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## Understanding Your Middos - 09 Cruelty

### ***Cruelty: When Internal Hardening Causes One To Get Aggressive***

Cruelty (in Hebrew, *achzariyus*), is another trait which stems from the element of earth. It is a branch of the trait of *azus*\brazenness. It is also another result of internal hardening [discussed in the previous two chapters], a nature of earth.

In the previous chapter, we mentioned that *azus*\stubbornness is when a person acts indifferent to another person; he acts to another person as if he's a stranger. When this negative trait is taken further, it becomes the trait of cruelty.

The word for "cruel" in Hebrew is *achzar*, which is a combination of the Hebrew words *ach* (brother) and *zar* (strange); in other words, when a person is cruel to another Jew, he acts to his brother Jew as if he's a stranger to him, rather than seeing another Jew as a brother to be friendly towards.

When a person has the trait of *azus*\brazenness, he hasn't yet actualized his negativity towards others. It is only dormant within him. A brazen person will lie to someone outright, but he doesn't do any form of cruel action to another. The brazen person, who is hardened inside, might eventually become a cruel person as well, though, if the internal hardening festers and increases.

Cruelty is rooted in the element of earth, which is cold and dry. It is therefore an internal hardening that has become total. But on the other hand, cruelty is also related to the element of fire, which is hot and dry; the dryness of fire can cause an increase of hardness in a person, and in this way, it is actually the heat of the fire which is spurring him on to act. Thus, the act of cruelty is also coming from a spark of fire in the soul.

For this reason, Shlomo *HaMelech* puts the traits of anger and cruelty in the same context.<sup>[1]</sup> This is because fire, the root of anger, can also spark cruelty. However, although some fire is involved here, the trait of cruelty mainly gets its strength from the element of earth.

### ***Cruelty: Feeling Towards Another Like A Stranger***

Chazal say that before the Creation of our current world, there were really 974 generations which were ready to come into existence already, but Hashem decided not to create them in the end. Instead, He took them and dispersed them throughout time, and these are the brazen-faced people that exist in every generation.<sup>[2]</sup>

The "brazen-faced people" in every generation are really people who have no connection to our

generation. Since they do not really connect with other people, they act cruel. They do not have a concept of becoming close to others. The reason why these souls act cruel to others is because they are like strangers of our current generation. They only know members of their own generation, which was before our current world was created. Therefore, these souls look at everyone in the world like strangers to them, so they act cruel to them.

In the end of the day, these souls were placed in the generation, but they have no connection to the generation. This is the root of their cruel behavior to others.

Thus, cruelty comes from viewing someone else as a stranger, and this is manifest when a person does not wish to have a connection with another person. The element of earth is the source of disconnection; warmth, which is in fire, enables connection, and moisture, which is present in both wind and water, can also foster connection. But dryness and coldness are both natures which oppose the idea of connection, and since both dryness and coldness are present in earth, earth is therefore the root of disconnection.

We can learn what cruelty is by examining what its opposite is – the trait of compassion. (When we want to understand a concept, we can learn from its opposite, as the Maharal<sup>[3]</sup> says that we can conceptualize what redemption will be like, when we compare it to what exile is like).

The opposite of cruelty is compassion. Since cruelty is rooted in earth, it must be that compassion is rooted in wind, because wind is the exact opposite of earth. Earth is dry and cold, and it cannot bring about connection. Wind, however, contains moisture and heat, which can each bring about connection.

In cruelty, we can find three kinds. The coldness of earth can be the source of one kind of cruelty, while the dryness of earth is responsible for another kind of cruelty. If the coldness and dryness of the earth combine, we get a third kind of cruelty.

We will try to understand the different forms of cruelty there are – cruelty that comes from coldness, cruelty that comes from dryness, and cruelty that comes from a combination of both.

### ***The Three Cruel Animals of the World***

Chazal mention three kinds of animals which are particularly cruel: the raven, the mountain goat, and the snake.

A raven is cruel towards its children. The *Metzudas David* writes that Hashem Himself feeds the babies of a raven, who are not fed by its mother.<sup>[4]</sup> A raven does not even feed its small children.

A mountain goat is also cruel to its children. The Gemara says that as soon as the mountain goat is about to give birth, it goes to the edge of the cliff, so that its newborn will fall down the cliff and die. Hashem makes a miracle and sends an eagle to save the baby goat, which quickly swoops down at the precise moment – not a second too soon, and not a second too late.<sup>[5]</sup>

Another cruel animal is the snake. “*The head of the “pesanim” (serpents) is cruel.*”<sup>[6]</sup> A pesen is a species of snake; after it gives birth, it throws its babies away to others. It does not take pity on them.

It is clear to any person that if there are three kinds of animals who act very cruel, it must be that there are three unique kinds of cruelty which can exist. We will try to understand each of these.

### ***Cruelty of the Raven***

How is a raven cruel? The Gemara says that a raven is black; when its child is young, the child has not developed its black color yet, and it is white. The parents hate it, because it does not look like them. [Therefore they don't feed it, so Hashem Himself has to come feed it]. But when the young raven begins to get older, it gains a black skin color, and then the raven parents begin to love their child, because now it looks like them.<sup>[7]</sup>

This shows us what the nature of cruelty is. A raven does not feed its children, because it views its child as a stranger, for not looking like it. On a more subtle note, it can't stand its child for being the opposite skin color itself, so it hates the child for being its opposite.

It is not only ravens that act like this. There is a kind of person who will meet someone from another country and act like a stranger towards him, solely because he's "not his type."

The raven acts like a stranger towards its own children, which is worse, of course. Why does it act cruel to them? Because the child is not "its type" - the parents have a black color, while the child has a white color. As soon as the child becomes black-skinned, the parents stop being cruel, because now it looks like them, so now they view the child as "their type."

Such cruelty comes when a person can't stand someone else who is his opposite. It is a cruelty rooted in the coldness of earth.

When there is coldness, there will be opposition. The nation of Amalek was the first to attack the Jewish people. They are compared to a person who goes into a hot bath and cools it off, enabling others to come and follow suit.<sup>[8]</sup> Amalek is "cold" to the Jewish people precisely because they are the opposite of the Jewish people. They are the nemesis of the Jewish people; Amalek is called the "first" of the nations, and so are the Jewish people called the "first" - we are the "first" holy nation, while they are the "first" evil.

Coldness is the source of disparity between people. When people are "cold" toward each other, they are separate from each other. By contrast, heat can enable two people to connect, even two people are fighting with each other.

For example, a wife is called *eizer k'negdo*, the helpmate who opposes her husband. If the husband continues to love her in spite of the fact that she fights with him and opposes him, his love will overpower their differences. The "heat" between the husband and wife can act as a catalyst to unify them together, even if they are amidst differences, because that is the nature of heat: it brings about connection.

We have so far seen the first kind of cruelty - the cruelty of the raven. Understandably, the cruelty of the raven can manifest in our own soul as well, and Chazal used the raven as an example from the animal world to bring out the concept of cruelty. From a raven, we can learn that a person acts cruel to another when another is "not his type", when another is the opposite of his personality. When a person sees another as his opposite, this causes a lack of connection with the other person, and this is rooted in the cold nature of earth.

### ***Cruelty of the Mountain Goat***

The second example of a cruel animal that Chazal speak about is a mountain goat. When it is about to give birth, it goes to a cliff, so that its baby will fall off the cliff as soon as it is born and die.

What is the meaning behind this kind of cruelty? How can a person - or even an animal - be so cruel to its own children, allowing them to die as soon as they are born? The truth is that if someone does not have children yet, Chazal say that he is the kind of person who might act cruel to a child.<sup>[9]</sup> But if

someone already has children, how can he be so cruel to his own children?

The way we can understand this is based on the following. Chazal say that a childless person is considered to be dead.[\[10\]](#) The depth behind this is because a dead person has dried up and disintegrated into the earth; dryness symbolizes a lack of life, just as a dead person has no life and thus dries up into the ground. Thus, a person who is childless is considered to be dead, because his feelings towards children have dried up.

Now we can understand how a mountain goat can be so cruel as to try to kill its own child; we will explain.

A person, by nature, does not want to die. In addition, a person naturally wants to have children. A mountain goat does not want children, and thus it seeks to kill them; since it wants to kill its own child, the mother mountain goat itself is considered to be dead. It doesn't value life, because its feelings for children have dried up. The mother mountain goat has developed an internal dryness within herself, and thus it is cruel to its child.

(Similar to what we are saying, Rashi says that the word *achzar*, "cruel", is another term for *Gehinnom*, because it is a dry place in which there is no life going on.[\[11\]](#))

The cruelty of the mountain goat is a whole different kind of cruelty than a raven's cruelty. A raven is cruel to its children because it doesn't like them. When its young children get older, it will begin to like the children. But a mountain goat is even crueler to its child: it wants to actually get rid of the child - it does so because it lacks its own value for life, because it has dried up inside itself.

If an animal has a value for life, it won't be able to kill its own child. If a person has a value for his own life, he won't be able to disregard the life of another person. But when a person doesn't feel alive inside himself - when he dries up inside himself - he can come to kill another person. He can kill someone, because he's not even aware of what he's doing; he doesn't realize that killing someone means that his life is being taken away. A killer has no value for life; he has dried up inside himself, and therefore, he is kind of dead inside himself.

A raven does not kill its child; it withholds food from them. It is certainly acting cruel to its child, but it is not trying to take away the life of its child. It is rather lacking a connection with its child. It understands that its child is alive, and it still has a value for life. A mountain goat has a worse kind of cruelty to its child. It will actually try to kill its child, because it has no value for life.

To illustrate, we can find an example that explains this concept from what goes on in our own world. There are people who practice abortion (*rachmana litzlon*). If you would ask such people, "Would you ever kill a newborn baby?" they would respond, "G-d forbid!! I would never do such a thing!" But they don't see a problem in killing a fetus inside its mother. Why not? Why do they think that killing a fetus is not the same thing as killing a live baby? It is because from their perspective, which is erroneous, a fetus is not considered to be alive yet. Therefore, they have no problem in killing a fetus. If a person would consider the fetus to be like a living baby, he wouldn't be able to do abortion.

Here is another example. A person might see a hundred ants walking and then step on all of them, and he does not feel bad at all that he just killed a hundred ants. He doesn't consider them to be living creatures - and that is why he can kill them. If you would ask such a person, "Why don't you take a knife and kill a horse with it?" he will probably not agree to do such a thing, and even if he would, he would do so with a guilty conscience. In reality, there is no difference between killing a horse and killing an ant; they are both creatures with a life in them. The only difference between them is from the viewpoint of human emotions, and in this case, the emotions are erroneous. It comes from

a lack of recognition for living things.

This kind of person won't kill a horse, but not because he has more compassion on a horse than on an ant. It is rather because he has no value for life. A person might view a small ant as a creature that has no life in it, and that is why he won't feel bad killing an ant.

We have brought these two examples to help us understand the kind of cruelty which the mountain goat has towards its children. It will kill its own children because it has no value for life; a lack of value for life comes when an inner dryness takes place in the soul, which is coming from the element of earth.

### ***Cruelty of the Snake***

The third kind of animal which Chazal say is cruel is the snake. A snake acts both cold and dry towards its children, which is the most total form of cruelty. It takes the cruelty of the raven (coldness) and the cruelty of the mountain goat (dryness) and combines them both together in its act of cruelty.

We can see this clearly and simply from the Snake, who wanted Adam to eat from the forbidden tree, so that Adam would die from it. Chazal say that the Snake wanted to get Adam killed so that it could marry Chavah. Here we see the very first act of cruelty that took place in Creation – the Snake, whose act of cruelty is the source of all cruelty.

The Snake wanted Adam to die, so that Adam would go back to the earth he was created from, back to the coldness and dryness of earth. Thus, there was both coldness and dryness present in its cruel motives.

In our own soul as well, if dryness and coldness combine, it can develop the trait of cruelty in a person. The kind of cruelty that results from both dryness and coldness together is the total kind of cruelty, and it is defined as a *disregard for continuation*. We will explain what this means.

Death is the end of life. Life, in concept, is something that represents continuity, something that continues to go on unless it is stopped. Death comes and puts a stop to life, ending it. Cruelty is a concept in which a person brings an end upon something, because the person does not see the continuity of the person he is being cruel towards.

We can compare this to the following scenario. If a person tells someone to go kill another person, he will naturally refuse to do so. But if a person tells another to go “pull the plug” on a dying person on the deathbed, there are many people who unfortunately would do it. Of course, we who keep the holy Torah know that such a thing is forbidden, and we also know that our basic emotions in us should recoil in disgust from such a request, but amongst those who do not keep the Torah, there are unfortunately many people who feel that not only there is nothing wrong with “pulling the plug”, but that you're even being kind to the ill person in doing so; that it's okay to end his life so you can “put him out of his misery.” They do not consider it to be cruel at all!

The depth behind their rationalization is because they view the dying person as someone whose life has essentially ended, and therefore, they feel that they are not taking away his life at all. To the contrary, they think they are being kind to him in ending his life. That is their misguided thinking – *rachmana litzlon* (May G-d have mercy on us from such a thing).

This is a kind of cruelty in which a person is cruel, yet he thinks he is being kind! A person will act this way if he fails to see the continuity of the person in front of him. When a person does not see the continuity of another person, he views another person as someone whose life has basically ended,

and therefore he justifies his cruelty.

Earlier, we discussed the cruelty of the mountain goat. This is a concept of cruelty in which a person has no value for life. Yet, the mountain goat is still aware that its child exists; its problem is that it does not value the existence of its child, in spite of its awareness. This is a kind of cruelty which stems from internal dryness - when a person lacks a value for his own life, because he has "dried up" inside, and thus he lacks the value of life in another.

But the snake's cruelty goes further than the mountain goat. It understands that its young are alive (and this is due to its coldness, which provides somewhat of a value for life, since coldness offers a degree of vitality), but it lets its children die, because it does not see them as continuous. The snake thinks [for some reason] that its child's life is considered to have ended already, and therefore, it does not think it is doing anything wrong with letting its child die.

We can see this as well from the Snake. The Snake told Adam that he will die anyway, regardless of he eats from the tree or not. In reality, Adam would only be cursed with death if he eats from the tree, but the Snake told him that he will die regardless. The depth behind this was because the Snake viewed Adam's life as having already ended, because the nature of its cruelty doesn't allow it to see continuity.

In addition, we can also see how the Snake is rationalizing its cruelty, thinking instead that it is performing a kindness to Adam and Chavah by tempting them with its argument. It told them that if they would eat from the tree, they would become like Hashem, and know everything. It was convincing them that it's for their own benefit to eat from the tree. Simply speaking, this was because the snake is a clever and devious creature, and therefore it had raised a very tempting argument. But the deeper understanding of this is that because it did not see the continuity of mankind, it viewed Adam and Chavah as being already dead anyway, and therefore it thought it was doing them a service by trying to convince them [on how to get eternal life].

To summarize thus far, there are three kinds of cruelty. One kind of cruelty is that a person does not want to connect with others, when others are not to his liking. This is cruelty of the raven. A worse kind of cruelty is when a person has no value for another's life at all, and this is cruelty of the mountain goat. The ultimate form of cruelty is when a person is aware that another person lives, yet he feels that the other's life is a lost cause anyway, and therefore he justifies his cruelty. This is cruelty of the snake.

This is the depth behind cruelty.

### ***Fixing The Cruelty of the Raven***

We will now see how we can fix the three different kinds of cruelty, depending on the factors in the element of earth which are causing the source of the cruelty.

Cruelty of the raven, as we mentioned, is coming from the coldness of earth. It needs to be fixed by using coldness of water. Since the coldness of earth here has become evil, we need to use a good kind of coldness to counter it. The good kind of coldness is found in the element of water.

On the second day of Creation, Hashem separated the upper waters and the lower waters. At first, the waters were all mixed together, but the different waters were not happy being together with each other, and they fought. So Hashem split them apart from each other, creating a divide between the upper waters and the lower waters. Did this further their strife? No; to the contrary, it made the lower waters yearn to return to the way things were in the beginning. Ever since the waters were split, the lower waters have been yearning to returning to the upper waters, where they will be closer to

Heaven.[\[12\]](#)

We can learn from this that when there is a separation between people, one of the ways how this can be repaired is through uncovering a yearning to return to our original state of unity.

This is how cruelty of the raven can be fixed – when we use the “coldness” of the water, which yearns to unite now that it has been separated from its other half.

### ***Fixing Cruelty of the Mountain Goat***

Now we will discuss how we repair the second kind of cruelty we mentioned, cruelty of the mountain goat. Since this kind of cruelty is stemming from the dryness of earth, the way to fix it is through its opposing power – moisture, which is rooted in the element of wind.

We can see from what happens by the mountain goat. Hashem makes a miracle and sends an eagle to rescue the baby as it falls down the cliff. Why does Hashem send an eagle? The simple understanding is because the eagle is considered to be the embodiment of compassion.

But the deeper meaning is because an eagle represents wind, for it can soar very high, similar to how drafts of wind ascend upward very fast. An eagle represents wind, and wind is the root of the trait of compassion. The moisture of wind is the opposite of the dry earth; if earth’s dryness produces cruelty, than this in turn means that its opposite, the moisture of wind, is the source for compassion.

Thus, since dryness of earth is the root of cruelty, it can be fixed through its opposite – the moisture of wind, which we utilize if we reveal compassion towards another.

To give an example of what this is, the Vilna Gaon wrote that if a father really wants to love his child and have compassion on him, he should keep a certain distance from his child sometimes. Distance from the child will make the father miss his child more, which will increase his yearning and love for his child.

Of course, distance is not always a good thing. If it is coming from the dryness of earth, then acting distant toward a child is a form of cruelty, and it simply causes a person to disregard another’s life. But if it is coming from the wind in the soul, then distance can actually foster more connection.

Wind can either bring about connection or separation; winds can connect things together by blowing them together, or they can separate things by blowing them apart. Still, if we want to achieve connection with another person, we should use wind, rather than use earth. Earth separates things [due to its coldness and dryness], and it cannot bring about connection. Wind, though, can bring about connection even after it separates things.

We can compare this to demolishing a house. Sometimes a house is demolished simply so we can get rid of it, but sometimes we knock down a house so we can build a better one its place. This is how we can understand wind: although wind can cause separation, even when it causes a separation, it can do so in order to bring about a connection.

Thus, when dryness of earth becomes dominant in the soul, there are two possibilities of what will now happen. Either it will cause a person to dry up inside himself and have no value for life, whereupon he is considered to be like a dead person inside himself. Or, it can dry him up and spur him on to *become thirsty* – the dryness can inspire him to yearn and quench his thirst. This yearning is rooted in the element of wind, and thus if a person uses wind, he can counter his inner dryness and instead yearn for vitality.

We can see this idea expressed by a person who becomes very despondent about life. One kind of person, when he becomes despondent, might become so down about himself that he totally gives up from life. Another kind of person, however, when he becomes very despondent, will be spurred on to inspire himself, and he will yearn to go free from his despondency, more than ever before.

The classic example of this was Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya, who fell so low in sin that he had totally given up on ever doing *teshuvah*.<sup>[13]</sup> But when he reached the climax of his despondency, he cried so much and became more inspired, more than ever before, and he “moved” himself<sup>[14]</sup> so high that he reached straight access into the Next World.

Thus, dryness of earth can serve as a catalyst to help a person become inspired. We can compare this to a thirsty person who is searching for a water fountain, and he feels like he is going to dehydrate unless he drinks within the next few minutes. If he is told that there is a ten-minute walk to the nearest water fountain, he will run there as fast as he can. What we can see from this is that as long as a person believes that there is hope to his situation, *the very fact that he is dry inside* is what spurs him on to change his situation and demand vitality for himself.

To give another example of how this is true, if a person is compassionate, and he sees another person who is in great need of help, his compassion will burst forth from him and rise to an even higher level than it normally is. The more “dry” the other person is, the more he will increase his compassion to help him, and thus, a strong amount of dryness can actually be a catalyst to reveal compassion [from another].

This is how cruelty stemming from dryness of earth can be fixed. It is when his internal dryness spurs him on to become compassionate.

Chazal say that it is forbidden to act merciful towards the cruel.<sup>[15]</sup> The depth behind this is because having mercy on a cruel person doesn't move the cruel person to change and become merciful. If the cruel person would stop being cruel at least a little after we are nice to him, then it would be fine to have compassion on him. But, the nature of the cruel person is that he does not gain a value for others' life, even if we have compassion on him. Thus, it is forbidden to have mercy on him, because a cruel person remains cruel.

A cruel person has no hope for valuing life, because he has dried up too much inside himself. He is like the mountain goat. He is in a situation of total despair. But wind can come and blow around dirt, giving new life into the earth – it can provide hope to the earth that it can come out of its dryness. This is how we fix cruelty stemming from dryness of earth – when the cruel person reveals wind\compassion.

### ***Using Fire To Repair Cruelty***

We can also use fire to help repair cruelty. Fire is hot and dry; the dryness of fire can also be the source of cruelty, as Shlomo *HaMelech* equates anger with cruelty; since anger stems from fire, and anger is related to cruelty, it must be that part of the cruelty is getting its dryness from fire.

However, herein we can find a solution to cruelty – from the very source of the problem itself. When anger is coming from cruelty, the anger can actually be a catalyst that helps remove the cruelty!  
How?

Fire, besides for being a source of dryness, also contains heat. The heat in fire can cause fire to burst out, and thus it can make a person's cruelty burst forth. As the cruelty is exploding outward from the person, it gains a degree of vitality from the heat of the fire, and thus, the cruel person can now some feel life going on inside himself. Now that he has gotten angry, he just might be able to get rid of his

cruelty.

Of course, when a person explodes in anger, this is the negative trait of anger. But if a person does have an angry outburst, it can still send him some vitality.

To illustrate, if a father has a rebellious son, and he gives up on improving the son, he won't even get angry at his son anymore when the son rebels. He stops getting angry at his son, not because he has overcome his anger, but because he has given up on the son. He has no hope anymore that his son will improve. But if he still has some hope left for his son to improve, his son's misbehavior will cause him to get angry, and the anger shows that the relationship between them has not yet lost its life.

We see from this that anger shows how there is some life going on; when there is no anger going on, it shows that there is no life here going on.

So if a cruel person gets angry at his victim, he just might have some hope now in abandoning his cruelty. Until now he was dried up inside himself, and thus he comes to act cruel to others, but now that he has had an angry outburst towards his victim, he gains some vitality in himself [albeit negative], due to the warmth of the fire in his anger. The anger gives some "warmth" to the situation here, and even though it is a negative kind of warmth, it is still warmth, and the warmth shows that some of the cruelty has been lessened.

Now that we understand this, we can now understand that cruelty is not defined by an act of cruelty, but rather, it is an *attitude* a person has in which he cannot find vitality in a situation. [He is either being like the mountain goat, or he is acting like the snake, as we said before]. Therefore, when a cruel person has an angry outburst, he has a beginning of a remedy for himself. Now that he has some vitality from the anger, he can take it further and nullify the negative anger, and this will complete his rectification.

The classic example of this concept we find by the sin of the Golden Calf. After the people sinned with the Golden Calf, there was a death sentence on them, and they had a commandment from Hashem to kill each other. A man had to kill his own family members for sinning with the Calf. How could they act so cruel? To kill their own families?!

The answer is, by killing their own families, they were using the element of fire, at its zenith. Fire can rectify cruelty, and therefore, they were not being cruel to each other by killing those who sinned with the Calf.

### ***Using Cruelty For Holiness***

Earlier [in the previous two chapters], we discussed the nature of internal hardening in the element of earth, which can lead to the traits of evil stubbornness and brazenness. We also mentioned a third kind of hardening - when one's *daas* [his mind] becomes hardened, when he becomes set in his negative way of thinking.

Cruelty can also stem from a hardening of one's *daas*. But a person can be firm in his *daas* for holiness, and in this way, his cruelty is holy. We find this concept in the following statement of the Sages: "A Torah scholar must be cruel towards his children like a raven."[\[16\]](#) This is a holy kind of cruelty.

By contrast, Bilaam was someone who possessed an evil kind of *daas*, and he wished to obliterate the entire Jewish people with his curse. His impaired *daas* enabled him to use cruelty for evil.

When a Torah scholar has to act "cruel" for holiness, where is this cruelty coming from? Is it coming

from the coldness of earth? *Chas v'shalom* (G-d forbid)! Chazal are specific to say that he must be cruel like the raven, as opposed to a mountain goat or a snake, because a raven has a value for life [as we explained earlier]. But instead of using the raven's cruelty for evil, the Torah scholar uses the raven's cruelty for something good and holy [to continue to learn Torah, even though his family is begging him to stop learning Torah and go make a living]. The cruelty he must exercise towards his family is not coming from the coldness of earth, but it is rather coming from a higher source - from holiness.

A Torah scholar is required to have *daas*. If he doesn't have *daas* [if he is not firm in his beliefs], Chazal say that he is worse than a carcass. Thus, a Torah scholar has to act "cruel" towards his family by continuing to learn Torah in spite of the fact that they might be begging to him to go make a living and support them. It is cruelty being drawn forth from a holy source, so it is a "holy" kind of cruelty.

Now we can understand the following point, which is very deep. A Torah scholar's cruelty, the holy kind of cruelty, is because he disconnects totally from this world, instead basking in spirituality. This is a kind of "cruelty" towards the world which comes from the inner depths of the soul, and it is a holy source of cruelty. In this way, a Torah scholar is so connected to spirituality that he feels like a stranger towards this physical earth; feeling like a "stranger", as we said earlier, is the root of cruelty [because *zar*\stranger is contained in the word *achzar*\cruel], but here it is being used for holiness.

Of course, if he remains only with his holy cruelty, then he is incomplete. He needs to also deal with the world and show mercy to others, and in this way he balances out his holy cruelty.

Beyond a Torah scholar's holy kind of cruelty, we can find an even deeper kind of holy cruelty. Chazal say that when a righteous person prays to Hashem, Hashem changes His trait of cruelty into compassion.<sup>[17]</sup> How can we say that Hashem is cruel, *chas v'shalom*? It is not the regular kind of 'cruelty' that we understand, which comes from coldness in earth. It is coming from the *daas* of Hashem, the source of all holiness. If we want to have some idea of it, a Torah scholar uses his *daas* to act cruel for holiness, as we mentioned above; this bears somewhat of a resemblance to the holy 'cruelty' which Hashem uses.

Hashem has different modes in which He deals with the world. Sometimes He is compassionate to us, like a merciful father. Sometimes Hashem has to remind us that He is exalted, and then He has to exercise cruelty so that we get the message. Hashem has to show a degree of 'cruelty' sometimes to us so that we should realize that He is totally above us. No matter how holy we become, we can never become as holy as Him.<sup>[18]</sup> The fact that He wants us to recognize this differentiation is called His "cruelty", because in this way He shows some distance towards us, and it is necessary for us.

### ***Balancing Cruelty and Compassion In Our Life***

To apply this concept in our own life, our soul has to be developed in that we maintain a healthy balance between showing compassion and showing cruelty. The Zohar says that if a person acts merciful, but he doesn't know how to be zealous for Hashem like Pinchos, then he is not really merciful.<sup>[19]</sup> If a person is too soft-hearted and he doesn't know how to be firm when he has to - he is missing the holy cruelty which a Torah scholar must exercise - then it shows that he is too attached to this world, and he is not a true Torah scholar.

A true Torah scholar is someone who lives the wisdom that he learns, and thus he comes to feel like a stranger towards this world, and this is how he shows holy 'cruelty'. Of course, if he goes extreme with this and he remains with only holy cruelty, and he never shows compassion, then he is also not a true Torah scholar.

A person needs to be able to exercise either compassion or cruelty, depending on the situation, and there must be a fine balance between the two. Understandably, a person has to know when and where to use compassion or cruelty. One needs to be compassionate and get along with people, but he also needs to be 'cruel' in the sense that he needs to disconnect from the physical world, such as in the case of a Torah scholar, that even if his family is begging him to go make a living so that they can have food to eat, he must disregard their pleading and continue learning Torah.

This is hinted to in the word *achzar*\cruel, which contains the words *ach*\brother and *zar*\stranger. In other words, the perfected kind of cruelty is when one knows how to treat another person like his brother, exercising compassion when he should; and he also knows how to act like a "stranger" to this world, which is using cruelty for holiness. So the true, perfected kind of cruelty is when the cruelty is balanced out with the ability to also exercise compassion.

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[\[1\]](#) *Mishlei 27:4*

[\[2\]](#) *Chagigah 13b*

[\[3\]](#) *Netzach Yisrael*

[\[4\]](#) *Tehillim 147:9*

[\[5\]](#) *Bava Basra 16a*

[\[6\]](#) *Devarim 32:33*

[\[7\]](#) *Kesubos 49b*

[\[8\]](#) *Rashi to Devorim 25:18*

[\[9\]](#) *Horiyos 1:4*

[\[10\]](#) *Nedarim 64b*

[\[11\]](#) *Mishlei 5:9*

[\[12\]](#) *Tikkunei HaZohar 5; see also Midrash Aseres HaDibros: 1*

[\[13\]](#) *Avodah Zarah 17a*

**[14]** Editor's Note: It seems that the Rov is alluding to the element of wind, which is defined by its "moving" nature, that Rabbi Eliezer ben Dordaya used his element of wind to counter the negative dryness of his element of earth.

**[15]** Koheles Rabbah 7:16

**[16]** Eruvin 22a. Rashi explains that a Torah scholar must continue to learn Torah even if his family is begging him to go out and make a livelihood so they can have food to eat.

**[17]** Sukkah 14a

**[18]** Beraishis Rabbah 90:2

**[19]** Zohar Beraishis 245a

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**Source:** <https://bilvavi.net/english/understanding-your-middos-09-cruelty>