiplicity of phenomena do not require any type of multiplicity of will, any type of arbitrary elements in terms of where they come from, but rather seem to be joined in their roots as being a single phenomena – existence. Or, in scientific terms, a theory of everything, a simple formula out of which we can now reach all levels of complexity without needing any type of *ad hoc*, arbitrary explanation. This, of course, is the philosopher's stone of science – to have a unifying theory. The reason that אברהם is so central to development of all knowledge, is as רמב"ם opens his work:

יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות, לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון.
(רמב"ם, הלכות יסודי התורה א:א)

The most basic of basic principles and foundation of wisdom is to know that there is something [namely God] that existed before anything else did.

The central idea and the pillar upon which all wisdom and understanding is founded is the recognition that there must be a primal existence. Historians of science all agree that there has never been a non-monotheistic culture that has developed fundamental

science. They may have developed a technology or an interesting taxonomy of various issues (Aristotle certainly did), but the idea that you could strip away reality and find something fundamental underneath it – which is of course the whole basis of modern science, an enterprise which has gone on for centuries to continuously tear away what appear to be laws of nature that are themselves outgrowths of underlying, much more fundamental ideas – that has only happened because of monotheism and its commitment to underlying unity. And therefore, the רמב"ם's statement that all knowledge is ultimately predicated on the recognition of מצוי ראשון, of prime existence, is the very definition of monotheism.

All אברהם was doing was simply stripping down. What he wanted to know was "why?" If one keeps asking why, he will ultimately arrive at discovering God. This notion was captured succinctly by Steven Weinberg in his essay *Newtonianism, Reductionism, and the Art of Congressional Testimony*, (2001) where he explores why "we all do have a sense that there are different levels of 'fundamentalness'"—why, for example, DNA is 'fundamental to biology,' and particle physics is 'fundamental to everything.' In science, Weinberg says,

We try to discover generalizations about nature...because some generalizations are 'explained' by others... after all, does anyone doubt that real materials exhibit [higher-level] phenomena because of the properties of the particles of which the materials are composed? ...so that there are arrows of scientific explanation, which thread through the space of all scientific generalizations... These arrows seem to converge to a common source! Start anywhere in science and, like an unpleasant child, keep asking "Why?" You will eventually get down to the level of the very small.¹¹

This, of course, is the nature of צלם אלוקים. In other words, with this understanding of the fundamental nature of Existence, one can then see the expression of existence in Existence as being within himself exactly the same drive. That is, anything that we ascertain in the expression of Existence, and we ascertain it in the most complex of ways (e.g. consciousness, relationship, pattern, purpose), so that in seeing one's own consciousness, he discovers that Existence is conscious. In doing so, he could say as אברהם says, ומבשרי אחזה אלוה,¹² out of my own flesh I discovered God. Because in recognizing that even contingent existence has within it that level of potential of expression of complexity and detail, he then recognizes that there is a singular Being which is the same for all. This is the nature of חסד.

The English word for חסד, kind, is actually related to this. Kind comes from the word 'kin,' as in kinship or kinder – that is, having a relationship to child, having similarities. Amazingly, עבודת כוכבים is always called אלהים אחרים. חז"ל say that they are called אחרים because they are *different*, they are not of *kind*.

לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים וכי אלוהות הן והלא כבר נאמ' נתון את אלהיהם באש כי לא אלהים המה ומה תלמוד לומר אלים אחרים אלא... אלהים אחרים שהם אחרים לעובדיהם וכן הוא אומ' והן יצעק אליו ולא יענה ומצרתו לא יושיענו. (מכילתא יתרו מסכת דבחדש פרשה ה')

'You should not have other gods.' Could they really be gods? Didn't the passage already say 'to throw their gods into fire' because they are in fact not gods? What, then, is the value of teaching 'other gods?' It comes to show that [these gods] act (indifferently) like 'others' to those who serve them, as it says, behold, he cries to his god, but it does not answer him nor redeem him from his dire straits.

אלהים אחרים are others in the sense that they don't care about you, they are *in-different*, which even in English is the opposite of *kind*! Kindness is indeed the opposite of being in a state-of-difference. And in recognizing the fundamental identification of all things in a single root, we also have the fundamental interrelation that ends up in an expression of kindness, because anything which one shares existence with doesn't need a moral basis for kindness. It is not a moral or ethical structure – it is an existential structure. This is true because everything becomes one's own self. But one's own self doesn't *require* kindness – it *is* kindness. That is what it means. The ultimate חסד is that which one does with himself. And in discovering his kinship with reality, then one's own drive to be, which is the essence of the expression of חסד, ends up being related to kinship, צלם אלוקים and monotheism. What this means, then, is that חסד שבחסד is the element of חסד exclusively involved in the coming into Being, per se. It is not concerned with the overall balance and the impact and the sustainability and maintenance. It would allow for the coming into being of millions of species though they might ultimately be forced into extinction. In terms of הלכה, its equivalent would be the pure concern for life without any interest in moral expression at all, which is, of course, embedded in the מאי חזית דידך סומק טפי of הלכה:

ההוא דאתא לקמיה דרבה, אמר ליה אמר לי מרי דוראי קטליה לפלניא, ואי לא קטילנא לך. אמר ליה נקטלך ולא תקטול. מאי חזית דדמא דידך סומק טפי דילמא דמא דההוא גברא סומק טפי. (פסחים דף כה/ב ויומא דף פב:ב)

A certain individual came before Raba and presented him the following dilemma: the governor of the city has ordered that he slay a certain man or himself suffer death. [Raba] said to him: You must allow yourself to be slain rather than slay another, for how do you know that your blood is any redder than his, perchance his blood is redder than yours?

So that if one is stripped down to the question of pure being, one cannot make the argument that one life is worth much more than another, even Moshe Rabbeinu's life

being worth more than a robber, because when it comes to life and existence per se, how does one know that one's blood is any redder than the next person. The "redness of blood" here is a reference to nature's expression of the ongoing sustainability of life. If this fact cannot be addressed, then one has no way of making any moral choice.

This is also expressed in that most early of images of אברהם as being open to being kind with anyone who passed his way:

עשה לו פונדק ופתח לו שני פתחים לכל רוח והיה מקבל העוברים
והשבים (מדרש המכירי ישעיה מא:ב)

*He made an inn for himself where two doors were open on
each side in order to receive any passerby...*

So when we talk about the non-differentiated חסד that אברהם is famous for, it is because he had an absolute connection to the underlying source of Being, and therefore, he saw everything as natural outgrowths of that being to which he desired to connect and relate to. And indeed, in one's connection to the underlying source of Being, he can become himself an expression of the nature of ברכה that is given through Creation itself, just as אברהם did:

אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש [בראשית יב] ואעשך לגוי גדול זהו
שאומרים אלקי אברהם, ואברכך זהו שאומרים אלקי יצחק,
ואגדלה שמך זהו שאומרים אלקי יעקב, יכול יהו חותמין בכולן
תלמוד לומר והיה ברכה בך חותמין, ואין חותמין בכולן. (פסחים דף
ק"ז:)

R. Shimon ben Lakish said: It is written: 'And I will make of thee a great nation, 'this refers to the phrase, 'the God of Abraham' used in prayer. 'I will bless thee' refers to 'the God of Yitzchak,' and 'make thy name great' refers to 'the God of Ya'akov'; and lest we assume that the conclusion of the blessings should also be made to embrace all three terms, the passage therefore ends with "and thou shalt be a blessing," signifying that only one (Avraham) should form the concluding blessing.



This essay is based on a transcription of a lecture delivered by
R. M. Weinberg in Jerusalem, Israel in 2003.

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endnotes:

¹ See רמב"ן

² אבות ב:ו

³ בראשית פרק יח:יט

⁴ ויקרא יח:ל

⁵ See also the Talmudic interpretation of this phrase as it applies in this context: "עשו משמרת למשמרתי" (יבמות כא.) (Ed.)

⁶ See "ושמרתם ועשיתם" (דברים ד:ו) on פרש"י

⁷ See רמב"ם הלכות דעות פרק א:ג

⁸ In light of the self-referential term **חסד שבחסד**, it should be noted that any type of matrix ultimately is going to be self-defined. In other words, its only truth is within itself. This is basically Kurt Gödel's understanding that there is no system that could possibly be proven from within the system – every system is going to be self-defined. One always has to be outside of the system in order to prove it. The point of **חסד** is that we have reached the level in which there is nothing else but existence. And so, it is what we find that is what there is. There is no outside – we have to say the given is "what is." And "what is" is the only thing that we can relate to is reality. But that means that it is going to be self-defined and in such a way that is recursively defined, because the definitions as given end up defining themselves. This is very much a function of pattern and chaos overall. All of the patterns that come out in chaotic systems are essentially recursive, so that we feed back the input into a formula and then we take the results and feed them back into the formula etc. The **דרך ה'** as it was expressed kabalistically is very much a recursive structure in which numbering is actually the vision that was used by the **בעלי קבלה** so that they abstracted ideas into **ספירות**, which simply mean 'numbers,' and these relationships between this system ends up creating patterns that could then be understood conceptually even though they are exceedingly abstract. So that one won't expect to note a pattern until examining some parts of the recursive structure. As such, this is a system of the **מדות היום** becomes clear only after several of the points are unmasked.

⁹ That is to say, if existence is only a product of the notion of "God has so determined that things should exist", then this arbitrary expression of divine will has no implications for us, because that determination is just an act of will and will is uncaused. That same will could just as easily wipe out the world as it was used to create it.

¹⁰ And it doesn't matter that one could say that such could be found in an infinite series of possible universes, it wouldn't make any difference, you're simply pushing off the level of chaos and randomness.

¹¹ In a classic tale of U.S. Congressional proceedings, Weinberg presented his opinion while testifying to the Congress Agency for Science, Space and Technology in support of Superconducting Super-Collider Project in 1987. After Weinberg's speech, Harris W. Fawell (R, Illinois), who supported the project, asked of the Nobel Laureate, "Will this help us to find God? Maybe you did not have it in mind, but your research will help us to know more about Universe." To this, Don Ritter (R, Pennsylvania), who was against the project, replied "If the machine does *this*, I will change opinion and support it!"

¹² איוב יט:כה