

What Is The Derech and Who's Off It?

A Discussion Of Core Jewish Values

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This shiur is dedicated l'ilui nishmas Dovid Yehudah ben Avrohom, olov hasholom, father of Shelley Berke and Alex Jacobs whose yahrtzeit is tonight; and also l'ilui nishmas Vivian Stanhill, Chaim Yitzchak ben Dovid Boruch v'Mino, olov hasholom, father of my dear friend David Stanhill who is presently sitting shiva for his father in America.

In the hope that this makes it easiest for everyone to hear, I will mute all participants; but at the end of the shiur in about half an hour I will unmute and stay on the line for those who wish to challenge, comment or question.

I am recording this shiur, so please do not make a comment unless you are happy for the comment to be recorded. For any technical issues during the shiur, please use the chat function, which Yisroel has very kindly agreed to monitor. If the internet connection drops please stay on the line and I will be back as soon as possible. The shiur will hopefully be available on my website in text and video form in due course.

There are three words that many of us are going to become more familiar with over the next few weeks then we have been for the past many years.

These are the words Keil Melech Ne'emon that we add before saying Shema if davening without a minyan. For many of us, it has been relatively rare to say Krias Shema without a minyan, but over the past week and in the immediate future we are going to have to get used to it, and therefore to adding these words.

The words Keil Melech Ne'emon are added when we say the Shema on our own to complete the traditional 248 words of Krias Shema, corresponding to the traditional Rabbinic representation of the number of limbs in the body. When we daven with a minyan the number of 248 is made up by the repetition of Hashem Eloikeichem Emess at the end by the baal tefillo, and when we daven alone we substitute for that by adding the words Keil Melech Ne'emon at the beginning.

Those words are chosen in part because they form an acrostic Aleph, Mem, Nun – making the word Omein, which is our traditional affirmation of the truth of what we say.

But the words are also individually interesting choices as preparation for the sentence in the Shema that articulates and asserts our belief in a single God.

The word Keil is one of the names of God, and it is one of the names that corresponds to or reflects the divine attributes of mercy and kindness, the Midas Hachessed.

The Vilna Gaon has an interesting elaboration on this theme which was told to me many years ago by my then neighbour in shul, Jack Ordman. The Vilna Gaon notes that the two most common names of Hashem that we use – Yud Keh Vov Keh, and Eloikim, both represent core attributes of God, the first representing kindness and the second representing judgement. But the first two letters of Yud Keh Vov Keh themselves form a name of Hashem, and that name is associated with the Midas Hadin, the attribute of judgement. And the first two letters of the name of Hashem Eloikim form the shem Hashem Keil, the name appearing in the three words we say before the Shema, which also represent a separate name of God, in this case one associated with the Midas Hachessed, the attribute of mercy or kindness. So, notes the Vilna Gaon, intrinsically incorporated within the attribute of mercy is an element of judgement, and intrinsically incorporated in the attribute of judgement is an element of mercy.

The second word that we say before the Shema – Melech – attests to God as King. This has two implications for us. First, it reminds us of our voluntary subservience to God as our king, our choice to become citizens of a virtual kingdom – Meloich Al Kol Ho'oilom Kulo. Having accepted the yoke of the kingdom of heaven – oil malchus shomayim – as we say in the preparatory paragraphs before the Shema, it becomes appropriate for us to feel and show an element of modesty in keeping with our self-classification as servants of God as King. On the other hand, the assertion of God as our King reminds us that there is a divine attribute of Malchus which we are required to emulate, as with all divine attributes, and which is articulated in the form of a power or strength, which we harness by showing moral courage and fortitude in our adherence to our faith. (It is

this aspect of our proclamation of God as King that has led Jewish martyrs over the years to die with the words of Shema on their lips, showing the ultimate in moral courage.)

The third word – Ne’emon – also has two aspects to it. It represents something that we believe in, coming from the root Emunah – belief. But that route is in itself two of the letters that make up the word Emess – Truth. By adding the final letter Soph, we have the first letter of the alphabet Aleph, the middle letter of the alphabet Mem and the final letter of the alphabet Sof, the truth being the understanding of any situation that takes account of all its aspects from beginning to end.

The three concepts represented by these three words remind us of three characteristics attributed to each of the founding fathers of our religion, Avrohom, Yitchok and Yaakov – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The last verse in Micah, chapter 7:12 – “Titein Emess L’Yaakov, Chessed L’Avrohom” – reminds us that Avrohom ovinu exemplified chessed, while Yaakov ovinu exemplified Emess; and Yitschok ovinu exemplifies the dual resonance of Malchus: he was the first person represented as being content to die in the service of God the King (in the akeido) but he is also represented by the rabbis as exemplifying not weakness but the opposite – Gevurah – moral courage.

So the first word of our phrase Keil Melech Ne’emon represents the attribute of kindness, which corresponds with Avrohom Avinu. The second word represents the attribute of moral strength, which corresponds

with Yitschok. And the third word represents the concept of belief and striving towards truth, which corresponds with Yaakov.

These concepts also correspond with a classic description in the Gemoro in Yevomos 79b of the eternal signs or characteristics of the Jewish people, the qualities which determine us as a nation: Rachmonim, Baishonim v'Gomlei Chassodim – compassionate, modest and doers of kindness.

As for the first – Rachmonim – we are said to display the characteristic of kindness, embodied in the name Keil which is the first of the three words that we say before the Shema.

The second – Baishonim, or modesty – is less a pre-occupation with particular issues of dress-code and more an all-round comprehensive modesty that is a natural product of an all-encompassing subservience to the Divine, and a consciousness of ourselves as being less important than the values which we serve and represent. It is therefore a reflection of our acceptance of the Kingship of God, which is the second of the three words that we say before the Shema – Melech.

Gomlei Chassodim appears to repeat the motif of kindness, but it adds the concept of gemilut. The Malbim and others explain the concept of gemilut as reciprocity, or some kind of inter-connection between the person doing the act and the person receiving it. At first sight this downgrades the concept of chessed from something being done out of love into being something done in the hope of mutual benefit.

We all remember that Rashi brings the midrashic commentary on the name of the bird the stork – the Chassidah – that it is given this name because it performs acts of kindness for its mate. The rabbis question on this why, in that case, is the Stork not a kosher bird as representing good Middos – good characteristics – rather than a treifa bird that cannot be eaten because it represents bad characteristics: and the answer is, quite simply, that chessed done to one's family is not kindness, it is simply self-interest.

So when the Rabbis characterise us as Gomlei Chassidim they are not referring to disinterested kindness, but to something else. (Of course, they have already included disinterested kindness in the concept of Rachmonim – compassion and empathy for others.) Gemilus chassodim is about being part of a societal structure where rule-following insures the greatest good of the greatest number: it is part of *yashrus* - straight dealing, honesty and adherence to Emess – to truth – in our dealings with others, that is so much part of the Divine that according to the Talmud the very first question we will be asked in the next world is not about ritual observance or anything remotely connected to it, but simply “Nososo v’nosoto b’emunah? – did you deal with the rest of the world with Emunah – with strict adherence to the rules and dealing faithfully with the reciprocal system of the rule of law?” And this concept of belief in truth links us to the last of the three words that we say before the Shema, Ne’emon.

There are three particularly famous occasions on which the entirety of Judaism is encapsulated in a single phrase.

At the end of Koheles – Ecclesiastes – Shlomo HaMelech says: “Sof dovor hakol nishma, es ho’eloikim y’ro v’es mitzvosov shmor, ki zeh kol ho’odom” – which freely translates as “At the end of the day all that matters for a person is to show real yiras shomayim – fear of Heaven – and to build her or his observance of the ritual mitzvos on that solid foundation”.

In Micah chapter 6:8 the prophet says “higid lecho odom mah tov u’ma Hashem doreish mimcho, ki im asos mishpot v’ahavas chesed, v’hatsnei’o leches im eloikeicho” – “What does Hashem want of you, other than to do justice and kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”.

And famously the Gemora in Shabbos 31a has Hillel respond to a request to teach the whole Torah at a single lesson by saying something along the lines of: “what is hateful to you don't do to someone else, that is the whole Torah – the rest is commentary, go and learn it”.

This comment of Hillel relates directly to the reciprocal nature of Gemilus Chessed as the foundation of the rule of law, and was expressly referred to as such in the leading tort case *Donoghue v Stevenson* in the House of Lords in 1932, when Lord Atkins said “The rule that you are to love your neighbour becomes in law, you must not injure your neighbour.”

Each of these three encapsulations of Judaism has a slightly different emphasis; but they all expressly acknowledge that Judaism is a complete package, and that the moral traits of kindness, modesty and justice are the

bedrock on which the rest of our Jewish observance must rest if it is to achieve anything useful.

As we said in the name of the Vilna Gaon at the beginning, even the name of God that represents kindness has to show justice and truth within it, and all our three middos of Rachmonim, Baishonim v'Gomlei Chassodim are required to be individual facets of a balance incorporating the three concepts in a well-constructed coherent foundation on which our ritual performance can lie.

If we wondered why the orthodox Jewish community locally, nationally and internationally is haemorrhaging adherents, particularly among the young, we could do no better than simply ask ourselves – are we offering a perception of ourselves as a community that reflects these three concepts of Rachmonim, Baishonim and Gomlei Chassodim? Are we obviously and clearly associated with compassion, empathy, modesty, moral courage, and adherence to truth and straight dealing?

Just asking the question is enough for us to give ourselves a resounding answer – no: as a community we clearly are not.

The key moral issues of today that our more spiritually attuned and morally-driven youngsters consider the most urgent are problems of global preservation, climate change, ecological destruction, and, as they come nearer to home, pressing ethical issues in relation to homelessness, poverty, equality, social isolation, discrimination and bigotry of all kinds.

As a Jewish community are we conspicuously in the forefront of addressing these moral issues? In a limited way, of course, we are well known for, for example, addressing issues of poverty – but most conspicuously within our own community. We do look after our own – or perhaps we did more effectively than we do now. It is true that we still have food distribution projects within our community, as of course so do many other local faith-based and purely secular communities; but in so far as they are community-based, again these are very much like the Stork doing chessed for its mate; this is self-interest in the preservation of our own community, not driven by our compassion to empathise with all human beings as creations of the Divine.

Of course, we do some of that as well. There are Jewish charities that operate in a wider field with conspicuous gallantry and great effect. But, again, is this what we are known for as a community?

On modesty, of course again there are many individual orthodox Jews for whom modesty is a byword: but how do we represent ourselves as a community? Are we more famous for moderation and modesty and walking humbly with our God, or for luxury cars, six-course weddings and expensive Paris-modelled clothes?

And on yashrus and emess – straight-dealing and truth – what should we take from the fact that the very first Jewish charity to close during the recession a few years ago in the UK was the Jewish Association for Business Ethics? As a community, we flock happily to any business providing goods that we require for our ritual observance, without asking

or caring whether, for example, the businesses that we use pay their suppliers on time, avoid indulging in regular strategic bankruptcies, pay their staff properly and treat their competitors respectfully and in accordance with reasonable standards of commercial morality. All too often, when instances of tax evasion, housing benefit fraud and other crimes of dishonesty are exposed within the community they are treated not with astonishment and expulsion, but with an acceptance that appears sometimes to transcend resignation and to flirt with admiration.

The present temporary destruction of our community is an extended Tisha B'Av, requiring us all to experience a hisbodedus – a one-to-one reconnection with God; and it is potentially a fantastically important opportunity for us to recalibrate the fundamentals of our community, and to rebuild it afterwards as a genuine reflection of our core values – Rachmonim, Baishonim v'Gomlei Chassodim.

Our increasing obsession with Toras Moishe – with the ritual side of Judaism – has without doubt been at the expense of our Toras Avrohom, the incorporation of the key values of Avrohom, Yitschok and Yaakov into our daily lives. As a community, we have departed so far from incorporating core values into our daily observances that nobody can be surprised if our most spiritual and morally-driven youngsters look at the community as spiritually bankrupt, and desert it out of contempt. If they are, as they so often are, driven into the arms of non-Jewish partners with whom they feel better able to establish a morally focused and ethically constructive life, whose fault is that: ours or theirs? (Clue – it's ours.)

The truth is that the answer to the question in the title of this shiur – Who Is Off The Derech? – is quite simple: the derech is off the derech. Our community has strayed massively from its core fundamental values, and this period of isolation is an opportunity to reflect, to re-connect with God one-to-one, to re-calibrate and eventually to rebuild.

It's lovely that services are being live streamed, shiurim are being live streamed and that we are doing as much as we can to maintain the services and institutions of our community. But this should not be allowed to become a frustrating and necessarily largely illusory attempt to maintain our reliance on what is at least in part a spiritually dysfunctional community. One of the positives that could emerge from this enforced isolation is that we reduce our reliance on community and strengthen our individual relationships with our own conception of a God of compassion, modesty, moral courage and truth.

Like all of us, I look forward to the restoration of our full communal functions: but I am not hoping for a return to normal. Personally, I hope our community will never return to what has become normal: I hope that each of us will come out of this enforced seclusion with an enhanced personal relationship with God and the core values of the Divine, the realisation that our community has failed to incorporate those core values effectively for many years, and with a determination to refashion it in a way that includes into every aspect of our ritual lives and every aspect of our wider lives, the core Jewish values of compassion, kindness, modesty, moral courage, truth and straight-dealing.

Perhaps our new communities could be as involved in food banks for the wider community and anti-poverty initiatives for the whole world as with our own shabbos tables; wouldn't it be lovely if every kiddush was matched with either a local foodbank or a community aid project in a less developed country, so that we can give real enthusiastic and energetic expression to our concern for others worldwide? Wouldn't it be great if every time we planted trees in Israel in honour of someone's special occasion, we were also digging a well in a community regeneration project somewhere in Asia? And wouldn't it be great if we showed renewed energy and determination to solve social isolation issues within our own community – notably agunot, absorbing geirim effectively and enthusiastically, and making room for those who don't fit the clone-stereotypes for any one of a wide range of reasons, but at the same time addressing the bigotry and discrimination that many of those people face in the general world? So our new communities could be energetically involved in addressing issues of exclusion, isolation and discrimination both outside our community and within it. Perhaps we could show that we take climate change at least as seriously – and address it at least as energetically – as those for whom it is the single greatest threat for the world today. And perhaps our new communities will be as concerned with the ethics of the businesses that we deal with as with their standards of ritual observance.

If we do even some of these things then we will not return to normal, but we will rebuild something of much greater spiritual power than we have had for many years, and we will use our core Jewish values to reawaken the *ruchnius* of our people, and through our people the whole world, ad

sheyovo Melech, Goel U'Moschiach, bimheiro b'yomeinu omein,
v'omein.

That is the end of the shiur. Those who need to leave now will of course do so, but I will *bli neder* stay on the line as long as anybody wants to challenge, discuss or question. Thank you all for joining and warm wishes to all.
