

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Maharal Sefer Netivas HaShalom - Notes from June 10 2007

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Just a word regarding parochialism, where different communities have to protect their own interests. If I were interested in my children getting an education and I was Moroccan, I would vote for Shas because that is the party that will get the money flowing into the schools that will serve my children. Conversely, if I am not I would probably vote for a different party, a party that will represent my own interests. The question is where does representing your own interests fit into the whole picture of l'shma if we are trying to move beyond being like Bilaam. The answer ideally should be that we should see each one as having individual integrity, that we want everyone to have what is theirs, which means that they don't have to be "you", you don't have to convert them to being "you", which means that it is okay for them to demand what is theirs, just as it is okay for you to demand what is yours. But there has to be a continual picture of all of these puzzle pieces being part of the bigger picture of the puzzle. Sometimes we live up to this challenge and sometimes we blow it. When we succeed we become people of klal yisroel and some of our leaders have succeeded with this beautifully and in our own time, when we see—my kids brought home this video of Reb Shteinman and the Gerrer Rebbe in Paris, and all over – each one was himself. The Rosh Yeshiva did not start giving out brachas for parnasa and shidduchim, and the Gerrer Rebbe didn't become a Rosh Yeshiva giving little drashas. They stayed themselves with such mutual respect and friendship, it was a beautiful thing to see. But they do part ways at a certain point. Reb Shteinman went on to Manchester and Gateshead where people who respond to him and value him happen to be living, while the Rebbe went on to Amherst, where the same holds true for him. But it didn't diminish their mutual respect. But it did show that they see the integrity of their own communities also as being part of this puzzle. Was this easy to pull off? NO. Does everyone pull it off? NO. Is it easy to be entrapped by this? YES. But what we have to remember again, when we see flaws, even in our leadership, because the leadership is always a reflection of who WE are, when we see flaws, we have to get beyond the flaws and look at what we can learn from them and what is beautiful and what is good.

I want to share something with you that I experienced this week before we begin the shiur in a formal way. I had to go to a dinner, which I don't like – I don't like dressing up and fancy meals and sometimes I don't like the speeches or the small talk. It is not my cup of tea. But I had to go for a kindergarten in Har Nof called Gan Harmony, a kindergarten that services children both with special needs and without special needs. My daughter is the educational director there so I had to go. Part of the dinner involved having two kindergarten graduates who are now adults speak. One of them was a special adult, a Downs Syndrome young man, and the other was a normal young man, both 24. The Down's man spoke first, he had composed his own speech with some help and you could see it was his own speech. He began by thanking the crew of Gan Harmony for preparing him so well that when he went on to first grade in the special ed school they actually put him into second grade because they believed in him, just as they did in Gan Harmony. And he began to speak about his current life. He works for the Knesset in the mail room – I have to say that made me think funny things because it was the Knesset – and he went on to say as we say in Pirket Avos that a person should learn Torah, so I learn Torah every day. And then I began to listen, how does he learn Torah every day when he is not in school? It is not so simple, even people who are intelligent and motivated don't always learn when they don't have the framework. How does he pull this off? Turns out he gets this periodical in the mail – a parsha thing written for children- and then he mentioned that on Shabbos he also learns with his chaverusa, a chaverusa who is not a relative or a paid person, just a neighbor, who has been learning Pirket Avot with him an hour on Shabbos for 8 years. Why am I telling you this? The reason is I happen to know this person very slightly. This is a person who lives what we are talking about now, who sees the beauty in every person he encounters. As soon as he said this, everyone at my table who knew him, the man's name is Rabbi Benjy Levine, said, "That is just like Benjy, it is so much like Benjy." Then someone said another interesting little story about him. For various reasons, Benjy had to buy a burial plot for himself and his wife. And he asked the chevra kadisha who is to be buried on the other

side of my plot, my wife is on this side, who is there? They gave him the name of the man and he called the man up and he said "We are going to be neighbors for a long time and our son is getting married next week, come to the wedding, we should get to know each other." Now the reason I am telling this story to you, it is not a dramatic story, high impact, deep passion, p'kuach nefesh stories, but it shows a certain love and regard for other people that I found very moving. This is what we have to aim towards. In our leadership, we have to look at our leaders with love and overlook things that sometimes really are flaws. Reb Nosson says in Lkeutei Hamara something very interesting and so profound. He says that it is within human nature that when we look up to someone we look at them critically. Sometimes it is better in our own minds to see our leaders as tzaddikim of our times as equal to ourselves and we will be more forgiving of their flaws.

Having said that, let's go on to our shiur in Netivat HaShalom.

Chapter 2

The topic here is how to actually pursue Shalom.

He begins by saying, Everyone who knows that his friend will usually say shalom to him should say shalom first. Pursue Shalom. And if you greeted him and he didn't answer back, he is called a thief who burnt the vineyard, for the man is in your house. Now he is going to explain this gemara.

Going back to the things we know from the last perek, shalom means completing something, putting all the pieces together so it becomes something. So if you can't give shalom, then something is lacking. Therefore you have to actively pursue shalom, because it completes everything including of course yourself and your own piece of the puzzle. If you know that your friend is going to greet you you have to precede him and say shalom to him because if you are not doing it, you are not pursuing peace, you are letting it happen. As one of the great civil rights leaders used to say, you are either on the bus or you are off the bus. Either you are pursuing peace or you are not pursuing peace. Either you are actively putting the pieces together or you are not, you are passive. You need to pro-actively pursue peace. That is what happens if a person doesn't say shalom. He is now expanding this. Whenever you see something that is incomplete, do what you can to make it whole, to make it good, to put the puzzle pieces together. Everything that you encounter in the world, you should try to find its wholeness and be pro-active in bringing it about. That means that if you are eating a pear, hold it in your right hand and look at it and experience it. If you see someone that you don't know, get to know them, bring the puzzle pieces of you and of them together, since obviously Hashem engineered that you meet each other. When a person is very thirsty, he is going to pursue water, because that is what completes him, that is what gives him what he is lacking. The deeper you feel the lack of something, the more intuitively you try to fill that lack. The more we are aware of lack of wholeness, the more we have to pursue it. Proactively.

Therefore when a person is lacking in peace, and we don't have peace unless we are together with all of the others who form the greater whole, then we have to pursue it. We have to pursue it. We spoke about this also in Pirket Avos. You have to make it happen. I will give you an example. There was a young woman who got married, and when she married she was a little older, as was her husband, and they are different. They are certainly different from the people who are living in their apartment building. I am going to disguise the next part in case you might have some idea of who I am talking about. They are more artistic, less conventional, she is a dancer, and here they are, living right across the hall from the daughter of a Chassidische Rebbe and her Rosh Yeshiva husband. So what do you think she anticipated living in this sort of door to door relationship? She thought they would have a pleasant peaceful hi how are you relationship and that would be the end of it because they have nothing in common. The Rebbetzin, who is a person of great peace, for whom this is intuitive, I can't imagine that she ever saw this, but this is her, she wants everyone to feel whole, she went shopping, stopped at her neighbor's door, and said you have to see the skirt I bought. Now this is someone she doesn't know! She takes the skirt out of the package, shows it to her, tells her where she bought it, how much it cost, invites her over. She was actively pursuing a relationship by giving this woman something of herself which the woman reciprocated and appreciated and they are good friends. This is what pursuing peace means. It means going forward with what you can give of yourself to the other person, give them your wholeness so they can become part of you. Be generous with yourself, be unstinting with yourself.

Great is shalom. In all of the other mitzvahs it says "as thus". If you see your enemy loading his donkey "then" you have to help him with his load. If something happens to which you have to make a response, respond. But you don't have to look for donkeys. You don't have to make it happen. But here, you have to go looking for opportunities to give of yourself so you can make wholeness happen. Look for opportunities. You are online in the supermarket. Say hello to the woman in back of you. Make a small comment about the weather or about the product you are buying just to make her feel at ease and comfortable and feel good.

Treat people who serve you as though they are human beings.

The medrash says, look for it in your place and pursue it in another place. Everything is completed through peace. Since we said that it is within our nature that we always pursue completion, and that means closure, we want our needs to be met, experiencing closure in fancy English, not yearning and lack. And everybody moves towards what they think will make them whole. One of the saddest things about our generation is movie addiction. People just want to see someone else's life on the screen. Sometimes it is pernicious and evil, love and violence and promiscuity and what have you, but sometimes, and even in innocent movies, you just want to see someone else live their life. The formula is the same, the introduction of characters, the story, the climax, the resolution – but we love seeing that resolution, that end where everything fits together. But it is not true. That is the only problem.

When you plant a seed in the earth it moves and progresses and grows until its completion. And you can only rest once it is complete. Unless there is an embryo inside its mother, it moves until it is complete. There is a growth impulse in everything that says go, complete yourself, finish. Therefore, peace, which makes everything complete, it is something you have to pursue. Unlike the other things that we have no choice about pursuing, the embryo can't choose whether or not to grow until it is fully formed, and the plant can't choose whether it should form leaves and eventually blossom. Here Hashem gave us free choice, but we have to see this free choice as something to do in a spiritual sense as organic. And a person shouldn't rest until they feel this completion in everything.

If your friend says shalom to you and you don't answer, you are a thief. This will be explained. Because when you make shalom, you make everything into one, you unify everything. There is peace between them. If a person says shalom to you and you don't return it, which will have unified everything, this is theft. You robbed that person of the opportunity to feel whole, to feel united with you, to become part of a greater whole.

I read a very disturbing letter to the editor in one of the newspapers where a woman was living in Yerushalayim and she was living in an observant neighborhood, and she said when she goes to the park there is a sort of clique, where the women all sit tother under the tree leaving her and the newcomers on the sunny bench, and she feels excluded. So she wrote this as a public kvetch, and I am not sure why the newspaper published it, but it certainly was something that the woman felt strongly. I am not saying it was wrong to publish it, it was just a very down home letter. If you read the letter, you might think, how petty. But it is not petty. The pain that the woman was feeling is called exclusion, and when someone wants to be included and you exclude them you are robbing them of unity that is really everyone's heritage, we are one people and everyone has the right to belong. This happens a lot, old people are excluded, bale teshuvot are excluded, childless people feel excluded. Older gentlemen are excluded. We have to make it our business to include the excluded people as well as those excluding them. We have to pursue peace. That means, and this is very difficult, to go up to someone in who you have no interest and say hi how are you. That is very hard. But it is kind to do this.

The person gave you shalom and if you return it you would be one. If it were to be mutual, they become one and this is what peace does. And if you won't do this, if you stay in the position of being exclusive, then you are a thief. Now this raises two very serious questions, especially for women who value communication and sometimes relationships more than some men do. Could you be everyone's best and most intimate friend? Neither could you nor is it necessarily a desirable goal. There is a difference between giving something of yourself to someone and sharing your most intimate secrets. You have to be very selective of who you make your best friend. So says Mesillas Yesharim because in a certain sense, the influence you have on each other is so great that you have to be very discerning. You can be at peace and truly have something to give honestly to everyone and to receive from them. The problem that sometimes arises is that one person wants a greater level of inclusion than the other person is prepared to give. Meaning, Danielle feels excluded unless Rona tells her everything. Rona does not want to exclude Danielle, she wants friendship, she wants wholeness, she sees her beauty and humankind, but she doesn't want to tell her everything, nor should she. So there are difficulties, but the best way to deal with this difficulty is for Rona to keep on affirming Danielle's goodness without giving her more than she feels is appropriate, more than indeed is appropriate. This means that the fact that you are giving of yourself does not mean that there should never be a boundary – there has to be a boundary and the clearer the boundaries are, the more real peace there is, because when each piece of the puzzle maintains its own integrity, the puzzle is whole.

The person who attaches themselves to three things and distances themselves from three things. The first is attach yourself to chalutzot. If a man dies without children, his wife is obligated to marry his brother in order to bring down a child who would bear the deceased brother's soul and offer completion. Today we no longer practice this so the Torah provides for an alternative practice which is "release." The next thing a

person should be attached to is bringing about peace. That one is easy. And the third is annulling vows. Now he explains all of them I am just listing them now but we will explain these as we go.

The three things we have to reject is refusal, holding onto security, and being a guarantor.

Surprising, what does one thing have to do with the other? What these two sets of rules is telling you is that in this world, as things go, that as the pieces work, for each one to have its own integrity and order, there are times when they have to be far from each other and times when they have to be close. There always has to be peace, and sometimes there has to be closeness and sometimes there has to be distance. And sometimes there doesn't have to be particular distancing or closeness, but things should be as they were created without moving from their place. When a person attaches to chalutzah, that means distance. They don't marry, she doesn't marry her brother-in-law, she doesn't bring down a child. But given the circumstances, and we just discussed this as appropriate, this maintains each one's integrity. This fits in the first paradigm which is that sometimes there should be distance. Why? Because it is possible and this is halacha in today's day, but if they marry the relationship won't be l'shaim mitzvahs. If a man marries his sister-in-law because of her beauty, it is as though he was in an incestuous relationship. Even though there is time when it is appropriate to do the leverite marriage and not chalitzah, the release, there is also a time for distance. That is our example of distance. It means when is distance appropriate? When kiruv is corrupting, when drawing close is corrupting. The opposite of that is bringing peace to make attachment. In case you didn't notice this, it is human nature that we are full of quarrels and contentions. Therefore, it says attach yourself to bringing about peace, to take the differences away from people and to take the differences away so that there can be peace between them. That is the second thing, there are times when we have to proactively draw things together. When it is not corrupting, and conversely each one can become more whole, then you can draw things together. Annulling vows – if you make a neder and it brings something closer or further than it should be, then the correct thing is to annul the vow. The person should not draw close something the Torah did not say to draw close, for instance, a person might say from now on I will wear only yellow clothing, and they shouldn't distance themselves from what the Torah says not to be distant from, and the person makes a neder for something unnecessary, he takes himself out of the group, out of the overlying unity of Klal Yisroel and he makes his own private Torah. So instead of being bound with every other Jew in what the Torah unites us, this person is making their own Torah, and he forbids to himself things that would otherwise be permitted. Now there are exceptions to this, if the person needs to make a neder in order to get to doing what the Torah says, as a means to being in the middle, he makes an extreme, but it is never an end in and of itself. Therefore, a person who makes a neder is as though he has built a private altar which is called forbidden, and the person who keeps that vow instead of annulling it, it is as though he made an offering on that altar. The explanation of this is that a person who builds his own private altar is separating himself by making his own private altar and sees his own way of worshiping as being superior and better than that of the klal. He is not part of the community. This conglomerate of klal Yisroel is our beauty and our health, with a single mizbeach. If a person builds a private mizbeach therefore, a person who makes a neder forbidding himself something that the Torah permits has made a Torah that is his private property and it has no relationship to the entirety of Am Yisroel. In that sense, it is as though he has made his own private altar and has separated himself from the tzibbur. In earlier times, when people brought bomot, they didn't think they were doing something wrong, they thought they were doing something even better, something super, their own active religious passion and devotion because they never grasped those who built bomot, they become bigger by being part of the klal Yisroel, becoming more and more yourself. And it says, a person who actually keeps this vow instead of annulling it, that person is analogous to someone offering on a bomot, which makes it much more severe because in Nefesh HaChaim it says, Hashem is the shadow of your right hand. Whatever you do creates a Divine response. This is Yaakov's ladder, He sends angels up and other angels come down. Even thought has an effect, speech has a profound effect, but when you do deed, even though speech in a certain sense is stronger than deed by the way because it is the essence of what a person is, a deed because it is so this worldly takes something out of the otherworldly and it brings it down here. The person who just made a boma isn't all comparable to a person who actually sacrificed on it. Similarly, a person who felt an inner need to make a neder, to feel superior, even though it separates him, once he actually does it and concretizes it, it is much worse. To annul a vow, it is not like the other two chalitzah and to go after peace, all three are different. With the aboma, you are making distance to create integrity, in making peace you are drawing close in order to create unity, and in the case of annulling vows, you are creating both simultaneously/, not letting the person reject the klal while at the same time they maintain their integrity just not more than their initial integrity. These things parallel chesed (more kavod lchaver), gevurah (distance) and tiferet (this mixture.) This draws something closer or more distant, but it is still in the same place.

A person should distance himself from miyum, which is if a father receives kedushin for a daughter who is not yet the age of majority, she has the right of refusal when she reaches majority. So in some ways, this is similar to what we said about chalitzah, there is something inappropriate here, and especially with chalitzah he

brings a Gemara that in general the woman doesn't feel affection toward the brother-in-law. But here, stay away from miyum is not the same because what someone does is not thought of in the deed that is thought out. He brings out other examples that are somewhat off target. So miyum is like chalitza but somewhat off target. Something that offers security (deposit) on one hand it draws you together, but on the other hand the thing becomes your thing but it is really theirs. Let me give you an example of this, supposed someone gave you a diamond ring for security. They want the loan and you did them a favor and they give you this diamond in order to get this favor and when they pay this loan you will give this back. You are allowed to wear it? NO. It is not yours. With collateral, people tend to take what is not theirs and see it as though it is theirs even when they keep the law. There is a certain relationship that lends itself to crossing boundaries. And that is not appropriate. The last one is being a guarantor. If he doesn't pay, I will pay. You have taken over a person's life too much when you say that. "I am him" and you mean it as an act of friendship and there are times when it is appropriate and permitted, it is not what you should want. He is being very very careful. When you are talking about making shalom you are not talking about becoming the other person, or taking over their life, which is what happens when people don't keep boundaries.

A person should be with their friends in accordance with mautz – you should be very clear in your mind how much closeness, how much distance, and how much leaving things alone. You have to think.

He leaves us with this – that we have to think – I would like for him to give us a formula, but he says we have to think. What could you do? The goal in all three things is shalom, which means that the other person has their integrity, you have your integrity and there is still unity. Let that be your guiding light in determining where the boundaries belong and where they don't belong, when they can be moved, and when they shouldn't be moved .

He brings the well known mishnah that you know, that these are the things that a person gets the fruit in this world (the interest) but that capital is saved for olam haba. This includes honoring parents, bringing peace between people, visiting the sick and learning Torah which is equal to them all, because Torah is the recipe. With these we are going to have all of the different sources of chesed, which are the commandments of the Torah, chachnasa challah, accompanying the dead, etc. which really stem from the three that we explicitly mentioned in the mishnah – honoring parents, doing chesed, and bringing peace.

He is saying – he is not going to discuss why these three are the ones that are the ones that are discussed – but I will tell you what they are - honoring parents has to do with maintaining boundaries, justice as it should be –they have done for you so you have to do for them; gemilas chesed is going beyond boundaries –and bringing peace or doing for a friend maintains integrity. In a sense this is why these three are selected but this is not his topic here. He is saying, what is the effect on the generation, on the dor? He goes to the trouble of saying where the boundaries should be, when you give yourself, what did it do for you? He says it will affect you in both worlds. The question is why and how does it affect you in both worlds? He says that it has a double benefit – it affects your relationships and it affects your G-dliness. In that regard, it is not like other mitzvahs that just affect your G-dliness, that give you a bond to G-d. These also affect your relationships. It is not like tzitzit and lulav where you don't see how they bring benefit in this world. You can't say you eat their fruit in this world while the capital remains in the other world. When a person does these other mitzvah, they are living in the other world while they are in this world. It doesn't have to do with their relationship to this world. But the ones that are mentioned here affect who you are and how you are here. In that sense you are eating their fruits in this world, meaning that they change your relationship to this world. They have intrinsic value in this world, not just extrinsic value in this world.

What do we mean when we say this? The way a mitzvah works is that it gives you a relationship to Hashem. What these mitzvahs (respect for parents, chesed, making peace) you are taking the benefit you have gotten from your relationship with Hashem and it pours over into your relationship with others. Now we can talk about what this doesn't mean because this can be easily misunderstood. It doesn't mean that there are two worlds where tzitzit and lulav will help and this world where you have to be nice to folks. NO. He is saying, there are two different dimensions of one world. That world is a world of relationship to Hashem. Your relationship to Hashem, your devekus to Hashem, changes you and ideally should pull forth and change the people who you are with. So your relationships in this world, when it says you eat the fruits in this world, it is the fruit of the mitzvah, not just the fruit of being nice, the fruit of the mitzvah, your relationship to Hashem – there is a mitzvah here – a Commander here- and your relationship to Him and the shefah that you bring down from Him affects your relationship with others.

Therefore the mitzvahs are called perot. This is something he explained previously in another Netiv, and that is the idea again that the act of chesed makes you more spiritual. How? With chesed you always lose if you are a materialist. And this doesn't just mean materially, if you are giving help or advice to someone you can't simultaneously exploit them, can you? Or, if you give materially, you have less. The affect of chesed is

that it brings you into the transcendental aspect of being, where you care more of who you are than what you have. The idealized way to make peace, the idealized way to do chesed, is to have so much elochut that it pours over. That is the difference, Ihavdil, between Avraham and Oprah.

This is what we are going to conclude with for now. What he is going to tell us (and this is what we will discuss next time) is how our relationship with Hashem translates into making peace. How does it translate into our avoiding machloket? What practically do we do now that we know the principle which I will review with you in a moment – now that we know the principle of shalom, how practically do we use this in terms of developing our own spirituality, and avoiding or solving machloket.

So to sum things up for this week, what we said is that unlike other things, you have to pursue shalom proactively. It is part of your own essence, you lose something by not doing that. Pursuing it proactively means wanting to make everyone more whole through being with you, in that you give yourself to others. What this doesn't mean is that you don't acknowledge your integrity versus their integrity to the point of having no borders. So you have to be able to recognize that there are times to give freely, times to withdraw so that the person can maintain their own integrity, and that you not corrupt yourself, and times to leave things as is. You have to be wary of relationships in which there are no boundaries, in which integrity could be sacrificed on either side, you have to be willing none the less to pursue shalom, which is a huge task. He said the affect of this is that it draws you close to Hashem and brings your G-dliness into the people with whom you have something to do. Tov. Have a good week.