***When Selfish***

***Becomes Selfless***

Shmuel Reichman

Everyone wants to contribute something significant to the world, to play a meaningful part in the cosmic symphony we call life. This desire is a basic component of what it means to be human. We yearn to expand beyond our limited sphere of existence and become a part of something meaningful, something infinitely greater than ourselves. Ego and fame aside, this yearning stems from a deep spiritual place, an inner knowledge that at root we in fact are part of something infinitely greater than ourselves. Each one of use is an integral piece in a collective whole that transcends the sum of its parts. The question in life is not *whether* we wish to accomplish something significant with the life we’ve been given, the question is how. *How* can I become more self-aware, more disciplined, more caring, more successful. This is the human saga, a tale of struggle and progress, setback and evolution. This theme is potently expressed in this week's parsha, Acharei Mos.

***Aharon's Avodah***

Acharei Mos begins by describing Aharon Ha'Kohen's Yom Kippur avodah, his divine service on the Day of Atonement. Enigmatically, Hashem commands Aharon to first bring a korban- a sacrifice- to atone for his own sins, and only afterwards to bring the korban to atone for the sins of the Jewish people as a whole. This appears antithetical to Aharon’s role as spiritual leader of the Jewish people. A leader is called upon to be selflessly, unequivocally devoted to his people, putting their needs before his or her own. Why then does Aharon place his own needs before those of the people? What deep lesson did he intend to teach?

***Chayecha Kodmin vs. Vi'Ahavta Li'Rei'acha Kamocha***

This very same issue is at the root of a discussion that takes place in the Gemara. The Rabbis of the Talmud, in Bava Metzia 62a, discuss the case of two men stranded in a desert with a single flask of water between them, belonging to one of the two men. If the owner of the flask drinks the water, he can survive long enough to make it safely back to civilization. If he shares his water, both men will die. The initial opinion, as quoted in the gemara, was that the man must share his water. This opinion stood until Rabbi Akiva came along and contested it, stating that "chayecha kodmin" - your life comes first, therefore the owner of the water must save his own life at the expense of his friend's.

Although this statement of Rabbi Akiva appears logically justifiable, it is shocking in that it seems to completely contradict another famous statement of Rabbi Akiva. One of Rabbi Akiva's most famous statements and principles is, "v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha, zeh klal gadol b'Torah" - Love your friend as you love yourself, this is the most foundational principle in the Torah. If this statement is true, and if it represents Rabbi Akiva's view, then how can he say chayecha kodmin, that you should prioritize your own life? Is this not a contradiction to loving your friend as yourself?

***The Two Step Process***

To understand Rabbi Akiva's opinion and the meaning behind the order of Aharon's sacrifices, we must establish a fundamental prerequisite and requirement for giving. In order to give, you must first have that which you want to give. In order to contribute to this world, you must first build something worth contributing. In order to love others, you must first love yourself. The first step of life is building internally, developing your own skills and gifts. This means building your mind and inner world, developing your beliefs and convictions, your understanding of Hashem and His Torah. Simultaneously, we must build our middos (character traits) and personality, work on our self-discipline, and craft the ideal lifestyle to maximize our potential in this world. Only then is it possible to expand outwards and contribute to Klal Yisrael and the world as a whole.

***When Giving Isn’t Giving***

Many people have an incredible desire to give, but nothing to actually contribute. It's wonderful to strongly wish to give one million dollars to tzedakah- charity. But if you have no money, that wish isn't very helpful. It's marvelous to want to be a role model and a teacher, but if you possess no knowledge nor character traits that should be modeled, what good is that? Of course, the desire is praiseworthy, but in reality, you can't contribute anything. The same goes for marriage. My wife and I often discuss how marriage can only be as great as the two spouses themselves. The marriage is the result of what each spouse invests into and contributes to the marriage, each spouse expands themselves outwards by giving themselves into the relationship. But if neither has anything to give, what kind of marriage would that be?

***Chayecha Kodmin as a Prerequisite***

Rabbi Akiva's principles in no way contradict each other. Chayecha kodmin isn't a contradiction to vi'ahavta li'rei'acha kamocha, it's a prerequisite. Only if you first invest in yourself can you then expand outwards and give to others. It's only once you first embrace your "self" and discover your true potential that you can then fall in love with yourself. It is only after you love *yourself* that you can then love someone else. Chayecha kodmin is the first step of fulfilling vi'ahavta li'rei'acha kamocha. Thus, investing in yourself is the most selfless form of selfishness and becomes the very essence of giving itself.

***The Process of Human Growth***

With this principle in mind, let us explore the process of human growth. Many people grow from the outside in. They look around at society, their friends, the people around them, and then shape themselves to reflect those surroundings. The clothes they wear, the food they eat, and the things they talk about all become a mirror of their external surroundings. In this model, a person is a slab of clay, and the goal of life is to fit as neatly as possible into the molds that society creates for you.

This couldn’t be further from the truth. Each one of us is created with our own unique potential, waiting to be actualized. Our job in life is to discover who we really are, to express our dormant perfection. Growth isn't about becoming great, it's about become *you*; learning isn't about discovery, it's about *self*-discovery. You are born as a masterpiece masked by confusion; your job in this world is to uncover yourself.

Instead of becoming a mirror, who reflects everything outside himself, we can become projectors. We can build something majestic and beautiful within ourselves, and then express that out into the world. This is also the difference between thermometers and thermostats. A thermometer reflects its environment; the temperature outside determines its internal state. A thermostat, however, is unaffected by the external state of things. It first builds the reality within itself, and then expresses that outside into the external environment. A true model of growth is where we first develop ourselves internally, and then express that out into the world.

***Aharon's Role as the Leader***

We can now explain Aharon's peculiar avodah. As a matter of fact, by now, it should appear self-evident. A leader must always work from the inside out, first developing himself internally, and only then expanding outwards. Before Aharon could begin helping Klal Yisrael, he had to first work on his own personal connection with Hashem. Only after bringing a korban for his own personal avodah was Aharon then able to expand outwards, and help all of Klal Yisrael build their connection with Hashem.

***An Ageless Principle***

When we consider self-focused investment, we generally think of those in their teens and twenties who are still in school or at the beginning of their careers, focused on learning and investing in themselves as much as possible. However, when framed correctly, investment is an imperative at every age. In order to give, we must first invest in ourselves. Therefore, at all stages in life we must balance these two principles: investing and contributing. Sometimes there may be more time and energy spent on investment, and sometimes more on contribution, but they must always remain partners in our approach to life. It's never too late to grow, it's never too early to contribute. The rare skill is knowing how to create the ideal balance between the two while still knowing when to shift that balance one way or another. May we be inspired to endlessly invest in ourselves while realizing that everything we invest into *me*, will ultimately be contributed into *We*.

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