

# *Ethics and Mystical Experience in the Reshit Hokhmah*

## *Introduction*

SAFED DURING THE LATE 16<sup>th</sup> century was home to a number of prominent kabbalists. These thinkers were often daring and innovative in their approaches; among the new teachings of Kabbalah that were being propounded, a new genre of Jewish literature emerged—kabbalistic-ethical works. These texts were written under the influence of the mystical schools of both Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria. The works attempted to synthesize Jewish ethical and moral teachings and kabbalistic lore. The first work in this genre was *Tomer Devorah* by Moses Cordovero himself. Others soon followed, including *Sefer Haredim* and *Shaarei Kedushah*.

One of the most significant was *Reshit Hokhmah* by Eliyahu Da Vidas. *Reshit Hokhmah* became a popular work throughout the Jewish world. It was published numerous times in complete as well as condensed form and was an important influence on the early Hassidic masters. In *Reshit Hokhmah*, Da Vidas attempted to show how kabbalistic and ethical teachings were interrelated, and attempted to demonstrate that many ethical insights could be derived from mystical sources.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps his most significant argument was that ethical behavior was a necessary precondition for mystical experience. Ultimately, Da Vidas saw interpersonal behavior as a reflection of the relationship between man and the Divine.

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### *The Torah's Goal: Human Behavior*

In the introduction to *Reshit Hokhmah*, Eliyahu Da Vidas stressed that Judaism is ultimately concerned with action and human behavior. According to Da Vidas, even the act of *Torah lishmah*, the study Torah for its own sake, is only successful if it governs man's actions.

A person must know that the essential reason for studying Torah is to lead one to action, as it is explained in the Gemara in tractate Berakhot. "The goal of wisdom is repentance and good deeds. A man should not study Torah and Mishnah and then despise his father and mother and teacher and his superior in wisdom and rank, as it says, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, they who do thereafter, have a good understanding'. It does not say, 'who do', but 'who do thereafter'. This implies those who engage in the Torah for its own sake and not for other motives. If one engages in Torah for other motives, it were better that he had not been created" . . . the essential aspect of Torah for its own sake is that a man studies Torah in order to fulfill it.<sup>2</sup>

Da Vidas understanding of *Torah lishmah* as being primarily about man's fulfillment of the Torah stands in sharp contrast to other conceptions of *Torah lishmah* such as the view expressed in the *Nefesh HaHayyim* by R. Hayyim of Volozhin, where *Torah lishmah* is understood primarily as an intellectual exercise. The main goal is to understand the material being studied regardless of whether or not it is relevant to man's behavior.<sup>3</sup> More generally Da Vidas emphasizes that man's behavior rather than man's knowledge of God is the primary concern of Judaism. This is why his work stresses the way in which man's actions and a proper understanding of the divine are closely related.

In the *Reshit Hokhmah*, Da Vidas attempts to show how Zoharic kabbalah can serve as a foundation for ethical teachings by arguing that one who truly understands man's role in the world will act morally:

A man who is passionately attached to his Maker is readily imbued with humility, and should he be the object of shame and humiliation, he will not hold this world in enough esteem to feel the need to answer in kind. Whatever people say about him only concerns this base world and the needs of his body. Even if people humiliate him regarding the blemishes of his soul, the intrinsic holiness of the soul herself will keep him from

becoming distressed as a result of this mortification. The soul considers it atonement for her sins.<sup>4</sup>

One who properly understands his role in the world will by embody the attribute of humility. A result of his religious devotion will be that he recognizes that the physical world is of no consequence and therefore will not be concerned with people may say about him. However, according to Da Vidas only one who has reached the level of holiness can attain this trait of humility.

A person can acquire the trait of humility in all its facets as a natural consequence of his having reached holiness, for one given to the pursuit of the pleasures of this world thinks that the world belongs to him. As we have explained, only one who is distant from material concerns can acquire the trait of humility, for when a person is arrogant the world cannot possibly fill his needs, such is his self-image.<sup>5</sup>

Reaching the state of holiness will naturally have a profound effect on a person's moral character. Achieving the level holiness does not merely satisfy a person's spiritual longings; it enhances one's moral character. In fact, the only way in which people can truly develop ethical character traits is by striving to improve their spiritual lives. A person who does not recognize that his main concern should be in spiritual matters will be too enveloped in the physical world and will not be able to be a truly humble individual. Da Vidas explains that anger is similarly caused by a spiritual lacking.

It is inevitable that one who has a the negative tendency to become angry will do so for unimportant reasons...when one has not merited a holy soul—because outside forces still have a hold on him—these forces will cause him to fall into the pattern of anger. A spirit of idolatry then comes to dwell on him, for he has not purified himself properly from his sins. . . . Once he is holy no outside forces will have hold over him, he will certainly not defile himself by becoming angry. . . .<sup>6</sup>

One who has not attained the level of holiness will become angry for insignificant reasons because he will view physical matters as having much importance. Da Vidas stresses the link found in the Zohar between anger and idolatry because both cause a person to abandon the service of God. For this reason anger is seen as particularly negative attribute. Only through reaching the level of holiness can one avoid the pitfalls posed by anger. Once one has obtained a holy soul he will be safe from dangers posed by idolatry and anger. Da Vidas understands one's spiritual life to have a direct impact on a person's moral conduct. The achievement of a high spir-

itual state will be reflected in a person's refined ethical sense. It would seem that for Da Vidas one's ethical failures are evidence that a person has not reached a high spiritual state. Similarly, Da Vidas believes that the way to achieve ethical perfection is through reaching the spiritual level of holiness; unless one has reached this level, a person will not be able to achieve moral refinement.

### *Ethical Behavior as a Precondition for Mystical Experience*

In the *Reshit Hokhmah*, ethical behavior is not merely a reflection of one's spiritual state. It is also a necessary precondition for mystical experience. Da Vidas maintained a great emphasis not just on one's ethical behavior but also a person's performance of the commandments.

It is only when your love for God is expressed through your observance of the 613 commandments that *malkhut* can exist as a cohesive whole and is able to transmit God's providence to man, as is hinted in the verse, "Why do you disobey the king's commandments?" *Mitsvah* observance sustains the world.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the *Gate of Love*, Da Vidas makes it clear that only when man's love for God is translated into man's fulfillment of the commandments does it have the desired theurgic (practical) effect of either a physical or metaphysical nature. On one level, this is unsurprising because Zoharic kabbalah tends to place great emphasis on the theurgic power of the *mitsvot*. However, it is noteworthy that in a section in which the primary concern is man's inner religious emotions, Da Vidas emphasizes that the most important manifestation of man's love for God is not his inner longing for the divine but his external physical fulfillment of the *mitsvot*. Only this behavior can connect man and God.

Da Vidas also uses the love between friends as a metaphor for man's relationship with God.

When your soul is stirred to love a friend, your friend's soul will be equally stirred to love you in return until both of your souls are bound to form one single entity. . . . The same occurs below in the realm of the spirit and is known as the "stirring from below." This happens when one who wants an intimate relationship with the Creator initiates the process through his actions and through Torah observance for the sake of the *Shekhinah*.<sup>8</sup>

Man's interpersonal relationships are a model for man's connection to God. Just as building an interpersonal relationship occurs through physical

behavior aimed at creating a mutual attachment, so too must man act in order to create a bond between himself and God. Physical actions serve to connect man and God. Man's physical behavior is also a reflection of how he hopes God will interact with him.

Da Vidas understood man's ethical behavior as an important prerequisite for mystical experience because when one behaves properly he mirrors God's actions.

You should be cheerful in you fulfilling of the commandments. . . . This is particularly true of *tsedakah*—charity, for you must feel glad when you give it; if you do, it allows you to cleave to the *Shekhinah*, as the verse hints, "I will behold your countenance with *tzedek*-righteousness."<sup>9</sup>

According to Da Vidas man should give charity freely and without regret, because that is the way in which God acts. Da Vidas quotes a biblical verse to demonstrate that God greets man by giving to him freely. This passage is strikingly similar to the theme of *Tomer Devorah* by Moses Cordovero, Da Vidas' primary teacher, which explains how man should act to mirror the attributes of God. In doing so he will become aligned with God and prepare himself for a mystical experience.

Da Vidas expresses a similar concept regarding how one should approach the holidays.

Concerning the joy of the festivals, it is known that the sages teach that man is duty-bound to rejoice in the festivals by partaking of meals that include meat and wine, together with the members of his household. The reason why the Aramaic word for "festival" is *ushpiza* is that literally, this word means "the occasional resident of an inn": hence, in the same way that we should greet a guest with a good disposition, we should also receive the festivals. The reason for this is that on each of the festivals there is a new Divine luminous energy shining on us.<sup>10</sup>

The same way in which a person must greet guests he also should prepare and receive the festivals. Here man's interpersonal relations are a model for his ritual behavior. A passage from the Zohar which Da Vidas later quotes further emphasizes the connection between receiving guests and receiving the divine light that is available during holidays. "We must give joy to the poor, for the portion of the guests invited to your meal is connected to that of the poor—that is, the guests invited to your meals derive joy from what the poor eat."<sup>11</sup> Inviting guests enables people to orient themselves properly and receive the divine light which is available on the holidays. Through inviting the poor to partake in a holiday meal, a person directs the divine

light down to the physical world. Man's ethical action is both a model for his ritual behavior and a prerequisite for mystical experience. A person is exhorted to greet the holidays just as he would greet a guest. In this passage the theurgic power of the ethical behavior is also made clear—through welcoming guests one is able to draw down the divine light.

### *Damaging Behavior*

In the *Reshit Hokhmah*, Eliyahu Da Vidas does not merely encourage positive ethical behavior, he also describes behavior which he believes will damage the relationship between man and God.

In the same way that Torah songs are conducive to passionate attachment to the Most High, the bawdy and disgraceful songs that women sing cause the soul to become distanced from the light of life. At the very least these songs constitute idle talk, words lacking any substance to them. How many men of inferior souls are drawn to these coarse songs and lose their souls in the process!<sup>12</sup>

Singing songs that speak of the divine glory and especially reciting the psalms strengthens the connection between man and God. However, Da Vidas strongly discourages people from hearing or singing more mundane songs, “. . . such as songs of the love between two people, or songs praising beauty. . . .”<sup>13</sup> Da Vidas' negative attitude towards a person hearing these songs does not seem to be based on any specific legal prohibition, though he does try to claim that they may fall into the category of proscribed speech. Later, Da Vidas quotes a Tosefta regarding the *Song of Songs*: “One who makes a song out of verses from the Song of Songs and sings it at a party has no portion in the world to come.”<sup>14</sup> It seems that Da Vidas is echoing a common fear in the Jewish tradition, based on the concern that the sexual imagery used to describe the relationship between God and Israel will be misunderstood if it is applied to erotic love between two people. Furthermore, Da Vidas believes that love songs that tell of one's affection for the beauty of a human lover challenges the uniqueness of the divine and will trivialize the praises of God. Da Vidas' concern about love songs may not be surprising, however; the Zohar and other kabbalistic works make frequent use of sexual and erotic imagery to describe the relationship between man and God. Earlier in the text, Da Vidas himself used the metaphor of human love, albeit of a platonic nature, to describe the bond that is formed between man and God. It is likely that their familiarity with the use of erotic imagery to describe man's relationship with God made kabbalists wary of its poten-

tial use in more profane settings. They sought to prevent the passionate symbolism they used from becoming debased. This led Da Vidas to proscribe listening to songs that spoke of physical beauty lest it take away from man's love for God.

The themes of prescribing human behavior and imitating God come together when Eliyahu Da Vidas discusses the concept of purity of the eyes.

Man must therefore strive to resemble his maker by purifying his eyes from the sight of evil, as we will explain in the section *Rectification of the Eyes* in our *Gate of Holiness*. In particular, it is important not to look at the face of an evil person. . . . The Divine energy causes the span of man's life to be lengthened stems from the ethereal level where God's tenderness and compassion are unmitigated. Hence, the Divine eye does not extend its watchful guidance to the evil, as we have seen above: namely, "You whose eyes are too pure to behold evil." Man also must resemble his Maker by looking at all that pervades holiness, in the same way as the Providence of the Most High is ever directed onto those of His beings who are imbued with Holiness. As the verse says, "God's eye is on those who fear him."<sup>15</sup>

A person is instructed to stay away from any evil influence to such an extent that he does not even look at the face of an evil person. In this way, he is mirroring the actions of God. God cannot stand to look at evil and only observes the good. Da Vidas explains that this is the mechanism by which God grants blessings to good people and imposes judgments on those who do evil. Only one who is good is capable of remaining in the sight of God and only one who God sees will have divine light given to him. One who does evil is removed from the sight of God because God cannot bear to look at evil. In doing evil, he condemns himself because he is unable to receive the divine light. One who is careful not even to look at evil is reflecting the actions of the Divine. Furthermore, Da Vidas instructs people to look at things that emit holiness. In this way, they too follow the actions of God, in that God focuses His eyes on those that follow His will. In mirroring God's actions and focusing on sources of holiness, one enables the divine light to flow down into this world. Once again, the theurgic power of man's ethical behavior is clear: through abstaining from looking at evil and seeking the holy, man plays a critical role in drawing divine energy into this world. Man's actions make the divine accessible and allow for the possibility of mystical experience.

## *Purity and Holiness*

Eliyahu Da Vidas places great emphasis on the pursuit of holiness. Holiness enables one to connect to the divine. It also molds a person's character and refines his ethical sense. The path to holiness that Da Vidas presents is manifold and involves a number of ethical, halakhic, and meditative steps. One area that Da Vidas sees as critical to achieving holiness is purity. In his conception of purity, Da Vidas freely intermingles physical, halakhic and ethical categories.

Purity leads to holiness. . . . Impurities involving physical contact include: touching a creature that has died on its own and which has a fatal lesion, or moving the dead creature; touching vermin. . . . Such are the impurities involving physical contact. One who is guilty of sexual offenses or eats forbidden foods is referred to as "impure". . . . Impurities not involving physical contact include seeing with the eyes, hearing with the ears, and expressing with the lips that which is not proper for me to see, hear, or say, as well as directing the thoughts of the heart to the forbidden.<sup>16</sup>

Da Vidas believes that impurity prevents a person from attaining holiness. In this regard, the *Reshit Hokhmah* is not unique. Many pietistic works, and in fact the Bible itself, view impurity as a hindrance to coming into contact with the divine. Da Vidas, however, adds several other categories beyond those prescribed by *halakhah*. According to Da Vidas, impurity is not merely a physically transmitted state; it can also occur because of a person's moral or ethical failings. Observing or hearing something one should not, also renders someone impure and prevents him from attaining holiness, in the same way as one who becomes physically impure. Likewise, purity can be attained both through physical action and by abstaining from certain activities.

Purity also distinguishes between physical and non-physical contact. One purifies oneself of nocturnal emissions, the plague, and the impurity of death by ritual immersion, as well as by sprinkling and by other purifying means related to the plague; such is the purity involving physical contact. Purity not involving physical contact includes distancing oneself from transgression and prohibition, cleanliness of heart, of thoughts and of tongue, closing one's eyes and blocking one's ears from any contact with evil.<sup>17</sup>

Da Vidas does not only focus on how one can be ritually pure but also focuses upon other types of purity. One can attain purity through moral con-

duct and avoiding contact with evil. Purity brings one to holiness. Beyond the halakhic categories of impure and pure, Da Vidas adds categories of moral conduct. These moral categories are no less important in bringing a person to a state of purity and holiness than their halakhic counterparts. In order to achieve holiness and access the divine, a person must refine his moral behavior.

Da Vidas did not just believe that ethical conduct was a prerequisite to attaining holiness; he also believed it was crucial to having one's prayers answered.

We see many times that we call out the thirteen attributes of mercy and yet we are not answered. The Gaonim said this is because it is not enough to simply wrap oneself in a tallit and pray. Rather one must carry out the thirteen attributes of mercy that God taught to Moses that he is merciful and gracious, and just as God is merciful, so too you must be merciful, and this is true of all the attributes.<sup>18</sup>

According to Da Vidas, one's prayers will not be answered unless he emulates the attributes of God. Calling out to God in the prescribed ritual manner is not enough—one must embody God's ethical attributes. Only ethical conduct will lead to one's prayers being answered.

Man's physical behavior is the main concern of Eliyahu Da Vidas in the *Reshit Hokhmah*. Ethical behavior reflects the degree of holiness that one has achieved. One's character traits will be refined when one reaches a certain level. At the same time, a person can attain holiness and connect with the divine through perfecting his actions. This desire to have contact with the divine is at the heart of the mystical experience. According to Da Vidas, a person can only undergo a mystical experience if he has striven to develop his ethical sense.

## NOTES

1. Solomon Schimmel, "Education of Emotions in Jewish Devotional Literature," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8.2 (1980), 259-276
2. Eliyahu Da Vidas, *Reshit Hokhmah*, 3
3. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh HaHayyim*, 94
4. Eliyahu Da Vidas, *The Beginning of Wisdom*. trans. Simhah H. Benyosef (Hoboken 2002), 385
5. *Ibid.*, 387
6. *Ibid.*, 392
7. *Ibid.*, 13

8. Ibid., 20
9. Ibid., 304
10. Ibid., 306-307
11. Ibid., 308-309
12. Ibid., 317
13. Ibid., 320
14. Ibid., 320
15. Ibid., 367
16. Ibid., 379
17. Ibid., 380
18. Da Vidas,. *Reshit Hokhmah*, 365