YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT(VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE #4: THE ESSENCE OF THE HOLY AND THE SECULAR

The Rambam, in his introduction to Massekhet Avot, the Shemoneh Perakim, expresses the classical Jewish approach to viewing the "secular". Man has the ability to sanctify all aspects of life. If, for example, one eats so that he may have the strength to study Torah, the act of eating may become a spiritual endeavour. If, however, one eats purely for the sake of eating, then the act remains devoid of religious content.

Rav Kook, on the other hand, introduced a revolutionary approach toward the secular. As we have developed in previous shiurim, Rav Kook maintained that although the secular appears to lack inherent spirituality, its foundations are, in fact, deeply rooted in holiness. In a passage which appears in "Arpelei Tohar", Rav Kook contrasts this idea - which he terms "the pure view" - with the view of those who lack this insight - those "of little faith".

He writes:

"It is through 'little faith', it seems, that men - eager to affirm their ideological stances - battle against all of the so-called 'evils' which arise in the world: Scientific knowledge, heroism, beauty, and order: these are outside all that is Divine in the world. And it is with a begrudging eye that some men, who think they have comprehended the foundations of holiness, in a realm that transcends worldly development, detest culture, the sciences, and the political arena - within the Jewish nation and in the world at large.

But all of this is a grave error, and displays a lack of faith. The 'pure view' sees God's appearance in all worldly progress. Both individual and communal, spiritual and material...Everything is part of God's ongoing creation. 'The world was not created for nothingness - it was formed so that it may be inhabited.'"

According to this approach, we are able to sanctify the secular by uncovering the spirituality that lies within it. Such an outlook may allow for a new understanding of the mishna in Pirkei Avot (3:9): "...Rabbi Shimon said: He who walks along a road studying, and interrupts his studies and remarks 'How beautiful is this tree!' or 'How beautiful is this field!' - this man has condemned his soul."

The classic approach understands this transgression on a superficial level - this man abandoned the realm of the holy for the realm of the secular. But the "pure view" takes a deeper look. What was this man's transgression? That he viewed the tree as an INTERRUPTION from his experience of holiness! This man lost sight of the inner spiritual core while experiencing the external beauty of the tree.

Furthermore, not only does the secular contain innate holiness, but its contribution is essential for holiness to reach its full potential. Holiness can express its true essence only through integration with the secular.

Perhaps we can illustrate this idea by using the concepts of thought and verbalization. Speech is not merely a device man uses to communicate his thoughts - it provides thought with the tools necessary for thinking! Without the framework of words and definitions that language supplies, man's thought cannot organize ideas properly. A man raised in the jungle cannot develop complex ideas; he is unable to develop his mind because his terminology is limited. The same applies to holiness. By itself, it is constrained in a tight chamber, only when it encounters the secular, in a proper manner, can its light radiate.

In reference to the realm of ethics, Rav Kook writes in "Ma'amarei Ha-Reiya" (page 41) that striving for a more moral society and improving the quality of life are acts of God, even when initiated by "secular" people. Even those who deny God's existence, while completely unaware of the significance of their actions, are in truth fulfilling God's command.

Any improvement of society is positive in the eyes of God. Let us take technology as an example. Man is cursed in Bereishit (3:19): "By the sweat of your brow you will eat bread." The modern world is overcoming this curse. Machines have replaced the labor and toil of the past. And at the root of all of these developments lies a holy spark.

We have slowly moved from the perception that the secular and the holy stand separately to an understanding that the two are not so different after all. At this point, we must ask ourselves how they differ.

In a four-volume-work entitled "Orot HaKodesh" ("Lights of Holiness") Rav Kook shares his thoughts concerning holiness. We will take a look at his first essay, which deals with wisdom. This will give us insight into understanding what is 'holy' and what is not.

Rav Kook writes:

"The wisdom of the holy ranks higher than all other aspects of wisdom in this respect, that it transforms the will and personal disposition of those who pursue it, drawing them toward those lofty heights on which its concern is focused. All branches of worldly wisdom, though they describe important and noble subjects, lack this impact, to draw the nature of the person who explores them to their own level of value. Indeed, they do not relate to the other aspects of the person's nature, only to his scientific dimensions."

Secular study expands the mind, but the study of Torah affects the soul as well. How is this accomplished? Rav Kook continues:

"The reason for this is that all aspects of the holy emanate from the ultimate source of life, and the content of what is hallowed has the power to engender new being, 'to stretch out the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth' (Yeshayahu 51:16), and certainly to stamp a dramatic new image on the person probing it. The secular sciences lack this potency; they do not, in themselves, engender anything new. They only portray to the mind what is found in existence. Thus, they cannot turn the one who studies them into a new being, to sever him from an evil inclination in his basic self and change him into a new type of person, pure and vibrant with the light of what is the true and abiding life."

Slowly, we are coming to the realization that Rav Kook's understanding of holiness is very deep, and very broad. Holiness is to be found at the core of existence. In other words, Rav Kook doesn't look "above," or to the "wholly other" for holiness, rather, he looks inward, towards the source, just as one looks within himself for the "I" - the deep and intimate within. According to this, the secular is that which is distant, that which has lost its connection and broken its ties with its own depth, with the source. In future shiurim we will continue to develop this idea.

(This lecture was adapted by: Boaz Mori)