YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**principles of faith**

**By Rav Joshua Amaru**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Carole S. Daman of Scarsdale in memory of Tzvi Hersh ben David Arye z”l – Harlan Daman

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**Shiur #06: Creation**

**1. Introduction**

This week we are going to skip to the fourth of the Rambam's 13 principles because of its close relationship to what we talked about last week. Last week I wrote about God as First Cause, as the source of the universe who continuously sustains it. Absent from that discussion, perhaps strikingly, was any reference to God as the Creator of the universe.[[1]](#footnote-1) This week I will discuss creation in relation to the fourth principle. That principle goes as follows:

The fourth foundation is God's precedence;[[2]](#footnote-2) that this One who has just been described precedes (everything) absolutely. No other being has precedence with respect to Him. There are many verses attesting to this in Scripture. The verse attesting to it best is: “The God of eternity is a dwelling place” (*Devarim* 33:27).

Here, too, we do not find explicit mention of *creatio* *ex nihilo*, i.e., creation out of nothing, or *yesh me-ayin* in Hebrew. In the Middle Ages, there were three competing opinions on this topic. These are: the "traditional" Jewish view of creation *ex nihilo*,[[3]](#footnote-3) the Platonic view that God created the world out of pre-existing unshaped matter (*hyle*), and the Aristotelian view that the world is eternal and that God eternally has co-existed with it. In philosophical and theological circles at the time, the question of whether the world was created or eternal (in some way or another) was a huge issue, especially considering the philosophical authority of Aristotle. The Rambam dedicates large sections of the *Guide to the Perplexed* to this issue.[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore, apparently at the end of his life, the Rambam added an additional comment to the fourth principle that explicitly endorses creation *ex nihilo*.

Know that a foundation of the great Torah of Moses is that the world is created: God formed it and created it after its absolute non-existence. That you see me circling around the idea of the eternity of the world is [only] so that the proof of His existence will be absolute, as I explained and made clear in the *Guide*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is a further controversy, continuing to this day, as to the Rambam's "real" position on this topic, and whether he had an esoteric (secret) doctrine that differed from that expounded in his works (which, on the surface, favors creation *ex nihilo*).[[6]](#footnote-6) I do not propose to enter into either of these controversies, which are largely academic today, especially considering that our science and philosophy have no commitment to the eternity of almost anything. So let us take for granted that God is eternal – i.e., that He pre-existed the universe and presumably will continue to exist after it, and that He created the Universe. My interest is in three questions:

1. What does it mean to claim that God is eternal?

2. How does God's eternity relate to God's role as Creator?

3. Why is it important to believe in an eternal God who created the universe? What is at stake?

**2. Two Conceptions of Time**

Eternity is an ambiguous concept. In one sense it refers to filling all of time, as in 'eternal life' or Aristotle's 'eternal world.' In another sense it refers to the absence or irrelevance of time, i.e., timelessness, as in, 'eternal beauty' or 'eternal truth.' Which of these senses are we using when we speak of the eternity of God?

This question depends upon how we understand time. We use two different, even conflicting, conceptions of time.[[7]](#footnote-7) In one conception, which we might call the subjective conception, time flows from the past and into the future. We live only in the present and all of our experience is present experience. From this perspective, the past and future are somehow unreal: the past is over; the future unrealized; only the present is substantial. Something is eternal, in this conception, if it has existed/will exist in every moment of present that there ever was or ever will be.

The other conception of time can be called the objective conception. It relates to time as analogous to space – as a dimension of existence that can be described without giving any special status to the present as the locus of reality. Time, in this conception, does not really flow – it is static, and the experience of the flow of time is merely an artifact of our own experience of moving through time. Time can be best described as a set of points, which can be marked by dates and times, which are part of the structure of reality. Things happen within this reality, but there is nothing intrinsically dynamic here. In a sense, this conception takes temporality, or temporal experience, out of the concept of time.

We use both of these conceptions all the time. The first, subjective conception matches our sense of ourselves as agents. We can only act in the present – we might plan for the future ("be careful not to leave the milk there – it is likely to spill"), or regret the past ("no use crying over spilt milk"), but these are all things done only in the present. We live our practical lives within the first conception, recognizing the unchangeability of the past and the potential of the future.

The second conception is a way of looking at the world that involves removing the subject (i.e., the one doing the thinking) from the content of the thought – she is, in a sense, looking at events from a perspective that is outside of time. Thus, scientists are interested in accounting for something that occurs in a progression from one point in time to another, irrespective of the present. History describes events in terms of their relations to one another rather than their relationship to the present (e.g., the American Revolutionary War lasted from 1775 until 1783). We can objectify the past (or the future) by conceiving it from the outside, without reference to its relationship to the present.

**3. Objective Eternity: God Outside of Time**

When I think about the Revolutionary War, my thinking is done within the subjective conception of time – I think in my subjective present. But the content of my thinking is about the objective conception – about a time between two objective points in a historical timeline in which I can plot my own position as well. What if we imagine a Being for whom all points in time are objective in the same way that the past can be objective for us? This Being would be, in some sense, *outside* of time, not part of the progression of events which is structured by time and space.

This gives us a different way of looking at the eternity of God. Understanding God as within time (in the subjective conception) has the disadvantage of imposing constraints on God. If God is a being who exists within time, then He is limited in whatever ways that temporality limits, i.e., the unavailability of the past and the uncertainty of the future. These constraints are not merely incidental parts of the subjective conception of time; they are constitutive of it; they are what makes our experience of time what it is. In order to avoid limiting God in these ways, perhaps we should say that God is not subjectively in time at all; for Him, time is wholly objective.

There are difficulties with this suggestion, which I will mention briefly. First, as I pointed out above, *our* ability to take an objective perspective, to think temporally without reference to our own experience, is something that we do *subjectively*; thinking objectively seems to rely upon there being a thinking subject who experiences a present when doing so. It is not at all clear whether it is possible for a being to be a thinking subject without experiencing time subjectively. More generally, in removing God from subjective time, we remove God from agency and action (thought can be conceived of as type of action). There does not seem to be a way of conceiving of *doing* something that does not involve the subjective passing of time (try imagining one – you won't succeed). What this means is that if God is outside of time, He cannot act within it because that would bring Him into the scope of subjective time with its constraints. Even creation itself, if it is conceived of as action, would thus involve a kind of Divine self-constraint. In creating the universe, God creates time, which He is then barred from interfering with or, if He interferes, He makes himself into a subject with its attendant limitations. So we are left with an impossible dilemma: either God is within time, and as a being that exists within that framework, is subject to its constraints, or God is outside of time and as such we cannot coherently ascribe thought or action to God.

Now, this analysis is only a very brief and sketchy survey of a very deep and complex topic. I admit that it is also somewhat idiosyncratic in its insistence that agency is coherent only within subjective time.[[8]](#footnote-8) I am sure that many will find holes in the argument and claim that there are ways of thinking about these matters that do not lead to the problems mentioned above. Nonetheless, I think these are real problems, and that they demand a different way of thinking about the whole topic. The best way of presenting this topic is by thinking about creation.

**4. God as a Super-Subject**

The Torah places great emphasis on creation and God as the Creator. It is the opening story of the whole Torah and we regularly invoke it in all of our Shabbat prayers. Shabbat itself is a *zekher le-ma'aseh bereishit* – a commemoration of creation. The creation story has God acting – He creates the world in distinct acts of creation over six days. One way that we can conceive of the eternal God is as a kind of super-subject: God, like everything, exists within time – that is simply what it means to exist. As such, He is constrained by the nature of time. Even God cannot change the past, because the past no longer exists; it is over forever. To change the past is equivalent to doing something logically impossible – e.g., to move an immovable object, and it is no limitation on God to say that He cannot do that. The difference between God and everything else lies in the fact that He is the first being to ever exist – time "begins" with His existence. Additionally, God's power and knowledge give Him the ability to affect the present and future in ways that are completely beyond any other being. This is (part of) the Biblical vision of God and it envisions God as fundamentally *immanent* or present in the world.

This conception of God is absolutely crucial to our religious lives and is certainly the dominant one that arises from the Torah. The God who cares about His creation, who speaks to His prophets, and enters into covenants with His people, is a *subject*; He is analogous to a person who has thoughts and emotions and who speaks and acts. Though I am sure that we cannot do without thinking of God in this way, there is something troubling here. The Rambam identified the difficulty with this conception of God with the fact that personhood of this sort implies corporeality (having a body) and threatens the notion of Divine Unity.[[9]](#footnote-9) I will have more to say on those topics in future *shiurim*, but I want to add a further consideration (which I think can also be found in the Rambam but less explicitly). There is a tension between thinking of God as a subject and envisioning Him as the Creator who exists before the world and made the world out of nothing. Subjectivity cannot exist by itself. Subjectivity is always over and against something; it is a way of showing how a self stands out from his or her environment. For someone to be a subject, he must have objects to relate to, and quite possibly other subjects as well.

**5. Creation as the Indication of God's Transcendence**

The Torah begins with God pre-existing everything else. Though it is not unequivocally clear from the verses, our tradition understands the subsequent creation to be out of nothing, *yesh me-ayin*. This leads to a paradox: only subjects can act, speak and create – action necessarily implies the presence of a subject. But before creation the concept of a subject is incoherent. The paradox of creation *ex nihilo* is a way of pointing to a notion of God who is not a subject, to whom we cannot ascribe speech, thoughts, actions, evaluations or emotions. God is *transcendent*; He is beyond the world and our comprehension, not subject to the categories and constraints through which we make sense of things, outside of time and space. In fact, this is no idea at all. We can literally say and think *nothing* about Absolute Transcendence; all we can do is point to it as the mystery that lies beyond the scope of our understanding.

The Rambam struggled with how to address Divine transcendence, and his response involves what is called negative theology. In a nutshell, that is to claim that we can make no positive claims about God's essential nature.[[10]](#footnote-10) All that we can do is make negative claims; we can only describe what God is not. In addition, we can talk about God's actions and ascribe attributes to Him on their basis. It is not entirely clear how these two elements co-exist, but this is not a course in the Rambam's philosophy so I shall not elaborate further.[[11]](#footnote-11) Instead, I want to close with a different way of approaching the transcendence of God.

**6. The Creation Story's Interplay of Divine Manifestations as a Metaphor**

We should not let go of the idea of God's transcendence. If we do, our conception of God is one that is made our own image – as a person. This borders on idolatry and contradicts the Torah's claim that human beings are made in the image of God and not the reverse. At the same time, to insist on Divine transcendence at the expense of all manifestations of God's concern, involvement and interaction with the world leaves us bereft, with no vehicle at all for any sort of connection with God or religious content. In the creation story we find a way of making religious content possible without giving up on Divine transcendence. Chapter 1 of *Bereishit* is the story of God (always referred to with the name *Elo-him*) creating the world in six days. The point of departure, from which creation begins, has God alone, with no world, no subjectivity, and no activity. In beginning to create the Heavens and the Earth, God is acting, and as such He is not transcendent. He is, however, distant, standing outside of His creation, judging it to be good but not interacting with it. In contrast, in the second and third chapters, we have the Garden of Eden story, with God (referred to throughout as *Hashem Elo-him*) speaking with, commanding and admonishing the first humans. He is so present that Man and Woman even "hear the sound of God walking in the garden" (3:8)!

The Torah is appropriately silent about the absolutely transcendent God. At the same time it sets up, in its founding story, interplay between the imagery of a distant uncommunicative God who is manifest only as the Creator of nature, and exceptionally personal imagery of God as He appears in the Garden of Eden story. These are both representations of God as immanent, as part of the world, because that is all we *can* represent. But in presenting God in such radically different ways, side by side, the Torah presents us with the paradox of any claim about Divinity: in conceiving of Him, let alone having a relationship with Him, we are forced by our own limitations into experiencing Him as a person or at least as an abstract subject, without respecting His transcendence and ineffability.

The Garden of Eden story serves as a way that the Torah gives us permission to do so, and to trust the experience of Divine contact as authentic. Juxtaposing the remote God of Creation with that story serves as a reminder – what you see, hear and experience is not what there is, or at least not all there is. Divine remoteness, as in the creation story, serves as a metaphor for Divine transcendence. In presenting us with these two radically different accounts of creation, the Torah both gives us permission to engage religiously on this mythic level, in which God is merely as super-subject, while bringing to our attention that this imagery is a construct necessary for us as beings limited by time and space. All religious language is metaphorical, in that it serves to point to a reality that is beyond the human scope.

1. More precisely, though the first principle does not discuss creation, God is referred to in the text as '*al-bari*,' which means, literally, 'the Creator.' It is a subject of dispute amongst scholars whether the Rambam, at least at the time of the writing of the Introduction to *Perek Chelek*, actually believed that creation is an essential belief. For discussion, see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma* *in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 53-55, and the references he cites. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word in the original Arabic – *al-kadam* (in Hebrew, *kadmon*) – is often translated 'eternal.' The problem with 'eternal' is that it evokes the future, while *al-kadam* evokes the past. The Rambam's point here is not about God’s continued existence in the future (though that is not in question), but rather that nothing pre-exists God (we will address the meaning of this notion later). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The "scare" quotes are meant to hint that the very concept of such an explicit philosophical/theological doctrine is not really traditional if we are referring to either Biblical or Rabbinic Judaism. Though I think it is clear both from *Tanakh* and Rabbinic attitudes to the subject that creation was conceived as a Divine act before which there was nothing, there was no felt need to formulate it until pressure was exerted from Greek philosophy which purported to call into doubt the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, Part II, Chapters 13-21, 35-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Most editions of the "Introduction to *Perek Chelek*" do not have this addendum and it is pretty clear that most of the Rambam's medieval critics and commentators did not have it either. In modern editions, it appears only in Rav Kapach's translation of the *Commentary on the Mishna*.

   It is clear that this passage is a late addition, given that it makes reference to the *Guide*, which was published many years after the original publication of the *Commentary on the Mishna*. The addendum is found in what appears to be an autograph copy of the Rambam's *Commentary on the Mishna* and we presume that the Rambam added this passage himself at the end of his life. For discussion, see Kellner, op. cit., and the sources he cites. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For readable discussions of this controversy, see Kellner, op. cit., pp. 53-61, and Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), pp. 71-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The classic philosophical discussion of this is J.E.M. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Mind* 17 (1908), pp. 456-473. What I call the subjective conception of time is McTaggart's 'A-series' and what I call the objective conception is his 'B-series.' This distinction is not intrinsically related to another important distinction about time – between linear time and cyclical time. That distinction was elaborated upon by Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. I will touch on that topic in a future *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is worth mentioning that a similar problem arises in the context of space and God's incorporeality. It is not merely difficult but may very well be incoherent to ascribe agency to a non-corporeal being. I will return to this point in my discussion of the third principle. My response below to the problem of God's presence in time can be readily extended to the problem of God’s presence in space. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Most of Part I of the *Guide to the Perplexed* is dedicated to addressing this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I am not sure if it is comic or tragic to try to sum up the Rambam's negative theology "in a nutshell." It is certainly no more than a gesture and anyone interested in pursuing it should take advantage of the sources mentioned in the next footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Guide*, part I, chapters 50-62. There is extensive literature on this subject. A good place to start is Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed* (Behrman House, 1991), chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)