YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Introduction to the Thought of the Ramban

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Shiur #07 - Evil

Today, for a change, we are going to leave the Commentary to the Torah, and examine a long section taken from a book of the Ramban's called *Torat Ha-Adam*. The *Torat Ha-Adam* is a halakhic monograph, spelling out the laws of death and mourning (though it actually begins with the laws of visiting the sick). The last section is called *Sha'ar Ha-Gemul* ("the Section on Reward"), which discusses what comes after death; that is, reward and punishment and the world-to-come. Obviously, this section is not halakhic in nature, and it has often been printed separately. We are going to examine the Ramban's attitude to what has been rightly called the central problem of religious philosophy, the problem of evil, or, in its traditional Jewish version, the problem of *tzaddik ve-ra lo, rasha ve-tov lo* (the suffering righteous and the prospering evildoers). The style of this work is far easier than the often terse style of the Commentary to the Torah, and I recommend you read the entire section before reading this shiur. On the other hand, it is much longer than any other reading we have analyzed. The section we will be discussing is found in *Kitvei HaRamban*, pp. 266-275, together with the conclusion on pp. 280-281.

It is helpful to sketch out the logical structure of the problem of evil in order to understand the position the Ramban takes. The problem of evil is a logical one for traditional theists, and has to be faced by anyone developing a consistent moral theology. It basically consists of three propositions, which, taken together, stand in contradiction to a fourth statement, which is a statement of fact.

1. God is All-powerful (omnipotent).

2. God is All-knowing (omniscient).

3. God is good.

But

4. Evil exists.

The reason why the first three propositions, taken together, imply that evil does not exist, is due to a sub-proposition of proposition 3, which defines the nature of "good."

3a. A good individual does everything in his power to eliminate evil.

Since God has the power to eliminate all-evil (being omnipotent), and since if evil exists, He knows about it (omniscience), were He good, He would have eliminated evil. **But evil exists**, as a matter of observed fact. Therefore, one of the three propositions must be false, which undermines traditional monotheism.

It is apparent that in order to answer the problem of evil, you have to change one of the four propositions (counting 3a), or deny the factuality of statement 4. Nearly every one of those approaches has been taken. For instance, there have been thinkers – though rarely Jews – who have claimed that evil does not exist, that it is only an illusion. The reason why Jews cannot adopt that approach, other than its apparent unreality, is that a consequence of such an approach is pacifism, a course of action that does not seek to change or improve the world. Halakha, which is prior to any philosophy, clearly is based on Man's mission to fight evil – and for that, evil has to exist. Another possibility is to limit proposition 1, in a manner that is widely agreed to by medieval thinkers. God is All-powerful, but even the omnipotent cannot do that which is logically impossible. You then have to claim that the elimination of all evil is **logically** impossible, perhaps because matter and perfection are mutually exclusive. The Rambam raises such a possibility, but we shall not address that position in this framework.

What is the Ramban's approach? The Ramban assumes the relatively uncontroversial assumption that justice does not contradict the good. Hence, punishment is not evil. Our question is "tzaddik ve-ra lo," the suffering righteous, and not the suffering of the evildoers. The Ramban then lays down the rule that "ein yisurim be-lo avon," **there is no suffering without sin.** The Ramban maintains that rule to the very end, and claims that all suffering and all evil in the world can be explained by it. As we shall see, the actual application will be rather complicated, and will, in fact, involve a redefinition of what is sin, and how sin engenders suffering, but the rule itself is simple, and, for the Ramban, universal. "Ein yisurim be-lo avon."

Explaining how this principle actually works, the Ramban goes through a number of steps. After all, the question implies that we can easily find examples of suffering of the righteous; that is, of people who have not committed sins. The Ramban therefore advances a number of explanations how the suffering we see in the world is in fact a result of sin alone.

The Ramban's first step (p. 267) is the principle of the deliberate imbalance of justice between this world and the next. The principle assumes that each person does indeed receive the exact reward and punishment which he deserves. However, the reward and punishment are not distributed evenly between this world and the next. God wishes to give unmitigated reward to the righteous in the next world, and therefore delivers all the necessary punishment for their few sins in this world. The righteous therefore arrives in the next world with "all his debts cleared." For the evildoer, the principle works in the opposite direction. Even the evil have some good deeds worthy of reward, and these are "paid off" in this world, so that in the next they can receive the unmitigated punishment they deserve. The result of the operation of this principle is that we cannot begin to measure the appropriateness of reward and punishment in this world, since we cannot see what will happen in the next.

This principle, as explained by the Ramban, would seem to imply that there are two different measures of reward. One is more or less mathematical – a given amount of sin requires a given measure of punishment (which can be meted out either in this world or the next). But there is a second measure of righteousness rather of sin. A basically righteous personality deserves to bask in God's presence in the **next world**, whereas the evil do not. Apparently the first prevents the second, since punishment must follow any sin. By manipulating the balance between the two worlds, God is able to achieve both measures.

A second look makes it clear that the first measure applies to deeds, while the second to personality. The first would appear to be based on justice (I will suggest another explanation for this later), whereas the second is based on achievement – the properly developed personality belongs in heaven and has not only merited it but has achieved it, turning himself into a spiritual personality.

This dual way of looking at things – in this case, applying to God - is typical of the Ramban. The actual working of the world is a fine intermeshing of many different causes and powers, all balanced through God. An imbalance in those powers would be disastrous, and one of the effects of mitzvot is to maintain the proper balance of different and even contradictory forces.

The Ramban uses a nearly identical argument in his explanation of *nisayon* – for instance, *akeidat Yitzchak*. In the commentary to Bereishit 22,1, the Ramban says that God puts the righteous to trial in order that they be able to merit the reward of good deeds and not only a good heart. This implies that God is interested in granting a reward to he who has a good heart, meaning good character traits, but somehow it is necessary to have those traits be expressed in action for the reward, at least in its fullest measure, to be warranted. Here too we see a dual standard. On the one hand, even before the trial with its good deed, God thinks the reward is deserved, yet He cannot grant it unless there are real actions which express that good personality trait. In order to bring the two measures of the man into balance, God presents him with a trial, an opportunity to perform the deed, thereby justifying the reward that his personality deserved before.

Now, on a practical level, the Ramban admits that this principle only answers the question based on the comparison of the righteous with the wicked. But we can also compare two righteous persons, who appear equal to us in their deservedness; yet one suffers and the other prospers. For this the Ramban adds that we cannot in fact judge how righteous the individual is. Who knows what may lurk in the interior of hearts and minds. And, the Ramban adds, there is also *shogeg*, unintentional sin. The individual may well be a *tzaddik*, yet he carries the burden of unintentional sin, of carelessness or accident. And here the Ramban adds an explanation which casts light on his entire attitude. Why does unintentional sin mandate suffering? Not as punishment, admits the Ramban, but as cleansing, for sin contaminates the soul and sullies it, and before that soul can enter the world-to-come it must be cleansed and repaired. Suffering is part of atonement, and any sin, by its very nature, requires atonement. The Ramban states that "sin debases the soul," much as poison sickens the body.

It is still true that "there is no suffering without sin," but the reason for this has changed. It is no longer a purely moral principle of justice but one of a metaphysics of morality. Perhaps the previous point was based on this as well. God punishes the sins of the righteous in this world, not only to clear the slate before the next, but in order to purify the righteous soul so that it can in fact enter the next. The pure soul ascends to the world of purity, while the debased one cannot exist on that level.

Finally, the Ramban states that if the earlier steps still leave some unexplained suffering, there is a "secret" doctrine that will be the ultimate explanation of how all suffering stems from sin. That doctrine is the *sod ha-ibbur*, which is the Ramban's name for the transmigration of souls. It is not the same as reincarnation, but rather that one soul arises from another ("*ibbur*" means "pregnancy"), and the Ramban here hints that the contaminating sin of a previous life needs to be cleansed from the soul in this one. We are not going to discuss this esoteric doctrine of the Ramban's kabbala, but we see how it fits in to his framework. Ultimately, all suffering stems from sin, but the notion of sin and its connection to suffering has been widened far beyond the simple conception of crime and punishment. In fact, what the Ramban has done here, without disclosing too much of the mystical philosophy which lies behind it, is to present a picture where sin and virtue are forces rather than individual psychological actions. Sin and evil are real, and have real effects on the soul. Divine Providence, ostensibly about crime and punishment, virtue and reward, is actually about contamination and atonement, the battle between the cosmic metaphysical forces of good and evil. Evil and sin are the **causes** of suffering, by a metaphysical law, and there is no other source of suffering. And suffering itself is as much the enemy of evil as its ally, serving to cleanse and redeem the souls that have been contaminated by evil.

The Ramban's picture might appear simplistic at first. Obviously, it is simplistic, in the sense that it offers a "simple" explanation for all suffering. But the Ramban is not at all oblivious of the facts, and does not attempt to "explain away" evil. On the contrary, the Ramban's theory of suffering is based on his taking evil with utmost seriousness. Evil is powerful enough to explain all suffering. What seems to be paramount for the Ramban is the theory of metaphysical reality he maintains – that the Good is good in all sense, including being pleasurable and rewarding, and that evil and sin are the blemishes in the fabric of the universe. Suffering is a breakdown of the proper goodness of reality, and its existence derives from those blemishes in reality. Sin contaminates the soul, separating it from spiritual reality and from the world-to-come. The restoration of the soul to its Godly nature (which we discussed in an earlier shiur) requires the uprooting of the evil that has made its way into the soul, and that is experienced as suffering.