YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 04:**

**Creation as a Moral Act**

**Moral Action**

We have already discussed a principle that Manitou emphasizes repeatedly: the world is created deficient, in order that mankind may work to complete it and thereby earn its right to exist. We then posed the question of the axis on which man is meant to act in order to bring the world to completion and perfection, and we saw that the answer is the moral axis. Now we must take a closer look at what morality is.

Morality is a complicated concept that has occupied human culture extensively. On the simplest level, we may assert that the first question that morality asks is the following: what sort of act is considered worthy? This question arises from a person's profound sense that there are values that obligate them, and these shape the answer to the question of what is right and what is not right, what is good and what is bad, what is permitted and what is forbidden. The question of morality may be broken down into many more detailed questions about proper action, which ultimately pertain to fundamental principles: What is the source of the obligation to act properly? What is its validity? Where does it come from? What is it that gives rise to man’s existential sense of obligation?

Another issue that needs to be clarified is the connection between the moral axis and mankind earning its right to exist. How do we know that the Torah views the moral axis as the realm for man's action and progress? We may suggest several different answers to this question. For instance, we see that morality occupies a central place in the Torah: first and foremost, out of the Ten Commandments, five pertain to interpersonal relations. Looking further back, we may point to Avraham's moral conduct, as attested to in *Bereishit* (18:19):

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him.

The verse indicates that it is for this reason that Avraham is chosen by God. Evidence of the concept of morality as the basis of other significant sections of the Torah is not difficult to find.

Manitou seeks the answer in the Torah. He goes even further back, all the way to the very bedrock of the world.

**In the beginning, God created the other**

Manitou defines morality as "making place for the other;" in light of this, he defines Creation as the ultimate moral act.

He locates the principle of morality in the first verse of the Torah: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (*Bereishit* 1:1). What is this verse telling us? On the simplest level, it seems to be telling us something about reality: the fact that the world is created; but according to Manitou, the verse is actually telling us something mainly about God. The Torah starts off by telling us that God makes room for reality: He creates the heavens and the earth.

Just as this readiness to make room for the other is the first thing that the Torah tells us about God, so it is the first thing that we are told about man. The first commandment that appears in the Torah is (ibid. v. 28) "Be fruitful and multiply" — i.e., make room for others to exist and be present. This would seem to be a fairly simple and self-evident imperative that is deeply imbedded in human consciousness.

However, as an individual, I might quite conceivably posit a different fundamental perspective, one that regards any other person who joins my sphere of existence as a nuisance. Anyone else who appears on the scene consumes resources which until now were at my sole disposal; as a result, I now have less, and my living space is constricted. This sort of view finds extensive expression in the rise of individualism in our times, accompanied by phenomena such as a decline in marriage rates, a rise in the median age for marriages, marital crises, etc. The principle of making room for the other has very real and significant ramifications.

The Creator's will to create the world is a moral will. The act of Creation is meant not only as an ontological, metaphysical act, but as a moral act, in the full sense of the word. Creating means making room for the other. Prior to Creation, there was only God, and He decided, for whatever reasons, to bring an "other" into existence. This is an act of absolute lovingkindness. This is the definition of moral action throughout *Tanakh*: it is not an abstract, metaphysical, impersonal concept, but rather an act of moral will. (*Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* III, p. 44)

Manitou goes on to discuss another commandment: following God's ways. There is a well-known teaching in the Gemara concerning this mitzva:

Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, taught: What is meant by the command (*Devarim* 13:5) “You shall follow [literally: walk behind] the Lord your God”?

Is it then possible for a person to walk after the Divine Presence? Are we not told that “the Lord your God is a consuming fire” (ibid. 4:24)?

Rather, it means that one should follow God’s attributes.

Just as He clothed the naked, as it is written, “And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and for his wife, and He clothed them” (*Bereishit* 3:21); so you should provide clothes for those who need them.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, as it is written, “And the Lord appeared to [Avraham] by the terebinths of Mamrei” (*Bereishit* 18:1) [following his circumcision]; so you should visit the sick.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, as it is written, “And it came to pass, after the death of Avraham, that God blessed Yitzchak, his son…” (*Bereishit* 25:11); so you should comfort mourners.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written, “And He buried [Moshe] in the valley” (*Devarim* 34:6), so you shall bury the dead." (BT *Sota* 14a)

This mitzva is in fact a general directive that pertains to a great many realms of life. We might say that the performance of any mitzva is following in God's ways, but here the focus is on a certain type of action. According to the teaching in the Gemara, following in God's ways expresses itself principally in extending oneself on behalf of someone else; making room in one’s consciousness to attend to others and their needs. One is required to clothe the naked, visit the sick, comfort mourners. Once again we are reminded of Avraham, who acts in this way. The Torah tells us that Avraham follows God's ways, and this finds expression in his moral actions, and specifically his hospitality. Welcoming someone else into one's own personal space is manifestly an expression of making room for the other. Beyond the constriction of one's space, hospitality also entails making resources available, making time for the other, and taking a certain amount of trouble on the guest’s behalf, even where this involves difficulty for the host — as is certainly the case for Avraham, following his circumcision, when he may be expected to focus on his own needs.

The concept of *shalom* is central to Jewish life, and it is one of God's Names.[[1]](#footnote-1) The word is used colloquially in reference to a relationship that includes and takes notice of the other. Allowing another person into one's personal space is liable to invite a struggle: the other might disturb, encroach, threaten. Even if this risk does not actually lead to overt conflict, it may cause hidden tension, a sense of uneasiness and resentment. Morality demands that one relate to the other from an inclusive, tolerant, benevolent perspective. This is the meaning of *shalom,* as in the Name of God Who creates the world as His "other.”

Ramchal likewise relates Creation to the moral sphere. According to his approach, God’s purpose in Creation is to show benevolence to man. We have already addressed Ramchal’s discussion of the significance of earning the right to exist, but this is preceded by the principle that God creates the world to show benevolence to man, and this benevolence is earned by man’s choosing proper action.

There is a certain affinity between Ramchal’s approach and that of Manitou, but it would not be accurate to say that Manitou bases himself on the Ramchal. One of the first questions that arises from Ramchal's explanation is the following: What does it mean that God wanted to show benevolence, when prior to Creation there was no one and nothing to show benevolence to? Manitou not only answers the question but does away with its basis by positing that the most fundamental moral movement is making room for the other — meaning that there is a movement more fundamental than showing benevolence. First there must be an “other.”

Manitou's explanation offers a surprising answer to a different issue, as the Torah provides no reason for Creation. Ramchal might answer that the reason is hinted to in the narrative: throughout the process, God evaluates reality and declares that it is "good" — implying that the purpose of the world is to be good (if we assume that the Torah indeed intends this understanding of the word “good”). However, Manitou's approach goes all the way back to the very first verse, asserting that the point is not some additional purpose or aim over and above Creation, but rather the act of Creation itself, in which God makes room for a different reality. This is the first and most fundamental moral action. Thus, the main thrust of morality relates to mankind coming out of itself and granting a presence to the other. This leads to other forms of giving, but the basis is the consciousness and acknowledgment of the other.

Thus far we have seen how Manitou reads the Torah, identifies a fundamental philosophical principle, and uses it to explain key verses. Now we shall proceed to examine his Kabbalistic perspective.

**The concept of *tzimtzum* in the teachings of the Ari and his disciples**

The Ari (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, 1534–1572) teaches that in order for the different levels of reality to come into existence, a "constriction" (*tzimtzum*) is necessary in order to create space, since God's Infinite Light is all that exists initially, leaving no room for anything else. God therefore "constricts Himself," as it were, in order to create an empty space in which the world can come into existence.

This concept, appearing at the beginning of *Etz Chayim* (a summary of the teachings of the Ari, published by his disciple, Rabbi Chayim Vital), has given rise to extensive analysis among Kabbalists of the generations since the Ari. It is not clear in what sense the world could not be created without Divine constriction, in view of the fact that God has no physical body that occupies space. This raises the possibility that the concept of *tzimtzum* might perhaps be meant in some non-literal sense. Alongside those who maintain that it is to be understood literally (such as R. Immanuel Chai Ricchi), there are two main schools of scholars who interpret the concept in a non-literal way:

1. The first suggests that *tzimtzum* is not to be understood as an objective phenomenon. In other words, from God's all-encompassing and complete perspective, the entire universe is filled with His glory; from our limited, human perspective there is constriction or "hiding of God's face." (Chabad and *Nefesh Ha-chayim*, despite all their differences, both adopt this fundamental approach.) According to this explanation, there is no actual constriction — for there can be no existence without God's Presence. There can only be a hiding of His face — i.e., a reality in which God is present, but man cannot encounter Him. Thus, the constriction is not an objective reality but rather the state of human consciousness; it is man’s inability to perceive God.
2. The other possibility is to view the concept of *tzimtzum* and the creation of an "empty space" or "vacuum" as a metaphor. Ramchal understands the metaphor as indicating that God restrains Himself rather than acting with His full force, creating a world that is deficient and incomplete. According to this approach, the constriction is real, but it does not pertain to the spatial dimension, as the literal understanding would suggest. The description of spatial constriction is a metaphor for narrow or incomplete action. Ramchal explains that the concept of *tzimtzum* teaches that the world is created in limited, deficient form, rather than perfect and complete as Divine power would dictate, in order to allow man to have free choice.

Manitou, like Ramchal, interprets *tzimtzum* as a metaphor, but offers a different explanation. Instead of viewing its significance as a limited, imperfect creation, he posits that *tzimtzum* is an expression of God making room for the other: not "making room" in the physical, geographical sense, but rather "making room" in the sense of allowing and acknowledging existence. This is a moral movement. Manitou asserts that *tzimtzum* is a very apt and accurate metaphor: indeed, it is seemingly proper and logical that Divinity should fill all of existence, and that nothing else should exist. The creation of the empty space is itself the movement of making room; it is the primal moral movement.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. According to BT *Shabbat* 10b, Shalom is one of the Names of God, as it is written, “And Gidon built an altar for the Lord there, and he called Him the Lord Shalom” (*Shoftim* 6:24). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)