

BROTHERHOOD IN HUMANITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH: THE JEWISH VIEW

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SUMMARY

This paper explores and discusses the Jewish view on brotherhood in humanity and its bond with global mental health. Human brotherhood is one of the foundations of the Jewish religion and is widely found in the ethics of the Jewish prophets and in the tradition of Israel. The halakhic sources oblige a person to do good to others by every possible means - his money, body, soul and mind. The concept of brotherhood in its deepest meaning contains a social responsibility that requires more than transferring a financial contribution to a particular account. In brotherhood, we adopt values that inspire us and put soul in all our actions. The adoption and assimilation of social values into society's policy concerns the very existence of the entire world. The legacy of the grace and brotherhood of our ancestor Abraham is the legacy of human love and universal human brotherhood.

In this paper, we bring many Jewish sources from the rabbinic literature on human brotherhood from the Talmudic period to our time. We will show the great importance of human brotherhood in Judaism, and how great the reward is for acts of brotherhood and lovingkindness. We will try to show the scope and range of brotherhood in humanity. As well, we will explore the concept of brotherhood in humanity as "Tikkun Olam" - "repairing the world" to bring about a societal change, and finally, social justice. In the final part of this work, we would like to show that human brotherhood is possible even in the most inhuman conditions, by bringing one short story from the Holocaust.

Key words: *Gemilut chasadim - human brotherhood – Torah – Talmud - rabbis*

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INTRODUCTION

The application of human brotherhood and loving-kindness requires constant self-improvement from us, and great consideration for others. Judaism is dominated mainly by the combination of love and reciprocity, and the aspiration is to bring the two into practical expression. According to the Jewish concept based on the Bible, the source of primary morality is not in man, but in God. Indeed, discipline is required here, but the laws of the Torah are not directed against human nature. On the contrary, they are supposed to help him realize the good inherent in him, for the love of man according to the Jewish conception, originates in the image of God in whom man was created.

During the period of the Corona pandemic, a period of global crisis, we have unfortunately seen, some of us from a distance and some of us from very close, how important the value of human brotherhood is. The pandemic has made us all understand that we must join hands and only through grace and brotherhood will we be able to overcome it. Out of a commitment to preserve human life as a supreme value on the one hand, and help and support all those harmed physically, mentally or financially on the other.

Brotherhood in humanity is a great contributor to improve our global mental health, as its purpose is to make us better individuals, families and society. In this paper, we will try to research and explore the Jewish perspective on this important issue of human brotherhood among people in general, and among Jews in particular.

HUMAN BROTHERHOOD IN JEWISH SOURCES

There are 613 commandments in the Torah, which can be divided into commandments "between man and God", which are commandments that deal with the relationship between man and God, and commandments "between man and his friend", which are commandments that deal with the relationship between man and his fellow friend.

The inner explanation of the system of mitzvahs is built on a number of basic principles, God who is omnipotent, created the world for the purpose of man in order to do him good, and that man was created from body and spirit. In order for a person to enjoy this good, he was given the challenge of free choice. It is a perpetual dual struggle between the two parts of his existence, the spirit and the body, around the question: who is the Lord and who is the servant?

It is a lifetime struggle with desires and passions, and the more he wins, the more he builds himself.

The spiritual expression of the soul in man is intellect, and when a person becomes an adult, he undertakes the task to keep God's commandments, because only with adulthood comes the possibility of the spiritual part to deal with the body's inclinations, to control it and to be an alternative to it. The system of commandments is supposed to help a person succeed

in this task, as the Midrash¹ is saying: “The mitzvahs were only given to make humans better.”²

Therefore, a large part of Jewish law is about treating people with human brotherhood, or as it is called in Hebrew *gemilut chasadim*. Furthermore, the word “mitzvah” (literally, “commandment”) is used in Hebrew as doing a good deed, an act of kindness.

The two types of commandments mentioned above are written in the five books of Moses in a mixed way and not separately. This was done on purpose so people understand that being a good person towards your fellow men is deeply connected with being good with God. You should eat strictly kosher food, but also be equally strict regarding what comes out of your mouth, about giving charity or helping the needy. This, for example, is very visible in the Ten Commandments, which include both parts of the commandments since the bond between the commandments relating to a person and God is inseparable from the commandments relating to a person and his fellow friend.

The Talmud is telling us a story from which we can learn that the essence of the whole Torah is to do good. The story is about a gentile who came before Rabbi Hillel and asked him to convert him under the condition that he will teach him the entire Torah while he is standing on one foot. Hillel converted him and said to him: “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.”³

The Mishnah is teaching us that “The world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Temple service, and the practice of acts of Brotherhood.”⁴ Similarly, in a different place, the sages teach that the world was created thanks to God’s act of kindness:

“It says (Hosea 6:6), “For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering.” The world was created from the very beginning with kindness, as it says (Psalms 89:3), “For I have said that the world will be built on kindness, and the heavens will be established on Your faith.”⁵

Furthermore, the following Talmudic text is teaching us that in the performance of brotherhood, we are imitating God:

“And Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “After the Lord your God shall you walk, and Him shall you

fear, and His commandments shall you keep, and unto His voice shall you hearken, and Him shall you serve, and unto Him shall you cleave” (Deuteronomy 13:5)? But is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn’t it already been stated: “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24), and one cannot approach fire? He explains: Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He. He provides several examples. Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21), so too, should you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, visits the sick, as it is written with regard to God’s appearing to Abraham following his circumcision: “And the Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre” (Genesis 18:1), so too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, consoles mourners, as it is written: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son” (Genesis 25:11), so too, should you console mourners. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: “And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab” (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead.”⁶

In the same direction of imitating almighty God, the Talmud asks us to work on our nature and character, Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too should we be compassionate and merciful.⁷ Based on this Talmudic text, Maimonides is putting it as an obligation in his codex:

“In explaining this commandment, the sages taught thus: Even as He is called gracious, be thou gracious; even as He is called merciful, be thou merciful; even as He is called holy, be thou holy. In this wise did the prophets attribute to God all such terms as long-suffering, abundant in beneficence, just and right, perfect, mighty and powerful and others like these, to proclaim that they are good and straight paths, and that man is obligated to lead himself in them, and to be like unto Him to the best of his ability.”⁸

Acts of brotherhood and kindness should be so deeply rooted among Jewish people that the Talmud is teaching that anyone who has compassion for God’s creatures, and is performing acts of kindness and

¹ *Midrash* – exposition or investigation, Torah commentaries; there are two kinds of m.: Agadic (narrative) and Halachic (law); gathered in collections. See more about *Midrash* in K.D., *Zidovstvo*, pp. 503-505.

² Bereshit Rabbah 44.

³ See. Babylonian Talmud (BT) Shabbat 31a. (Steinsaltz); Similarly Rabbi Akiba said regarding the Torah commandment “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), This is a fundamental principle of the Torah” (Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:3).

⁴ Mishna Pirkei Avot 1:2

⁵ Avot D’Rabbi Natan 4:5.

⁶ BT Sotah 14a (Vilna); see also: Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael 18:20.: see also Rashi Commentary on Deuteronomy 13:5: “and unto him ye shall cleave - i.e. cleave to His ways: do kindly actions, bury the dead, visit the sick, as did the Holy One, blessed be He”.

⁷ BT Shabbat 133b (Steinsaltz).

⁸ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah (MT), Human Dispositions 1:6.; see also Maimonides in Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3 53. p. 412.

brotherhood, it is known that he is of the descendants of Abraham, our father.”⁹

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN BROTHERHOOD

In a special way, the Talmud describes the importance of acts of brotherhood and kindness in building a better world.

“And this is what Rabbi Elazar said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you; only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)? “To do justly”; this is justice. “To love mercy”; this is acts of kindness. “To walk humbly with your God”; this is referring to taking the indigent dead out for burial and accompanying a poor bride to her wedding canopy, both of which must be performed without fanfare. The Talmud summarizes: And are these matters not inferred *a fortiori*? If, with regard to matters that tend to be conducted in public, as the multitudes participate in funerals and weddings, the Torah says: Walk humbly, then in matters that tend to be conducted in private, e.g., giving charity and studying Torah, all the more so should they be conducted privately... Rabbi Elazar teaches that One who performs acts of charity and brotherhood is greater than one who sacrifices all types of offerings.”¹⁰

Furthermore, the sages taught us that acts of brotherhood and kindness are superior to charity¹¹ in three respects: charity can be performed only with one’s money, while acts of kindness can be performed both with his body and with his money; charity is given to the poor, while acts of kindness are performed both for the poor and for the rich; charity is given to the living, while acts of kindness are performed both for the living and for the dead.

The Talmud further teaches that acts of brotherhood and kindness are so important that the Torah starts and ends with an act of kindness and brotherhood. Its beginning is an act of kindness, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21), and its end is an act of kindness, as it is written: “And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab” (Deuteronomy 34:6), which means that God himself buried Moses.¹²

The Midrash explains the verse in Isaiah: “And I placed My words into your mouth and with the shadow of My hand I covered you” That is refers to the Torah and to acts of brotherhood and loving kindness. This comes to teach you that anyone who occupies himself with Torah and acts of kindness merits to take shelter in the shadow of the Holy One.¹³ If one engages in acts of brotherhood and kindness, all his transgressions are forgiven.¹⁴ Furthermore, a sentence accompanied by God’s oath (not to cancel it) cannot be torn up or canceled, however the performance of acts of brotherhood and kindness can cancel it.¹⁵

THE REWARD OF BROTHERHOOD

The Talmud is teaching that acts of brotherhood and kindness have no definite proportion or quantity prescribed, no minimum amount sufficient to satisfy your obligation, while all other commandments have a definite proportion.¹⁶ That gives a perspective on this commandment, i.e. even this commandment can be done in many different ways, for example, dedicating more or less time and kindness when engaged in this commandment.

The reward on this commandment is unique, it was said that a person engages in acts of brotherhood and loving kindness, enjoys their profits in this world, and the principal reward remains for him for the World-to-Come.¹⁷ Furthermore, according to Judaism, before the arrival of the Messiah, there will be trouble and a painful time, so the Talmud teaches that the only things that can spare a person from the pains preceding the coming of the Messiah are that they shall engage in Torah study and acts of brotherhood and kindness.¹⁸

The Midrash teaches us about the importance of the book of Ruth, it does not have anything in it concerned with laws of impurity or purity nor what is forbidden and what is permitted, which is typical for all books in the Bible. So why is it written? To teach us the greatness of the reward Ruth received for her acts of brotherhood and lovingkindness.¹⁹

THE SCOPE OF BROTHERHOOD

According to the following Talmudic source, the way one should behave during the performance of God’s commandments is a way of brotherhood and kindness:

⁹ See BT Beitzah 32b (Steinsaltz), deriving from the verse: “And show you compassion, and have compassion upon you, and multiply you, as He has sworn to your fathers” (Deuteronomy 13:18): see also BT Yevamot 79a (Steinsaltz).

¹⁰ BT Succah 49b (Steinsaltz).

¹¹ Ibid. and see the verse in Hosea 6:6, 10:12.

¹² BT Sotah 14a (Vilna).

¹³ See: Midrash Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 251:7; Jerusalem Talmud Taanit 21a.

¹⁴ BT Berakhot 5a-5b (Steinsaltz).

¹⁵ BT Rosh Hashanah 18a (Steinsaltz).

¹⁶ Jerusalem Talmud Peah 1a.

¹⁷ BT Kiddushin 40a (Vilna); Berakhot 8a (Steinsaltz).

¹⁸ BT Sanhedrin 98b (Vilna).

¹⁹ Ruth Rabbah 2:14.

“As Rav Yosef taught with regard to the verse: “And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and shall show them the path wherein they shall walk and the action that they must perform” (Exodus 18:20). The Talmud parses the various directives in the verse. “And you shall teach them,” that is referring to the structure of their livelihood, i.e., teach the Jewish people trades so that they may earn a living, “the path,” that is referring to acts of brotherhood and kindness; “they shall walk,” that is referring to visiting the ill; “wherein,” that is referring to burial; “and the action,” that is referring to acting in accordance with the letter of the law; “that they must perform,” that is referring to acting beyond the letter of the law.”²⁰

The purpose of Jewish law is to make us a just and ethical society, where everyone is doing good to each other, no one is harming another or taking advantage of another. We are commanded to help those in need, both in physical and psychological needs, as well as in financial needs. This is why saving a fellow man in Judaism is an obligation and not only an ethical recommendation²¹

There are many laws regarding business ethics. They regulate conduct between a businessman and his customer, partner or employee. These laws apply not only to our treatment of our fellow Jews, but also to our treatment of gentiles, as it is a question that concerns all humanity and not only one society.

There are many laws that are connected to our treatment of animals. There is a Talmudic debate²² about whether causing pain to animals is a biblical level or rabbinic level prohibition. This debate continued in post Talmudic rabbinic literature, however most rabbinical authorities determined that it is a biblical prohibition.²³ The following Talmudic source is showing that one must have compassion and kindness even towards the lowest of animals:

“Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s²⁴ suffering²⁵ came upon him due to an incident. What was that incident that led to his suffering? The Talmud answers that there was a certain calf that was being led to slaughter.

The calf went and hung its head on the corner of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s garment and was weeping. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to it: Go, as you were created for this purpose. It was said in Heaven: Since he was not compassionate toward the calf, let afflictions come upon him. The suffering left him due to another incident. One day, the maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was sweeping his house. There were young weasels lying about, and she was in the process of sweeping them out. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to her: Let them be, as it is written: “The Lord is good to all; and His mercies are over all His works” (Psalms 145:9). They said in Heaven: Since he was compassionate, we shall be compassionate on him, and he was relieved of his suffering.”²⁶

It is unbelievable that a great Rabbi such as Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was punished in such a painful way. It seems that the Talmud wants to teach us that the price paid by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi in order to reach the required insight regarding the proper treatment of animals as God’s creations serves as an example of the message that our sages wanted to convey on this subject, that even if the slaughter was permitted to the needs of man, one should not be indifferent to the deprivation of animal life.

BROTHERHOOD IN HUMANITY AS TIKKUN OLAM

Acts of brotherhood in humanity are acts that, among other things, lead to what is called in Judaism “Tikkun Olam” –“repairing the world”. By helping individuals, we are working towards larger societal change, and finally, social justice.

Bottom of Form

Jewish communities throughout history have often created voluntary organizations that undertook the responsibility to fulfill all the commandments which fall into the category of *gemilut chasadim*, doing acts of brotherhood and lovingkindness. Today, in a period of modernity, many Jewish individuals and organizations have turned this tradition of Jewish self-help into a concern for social welfare and social justice for Jews and non-Jews alike.

In his codex, Maimonides writes the main commandments that fall into the category of *gemilut chasadim*:

“It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one’s shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride

²⁰ BT Bava Metzia 30b (Vilna); See also BT Bava Kamma 99b -100a (Vilna).

²¹ See: DADON, Kotel. » Stav prema spašavanju života u židovskom zakonu, Milosrdni Samaritanac – ideal ili dužnost, moralna ili pravna obveza?« Nova prisutnost 15 (2017) 3, str. 393-423.

²² See: BT Bava mecia 32b. (Vilna)

²³ See: A. Steinberg. Assia, Jerusalem 1989. I, 263-269.

²⁴ Yehuda HaNasi, rabi (120.- Bet Shearim, Israel 220.), last generation of the tanaite, president of Israel, Redaktor of the Mishnah, called in short Rabi (my teacher) or Rabenu hakadosh (our holy teacher).

²⁵ He suffered from toothache and kidney stones for thirteen years. See Jerusalem Talmud Kilayim, chapter 9, page 32b; Midrash Bereshit Rabba 33: 3.; Yalkut Shimoni Psalm, 888.

²⁶ BT Bava mecia 85a (Vilne).

and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit.”²⁷

Participation in the burial of someone who dies, and comforting the mourners is of the highest level of *gemilut chasadim*, since the dead have no future opportunity to repay our acts of kindness. According to Jewish tradition, one should provide mourners with their immediate needs (such as meals) to allow them to mourn their loss.

By fulfilling the commandment of visiting the sick or comforting mourners, we are engaging with the spiritual and emotional needs of those who are ill as well as assuaging their physical ailments.²⁸ With all kinds of expressions of concern, we are helping to relieve their anguish and isolation. According to the sages, by visiting the sick, we alleviate suffering by taking from him one sixtieth of his suffering.²⁹ The following Talmudic paragraph is emphasizing the importance of visiting the sick: “Everyone who visits the sick encourages him to live, and anyone who does not visit him encourages him to die.”³⁰

Our father Abraham is known as the role model of hospitality. Inviting guests by Jewish individuals or the organization of hospitality in Jewish communities for Jews passing through their locales, is well known in Jewish tradition.

Social Welfare includes different acts of kindness and brotherhood for the needy, whether they are done by individuals or by community institutions. Those acts include giving charity (*tzedakah*), food, shelter, or clothing, provides for a bride’s material needs for her wedding, gladdening a bride and groom at their wedding celebration and so on.

Engaging with human brotherhood requires a high degree of concern, not only for others’ physical welfare, but also for their feelings and dignity. Furthermore, one must do it in a way that shows concern for the recipients’ feelings, not only for their financial need. The Talmud is telling about Rabbi Yannai, who saw a man give money to a poor person in public, he told him that it would have been better for him not to give money than to give him money and embarrass him.³¹ Maimonides emphasizes this as well, and writes that one should give to the needy with a pleasant expression and happily. In case a needy person asks for money and one has nothing to give him, one should make him feel better by speaking nicely with him.³²

To be successful in this task, one needs to develop sensitive social hexagons towards others’ needs. To know when he is in the state of the onset of a collapse and when he is on the verge of falling to the ground. Sometimes, such clarity requires a subtle investigation.

As the level of brotherhood increases, in doing good, care for others will increase, and thus our situation as individuals, as a family and as a society will improve morally.

The more we learn to understand that doing good is a mirror of our personal religious level, the better we will become, the healthier in body and soul, and a more honest and more moral people.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION - BROTHERHOOD DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Acts of human brotherhood are especially necessary in times of trouble; however, at such times, such acts are similarly very hard to do. The time of the Holocaust was such a time, horrific conditions when the world seemed engulfed in chaos and darkness. I want to end this article with a special story that happened in Auschwitz, where a Rabbi tried to the best of his ability to act in human brotherhood towards a fellow Jew, who was in a time of distress. Rabbi Meisels survived the holocaust and published this story in his book.

On September 17th, 1944, the eve of *Rosh Hashana* – Jewish New Year (5705), the Nazis took 1400 boys to an isolated, closed block at Auschwitz. The next day, the first day of Rosh Hashana, a rumor spread through the whole camp that in the evening, the youths would be taken to the furnace. Many people in the camp had an only son among these youths, the only child left to them, and that whole day, they ran in confusion around the closed block, in the hope that perhaps they could catch some glimmer of light to save their precious son from there... during this horrible time, a Jew came to the rabbi with the following question:

“Rabbi! My only son is in there among the boys condemned to the furnace, and it is within my power to purchase his release [by bribing one of the guards]. Since it is known to us, without any doubt, that they will take someone else in his place. I present before you a halachic³³ (Jewish law) decision. Tell me what the law is according to the Tora. Am I allowed to redeem him? I shall act according to your decision.”

When I heard this question, the thought of rendering a decision on the matter of life and death caused me to tremble. I replied: "My dear friend, how can I

²⁷ Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Mourning 14:1.

²⁸ This obligation of visiting the sick extends to all people, not only Jews (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 335:1).

²⁹ BT Nedarim 39a, 39b. (Vilna); Midrash Vayikra Rabba 34.

³⁰ BT Nedarim 40a (Vilna).

³¹ BT, Hagigah, 5a (Steinsaltz).

³² Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, chapter 10.

³³ *Halacha* – 1. the legal part of Jewish religious literature. The name comes from the verb *halach* (to go), because we are *going* or *following* the Jewish law; 2. a particular provision from the system of *halacha*.

give a clear-cut ruling on a question like this? When the Temple was standing, a question like this would have been brought before the Sanhedrin (Jewish supreme court of 71 judges). And I am here in Auschwitz, without a single book of *halacha* (Jewish law), without other rabbis, and without a calm and settled mind, due to the many disasters and troubles. If it were the practice of these wicked ones to first release the redeemed one, and afterwards to take another in his place, there would be some room to lean toward a permissive [ruling]..."

But the man wept greatly, and begged me very much. He said to me: "Rabbi, you must tell me the *halacha* now." I in turn pleaded with him: "Release me from this question, for I cannot tell you anything at all." But he continued to beg me, saying, "Rabbi, does that mean that you do not permit me to redeem my only son? If so -- I accept the ruling with love."

I pleaded with him and objected to his inference, but he went on begging me and trying to make me give him a clear answer. When he saw that I stood my ground and did not want to give a halachic ruling, he answered me with emotion and with tremendous inspiration:

"Rabbi, I have done my duty as the Torah requires me to do. I brought my question before the rabbi. There is no other rabbi here. If His Honor, the rabbi, cannot answer that it is permitted for me to redeem my child, that is a sign that he is not completely sure that the *halacha* permits [it]. If it were permissible without any doubts, certainly you would tell me so. To me this means that according to the *halacha*, it is forbidden to me. I accept this with love and joy, and I shall not do anything to redeem him, because that is what the Tora commanded..."

All my pleadings to him not to put the responsibility on me were to no avail. He only repeated what he had said, with heartrending weeping. He fulfilled his words, and did not redeem his son. That whole day, *Rosh Hashana*, he walked and spoke to himself joyfully, saying that he merited to sacrifice his only son to God, since even though it was in his power to

redeem him, he would not, seeing that the Torah did not permit him to do such a thing. This would be considered by the Holy One, Blessed is He, like the Binding of our Father Isaac, which also had taken place on *Rosh Hashana*."³⁴

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