

Lesson 9 – Mizmor 15: The Importance of Ethics

Goal:

For students to think about the relative value of Mizvot בין אדם לחבירו and בין אדם למקום and appreciate the perspective presented in this Mizmor.

Activity:

1. Background

Are some Mizvot more important than others? If so, which are the most important? Make a list on one half of the board of the eleven most popular responses.

2. Performance

This Mizmor is structured as a question and answer. We can guess that it was also meant to be performed as a call and response (antiphonic). Have one student or one half of the class recite Pasuk 1 and then another student or the other half of the class respond with Pesukim 2-5.

3. Textual Notes

Have individual students read each Pasuk, explain it, and look for parallelism or other poetic devices. Make sure to bring out the following points:

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד
דָּוִד מִי יְגוּר בְּאֶהֱלָךְ
מִי יִשְׁכַּן בְּהַר קֹדֶשְׁךָ :

Notice parallelism, מי=מי, ישכן=יגור, בהר קדושך=באהלך, ישכן means to dwell and connotes more permanence. יגור means to sojourn, to live temporarily. אהל is a tent meant for temporary nomadic living while הר קדושך refers to the Beit Mikdash which is built on a mountain and is a permanent structure. *What might be an appropriate setting for this question? Who would ask it of whom? When pilgrims come to the Beit Mikdash on holidays, the Leviim at the gates might recite this Mizmor to remind those entering that they come to a holy place and must be worthy of entering. Even if the Mizmor originated in a pilgrimage ceremony, it may also have figurative meaning – who can live with a sense of holiness and sanctity, feeling comfortable that he fulfills what Hashem wants of him. Radak thinks it refers to the heavenly sanctuary and asks who will merit the world to come.*

(ב) הוֹלֵךְ תְּמִים וּפְעֵל צְדָק
וְדַבֵּר אֱמֶת בְּלִבּוֹ :

To walk in perfection means to live without blame by never doing evil. פעל צדק connotes more active doing of good deeds. *What does it mean to speak truth “in his heart”?* As opposed to the liar who is אחד בפה ואחד בלב – thinking one thing and saying another, the honest person says what is in his heart (meaning mind). Notice that the three verbs הולך, פעל, and דבר, can also be read as nouns – a walker in perfection, a do-gooder, a speaker of truth. These traits are not simply actions one sometimes does but rather must be part of one’s personality.

(ג) לֹא הִגֵּל עַל לְשׁוֹנוֹ לֹא עָשָׂה לְרֵעֵהוּ רָעָה וְחָרְפָה לֹא נָשָׂא עַל קַרְבּוֹ :

The previous Pasuk listed three positive traits. This Pasuk lists three things the good person does not do. רגל means to slander. It uses the same root as the word for “leg” because it implies one who walks from place to place collecting and spreading gossip. He also does not harm his friend or cause embarrassment to his relative. *Does this mean one may harm and embarrass an enemy or a stranger?* No. It just uses the most common

example since we interact most with our friends and family. רעהו can also mean fellow and קרבו can mean those around him.

(ד) נְבִיזָה בְּעֵינָיו נִמְאָס וְאֶת יִרְאֵי יְדֹדֵי כְבֹד נִשְׁבַּע לְהִרְעוֹלָא יִמָּר :

A good person must not only do good but also associate with good people. He despises the נבזה – the contemptible person but gives honor to the God-fearing person. If one honors a bad person then he will become corrupt also, as the Gemara says: אמר אביי:

Even when he swears to his own detriment, he does not retract but fulfills the oath. (סוכה נו): אוי לרשע אוי לשכינו, טוב לצדיק טוב לשכינו

(ה) בְּסִפּוֹ לֹא נָתַן בְּנִשְׁךְ וְשִׁחַד עַל נְקִי לֹא לָקַח עֲשֵׂה אֶלֶּה לֹא יִמוּט לְעוֹלָם :

Next, we find two traits relating to money. The good person does not lend money with interest or take bribes against the innocent. Notice parallelism between נתן and לקח. Also, the order of words is different in each phrase such that the two negative words נשך and שחד are back to back in the middle. For homework, or as an in-class assignment, ask students to find Pesukim in the Torah which prohibit these two actions. *What is so bad about charging interest?* In an agricultural economy it was usually the poor farmer to needed a loan to buy seed and equipment in order to grow a good crop. By charging interest to a poor person, one only deepens his poverty. In today's economy, even rich people will take a mortgage when their other assets are not liquid which is why the Rabbis instituted a Heter Iska for such cases.

The last phrase sums up that one who does all of these things will never fall. This intensifies the permanence of the reward mentioned in the first Pasuk.

4. *How many character traits are listed here?* Eleven. *What do they have in common?* *How do they compare to the list of most important Mizvot we made at the beginning of class?* These are all ethical requirements – בין אדם לחבירו. Some of the pilgrims bringing sacrifices may have believed that they could steal, cheat, and lie at home and then repent for them by bringing a sacrifice. The Mizmor reminds them, and us, that such rituals are only effective if they actually make us better people, not if they are done mechanically.

5. Read this famous Midrash together and discuss its meaning. The continuation of the Midrash is also very interesting if you have time.

From 613 to 11

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מכות דף כג עמוד ב

דרש רבי שמלאי: שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצות נאמרו לו למשה, שלש מאות וששים וחמש לאוין כמנין ימות החמה, ומאתים וארבעים ושמונה עשה כנגד איבריו של אדם. אמר רב המנונא: מאי קרא? (דברים ל"ג) תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה, תורה בגימטריא שית מאה וחד סרי הוי, אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמענום. (סימן: דמשמ"ק ס"ק).

בא דוד והעמידן על אחת עשרה, דכתיב: (תהלים ט"ו) מזמור לדוד [ה'] מי יגור באהלך מי ישכון בהר קדשך, הולך תמים ופועל צדק ודובר אמת בלבבו, לא רגל על לשונו לא עשה לרעהו רעה וחרפה לא נשא על קרובו, נבזה בעיניו נמאס ואת יראי ה' יכבד נשבע להרע ולא ימיר, כספו לא נתן בנשך ושוחד על נקי לא לקח עושה אלה לא ימוט לעולם.

R. Simlai when preaching said: Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative precepts, corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts, corresponding to the number of the members of man's body. Said R. Hamnuna: What is the text for this? It is, "Moses commanded us torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." "Torah" being in letter-value, equal to six hundred and eleven, 'I am' and 'Thou shall have no [other Gods]' [not being reckoned, because] we heard from the mouth of the Might [Divine].

David came and reduced them to eleven [principles], as it is written, A Psalm of David. Lord, who shall sojourn in Thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Thy holy mountain? — [i] He that walketh uprightly, and [ii] worketh righteousness, and [iii] speaketh truth in his heart; that [iv] hath no slander upon his tongue, [v] nor doeth evil to his fellow, [vi] nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour, [vii] in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but [viii] he honoureth them that fear the Lord, [ix] He sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not, [x] He putteth not out his money on interest, [xi] nor taketh a bribe against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved.

[L9 - Eleven Commandments - Source Sheet.doc](#)

What does it mean that all 613 commandments can be summed up in these eleven? The purpose of all the commandments, even the ritual ones בין אדם למקום, are intended to make one more aware of God's presence, more sensitive to the world around him, and therefore more motivated and capable of helping others.

Bibliography:

Sarna, Nahum. *On the Book of Psalms*, pp. 98-121.