



Shabbat Table Discussions

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PERSONAL GROWTH: AT WHAT COST?

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Rivkah thought she was doing something good by helping a classmate study for a test on Friday afternoon. She knew that her family was going to her grandparents for Shabbat and they wanted to leave early, but she also felt that helping her classmate is an important mitzvah. When she got home, she learned that her family had been waiting for a long time for her and was now running very late. The car ride was very tense and her parents were very nervous about making it in time for Shabbat. Ultimately, they made it at the last minute, but they missed a good part of the Friday night services. Rivkah realized that if she would have thought about the consequences of her actions, she might have done things differently.

We sometimes face situations that require us to decide between our own personal growth and how we relate to others. If a situation requires us to decide between our own personal growth and either someone else's needs or someone else's mitzvah observance, how do we decide?

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE	Liz takes great pride in the fact that she hasn't missed the Sunday morning Chumash class since she started attending three years ago. This upcoming Sunday is her sister's piano recital and her sister would like her to come. What should she do?
CASE TWO	Michael and Sam go to two different schools but wait together each morning at the same bus stop. Michael tells Sam that he forgot his tzitzit this morning. Sam offers to let Michael wear his pair for the day. Should Michael accept the offer or should he let Sam get the mitzvah?
CASE THREE	The Steins and the Cohens were on the same late night flight returning home from Thanksgiving/Chanukah vacation. When the Steins reach their home, they realize that they left their Chanukah candles behind and it's too late to buy candles or oil or even to call a neighbor ... except that they know that the Cohens are still up. When the Cohens get the phone call, they count their candles and realize that they have just enough for that night and if they give some of their candles to the Steins, not everyone will be able to light the proper amount of candles for that night. Should the Cohens share their candles or respond that they don't have any to spare?

Let's Examine the Sources

When one is trying to improve in an area of one's life, one may accept certain stringencies and practices to ensure that his/her goals can be met. Someone trying to lose weight may decide not to eat any meals out of the house. Someone trying to curb conversation during religious services may decide to sit in a different section of the synagogue. Someone trying to attend services more regularly may try to maintain a certain streak or have a friendly competition with others. These practices are generally positive, but can also have negative consequences:

Questions for the Table:

- 1) In the examples mentioned in the previous paragraph, what are some of the negative consequences that can result from these practices?
- 2) Can you think of other examples that are mostly positive, but can have negative consequences?

Basic mitzvot are not negotiable. We perform them even when they conflict with other values. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto discusses one who accepts upon oneself extra practices and the importance of weighing the consequences of those practices:

What one must understand is that one should not judge acts of piety based [only] on an initial impression. Rather, one must investigate and analyze the consequences of the action.

Sometimes, the act seems good and because the consequences are bad, one is required to abandon the act, for if one performs it, one will be considered a sinner rather than a pious person ... If one wants to truly become pious, one must weigh one's actions against the consequences based on associated conditions such as the type of people that are affected, the issue and the place. If refraining from the act will result in a greater sanctification of God's name than the act itself, one should refrain from the act.

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesillat Yesharim, ch. 20

והנה מה שצריך להבין הוא כי אין לדון דברי החסידות על מראה הראשון, אלא צריך לעיין ולהתבונן עד היכן תולדות המעשה מגיעות, כי לפעמים המעשה בעצמו יראה טוב, ולפי שהתולדות רעות יתחייב להניחו, ולו יעשה אותו יהיה חוטא ולא חסיד... הבא להתחסד חסידות אמיתי צריך שישקול כל מעשיו לפי התולדות הנמשכות מהם, ולפי התנאים המתלויים להם לפי העת לפי החברה לפי הנושא ולפי המקום, ואם הפרישה תוליד יותר קידוש שם שמים ונחת רוח לפניו מן המעשה - יפרוש ולא יעשה.
מסילת ישרים פרק כ

Questions for the Table:

- 1) R. Luzzatto discusses taking on a practice that will generally lead to negative consequences. Do you think his comments apply to a practice that generally doesn't have negative consequences but once in a while present a conflict (such as case #1 where Liz's streak generally doesn't present a conflict but now it does)? What should one do in those situations?
- 2) In case #1, what are the negative consequences of Liz trying to maintain her streak of attending the class? Do you think the positive effects of her streak outweigh those negative consequences?

Sharing Mitzvot with Others

An opportunity to perform a mitzvah is something that one should always cherish. When one can share that opportunity by letting a friend perform the mitzvah instead, is it appropriate to do so, or does it show a lack of interest in the performance of the mitzvah?

Perhaps we can derive a lesson about sharing mitzvot with others from a Talmudic discussion about a similar situation involving asking someone else to perform a mitzvah on one's behalf. The Talmud seems to give two different indications as to whether this is appropriate:

Talmudic source #1

R. Yosef said: It is more meritorious [to perform a mitzvah] personally rather than through an agent as we find that R. Safra cooked the head [of an animal] and Rava salted fish [for Shabbat].

Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 41a

אמר רב יוסף מצוה בו יותר מבשלוהו
כי הא דרב ספרא מחריך רישא רבא
מלח שיבוטא.
תלמוד בבלי, קדושין מא.

Question for the Table

Why do you think it is more important to perform the mitzvah personally? Does it really matter who performs the mitzvah?

Talmudic Source #2

The head of the exile built a house. He said to Rav Nachman "Please affix the mezuzah for me."

Menachot 33a

ריש גלותא בנא ביתא אמר ליה לרב נחמן
קבע לי מזוזתא.
מנחות לג.

Question for the Table:

Source #1 implies that if one has a mitzvah to perform one should perform it personally.¹ Source #2 indicates that it is permissible to allow someone else to perform a mitzvah on one's behalf.² How would you resolve the apparent discrepancy?

R. Alexander Shor resolves the discrepancy as follows:

It seems to me that when someone appoints an agent to perform a mitzvah not in order to honor the individual and offer the opportunity to perform the mitzvah, but because one doesn't to be personally burdened with the mitzvah, then it is preferable if the individual who is obligated performs it personally. However, to honor someone who truly wants to perform the mitzvah [is meritorious] and on these types of acts the Talmud, Yoma 39, states that it is similar to a buyer who is coming to weigh fragrant spices who tells the seller "Why don't you weigh it in front of both of us so that we can both smell good." One person creates [the obligation to perform] the mitzvah and the other person performs it and both of them "smell good."

R. Alexander Shor, Tevuot Shor 28:14

נלע"ד דוקא היכא דקעביד שליח לא
בדרך שמכבד לאחר לזכות במצוה
רק נראה כאינו רוצה לטרוח בעצמו
להכי אין המצוה כל כך כמו אילו
טרח בעצמו אבל בדרך כבוד שמכבד
למי שמהדר אחר המצוה לקיימה על
כיוצא בזה אמרינן ביומא דף ל"ט
דדמי למי שמודד אפרסמון שאומרים
לו בא ונתבסם אני ואתה שהוא גרם
המצוה והאחר עושהו ומתבסמים
שניהם.

תבואות שור כח:יד

Questions for the Table:

- 1) The Talmudic discussion is about using an agent for a mitzvah that one is personally obligated to perform. Case #2, involving sharing tzitzit, is about giving away a mitzvah opportunity to someone else. Do you think the principles that R. Shor discusses apply to case #2? Why or why not?
- 2) There is a positive fulfillment of a mitzvah if someone wears tzitzit but there is no violation if one does not. Does the application of this fact change anything when considering case #2?

¹ Regarding the scope of which mitzvot are subject to the principle that it is preferable to perform the mitzvah personally, see *S'dei Chemed, Ma'arechet HaMem*, no. 54.

² Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *Tali*, writes that Rav Nachman was willing to accept this request, implying that it was appropriate for the head of the exile to do so.

Sharing Chanukah Lights

The prevalent practice (at least among Jews of Ashkenazi descent) is that each member of the household lights a set of candles corresponding to the particular night of Chanukah (e.g. on the fifth night, each person lights five lights). However, this practice is considered *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, a practice for those who are extremely scrupulous. The Talmud teaches us that the basic mitzvah only requires one light per household per night:

Our Rabbis taught: The mitzvah of [lighting candles on] Chanukah [requires] one light for the entire household; the scrupulous [light] a light for each member [of the household]; and the extremely scrupulous, — Beit Shammai say: On the first day eight lights are lit and every day they are gradually reduced; Beit Hillel say: On the first day one lights one light and every day they are progressively increased.

Shabbat 21b

מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו
והמהדרין נר לכל אחד ואחד
והמהדרין מן המהדרין בית שמאי
אומרים יום ראשון מדליק שמנה
מכאן ואילך פוחת והולך ובית הלל
אומרים יום ראשון מדליק אחת
מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.
שבת כא:

R. Avraham Gombiner notes that when there is not enough oil, it is important to keep in mind the different levels of the mitzvah:

If someone has exactly enough oil and one's friend doesn't have any, it is better for the person with the oil to light one candle each night and give some to one's friend because according to the letter of the law, only one candle is required.

R. Avraham Gombiner, Magen Avraham 671:1

נ"ל דמי שאין לו שמן הרבה יתן באחד שמן כשיעור
והמותר יחלק לכולם שאם יעשה לכלם בשוה לא ידלק
אפי' א' כשיעור ואם יש לו שמן בצמצום ולחבירו אין לו
כלל מוטב שידליק בכל לילה א' ויתן גם לחבירו דהא
מדינא א"צ אלא א'
מגן אברהם תרעא:א

Questions for the Table:

- 1) One could have argued that the person who has no candles is exempt from the mitzvah and therefore, the person with the candles should light in the most scrupulous fashion. How can you apply the lessons from case #1 and case #2 to explain R. Gombiner's ruling?
- 2) In case #3, the Cohens had enough to fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin* before they got the call from the Steins. If they decide to follow R. Gombiner's ruling, how many candles should they give them?

Conclusion

In this session, we discussed two issues: 1) personal growth activities that negatively impact others; 2) sharing mitzvah opportunities with others. When addressing issue #1, we have seen that when exploring personal growth, we need to consider the people it may impact. When it comes to basic mitzvot, we perform them even in the face of conflict while being considerate for others. When it comes to observing stringencies or enhanced forms of a mitzvah, we prioritize avoiding conflict and helping others. When addressing issue #2, we have seen that motivation is important. It is admirable to honor others with a mitzvah opportunity, but one should not try to avoid performing a mitzvah by delegating to others. Sometimes the two issues are connected such as in case #3, where the Cohens have enough to fulfill the basic mitzvah and the Steins are eager to fulfill the mitzvah. By thinking about these cases, we learn to balance personal religious ambition with our care for others, trying to involve more people in mitzvot while fulfilling them ourselves.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (also known as Ramchal, 1707-1746) was an Italian scholar who wrote numerous works on Jewish thought and mysticism. His *Mesillat Yesharim* is considered one of the most important Jewish works on ethics. He settled in the Land of Israel in 1743.

R. Alexander Shor (1673-1737) was a Polish rabbi. His *Tevuot Shor* is considered an authoritative work on the laws of *shechitah* (ritual slaughter).

R. Avraham Gombiner (c.1633-1683) was a Polish rabbi most well-known for his *Magen Avraham*, a commentary on *Shulchan Aruch*. He also wrote a commentary on Midrash and the Tosefta.