YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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***Shiur* #26: The Role of Exile and the Test of Redemption**

In the last few *shiurim*, we have explained the teachings of *Chazal* and of Maharal concerning the decree of exile, revealed to Avraham in the Covenant Between the Parts, as arising from a "fault" on his part – the tendency towards absolute *chesed* that is part of his identity.

However, there is a deeper dimension to the exile that arises from a different *midrash* on the Covenant Between the Parts. This *midrash* understands the verse, "And behold, terror, a great darkness, fell upon him" (*Bereishit* 15:12) as alluding to the four kingdoms that *Am Yisrael* was forced to contend with over the course of history:

“Terror” – this is the kingdom of Babylon; “darkness” – this is the kingdom of Media; “great” – this refers to the kingdom of Greece; “fell” – this is the fourth kingdom, Rome. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*)

According to this *midrash*, in this fourfold sensory prophetic experience God reveals to Avraham the general course of history, dominated by these four kingdoms. Are we now to understand this entire historical progression as the result of Avraham's “sin”? Had Avraham not “sinned,” would these kingdoms not have existed, or would we perhaps have had no need for any encounter with them? Obviously, this is not what *Chazal* mean when they see these same four kingdoms alluded to in the second verse in the Torah, in the expressions "unformed," "void," "darkness," and "the deep." Why is *Am Yisrael*'s encounter with these four kingdoms engraved in the course of world history from the outset? And if these encounters are necessary regardless, then in what way is the Egyptian exile the result of Avraham's excess of *chesed*? Was the exile something that was decreed by God from the start and only revealed at the time of the Covenant Between the Parts? Is the whole of history simply an unfolding of a preordained fate, and not the result of free choice, as Manitou argues?

The subject of the four kingdoms connects us to a far broader question: the relationship between Israel and the nations of the world.

**Israel's Universal Mission**

The very first time that God calls to Avraham, He tells him, "Through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (*Bereishit* 12:3). What this means is that *Am Yisrael* has a mission vis-à-vis humanity. This mission is reiterated to the nation as a whole specifically at the Revelation at Sinai, when the gap between Israel and the other nations seems to be highlighted in the clearest possible way. (*Chazal* explain the name "Mount Sinai" as "the mountain upon which the hatred [*sin'a*] among the nations of the world descended" – *Shabbat* 89a.) Specifically at that point, *Am Yisrael* are told, "You shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*Shemot* 19:6). This is a fundamental truth: *Am Yisrael* did not emerge in the world for their own sake, but rather to fulfill a universal mission.

The history of man in this world is the history of the “families of the earth,” the seventy nations, and the Holy One, blessed be He, reveals to Avraham in the Covenant Between the Parts what the general outline of history will be: four kingdoms, four dominant cultures. Over the course of this history, Avraham’s descendants must maintain ties with the nations because they have a mission to accomplish in relation to them; they must serve as a “kingdom of priests.” (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 156)

In view of the above, it turns out that the destiny and purpose of the Jewish People doesn’t start with Avraham. The outline that is revealed to him in the Covenant Between the Parts existed already long before his time. Now we need to clarify the relationship between this covenant and Manitou’s teachings that we have examined thus far, suggesting that history develops in accordance with man’s choices. If everything depends on free choice, how is it possible that the course of history is determined in advance?

Recall Manitou’s fundamental principle of alternatives – i.e., the idea that the Torah is not a path known and dictated in advance. The biblical narrative is not a train, passing through fixed stations, but rather like a car, driving on the open road. Each time a junction is reached, a decision has to be made as to which direction to take. The moment that decision is made, the driver finds himself on the road that he himself took, and he must continue with that road until he reaches the next junction or point of choice.

In accordance with this principle, the path of the four kingdoms was established in advance – but only as one of the possibilities. A different road could have been taken, such that the relations between Israel and the other nations would have been completely different.

**Exile Wasn’t Inevitable**

The possibilities for the relations between Israel and the nations of the world are defined by Manitou as subjugation and oppression, on the one hand, or honor and glory, on the other. The former possibility entails the exile that we experienced for two thousand years, during which time Jews wandered among the nations, having some measure of impact. The latter possibility would have left *Am Yisrael* living in *Eretz Yisrael*, with their light emanating to the nations of the world. This possibility is described in the vision of *Yishayahu* (2:2-3): “The mountain of the Lord's house shall be firmly established at the top of the mountains… and all the nations shall stream to it. And many peoples shall go, and they shall say, ‘Come, let us go up to the Lord's mount, to the house of the God of Yaakov, and let Him teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths’ – for Torah shall emanate from Tzion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” Manitou suggests additional ways in which this vision could be realized, such as emissaries being sent from *Am Yisrael* to all the countries of the world. In any event, the point is that it was not necessary for *Am Yisrael* to influence the nations specifically by being exiled and having to roam among them.

*Bnei Yisrael* are faced with two alternatives for maintaining this connection [with the nations of the world]: The first is to maintain the connection in ideal conditions, in *Eretz Yisrael*, with honor and glory, by sending teacher-emissaries for limited periods among the nations. The other alternative is exile-subjugation-oppression. If *Am Yisrael* are truly *Am Yisrael*, the connection will be maintained in accordance with the first alternative. But over the course of history, this hasn’t been the case. There is a gap between the ideal Israelite identity, as conceived in God’s mind, and *Am Yisrael* – meaning, the actual, historical people. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot*, ibid.)

These two possibilities faced *Am Yisrael* at the outset. In order to proceed on the path of “honor and glory,” *Am Yisrael* had to be worthy of that – including meeting God’s demand that there be a balance of attributes. Here we return to the problem we discussed in previous *shiurim*: the exaggerated tendency towards *chesed*. This is a problem that *Am Yisrael* finds difficult to overcome – both because it is so deeply embedded in the nation’s character, and because it is difficult to place boundaries on a value that is true and correct. In many ways, it is easier to identify evil as evil and to keep away from it. Limiting goodness and kindness, on the other hand, is harder and far more complex. If *Am Yisrael* had managed to overcome the tendency towards exaggerated *chesed*, the relations with the nations of the world could have been maintained with honor and glory.

According to this understanding, the Divine decree at the time of the Covenant Between the Parts did not necessarily entail exile in Egypt. History could have developed along the lines of the alternative. While Manitou’s exegesis usually accords with the biblical narrative, in this instance we encounter some difficulty, because the language of the verses of the Covenant sounds decisive and absolute. And while we know that *Chazal* themselves teach that the decree was not fulfilled in its entirety and the subjugation in Egypt lasted only 210 years instead of 400, the wording – “Know with certainty that your progeny…” – seems to convey finality and certainty. It sounds less like a junction for making choices, and more like notification.

Manitou proposes the following reading: “Your progeny will be strangers – no matter what, because that is what is needed in order to fulfill the mission of being a ‘kingdom of priests.’ And if some misdeed becomes manifest among your progeny, then the state of being ‘strangers’ will become subjugation” (p. 161). In other words, there is a decree; some sort of encounter between *Am Yisrael* and the nations of the world must take place. Thus, there must be an exile. The question is how long it will last and how it will develop. The descent to Egypt was unavoidable, but the lengthy subjugation was not – just as we see, for example, in the fact that *Sefer Bereishit* mentions a forecast of four hundred years, while *Sefer Shemot* speaks of two hundred and ten years of actual exile. Yaakov’s children might have returned from Egypt to Eretz Cana’an after Yaakov’s death or after the death of Yosef, but they did not do so.

**The Delay in Returning**

Some of the commentators offer local explanations for the failure of Yaakov’s family to return, but Manitou argues that there is a more fundamental issue underlying all the practical reasons. Exile is dangerous first and foremost because *Am Yisrael* have a tendency to delay their return. This tendency has a positive motivation – the dimension of national mission in our relations with the nations of the world. Manitou views Yaakov’s words, “I have sojourned with Lavan and have remained until now” (*Bereishit* 32:5) as an expression of sin – the sin of delay. When Yaakov, as per the *midrash*, explains his fear of Esav with the words “lest sin cause [my downfall],” Manitou suggests that the sin referred to here is the delay in returning to the land. Yaakov should have returned earlier; he did not need to wait twenty years until he saw that Lavan’s attitude towards him was not as it had been in the past. This phenomenon continued among Yaakov’s descendants. After the Babylonian exile, at the beginning of the Second Temple Period, only a small number among *Bnei Yisrael* returned to the land. Among Spanish Jewry, only a small number (including Ramban) moved to *Eretz Yisrael* prior to the Expulsion. The same phenomenon repeated itself at the start of the Zionist movement and prior to the Holocaust (a subject to which Manitou devoted extensive attention, but which lies outside the scope of our discussion). The tendency to delay returning means that proper attention is not given to the signs that the time of redemption has arrived. *Am Yisrael* delays and waits until the episode comes to an end – which means that redemption comes wrapped in catastrophe. Ultimately, Manitou concludes, we responded against our will to God’s call to return to *Eretz Yisrael*. A large portion of *Am Yisrael* remains in the Diaspora and is still delaying its return.

I am truly concerned when I observe the naiveté of those Jews who say that they still have a holy mission to fulfill among the nations, and it can be undertaken only in the Diaspora. I ask myself: What is this holy mission? Is it to disseminate the truth of Torah among the nations? There was an attempt of this sort in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Germany, when the disciples of R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch presumed to teach the enlightened Germans, as it were. What came out of it? (…) *Am Yisrael* is not aware that this delay leads only to disaster. We wait until the very end – in other words, until the stage of “if they are not deserving, then ‘in its time’” (*Sanhedrin* 98a) – and that brings disaster. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 140).

Delaying the return comes back to the same fundamental problem of an excess of *chesed*, which, as we have seen, expresses itself in a failure to fully recognize our right to *Eretz Yisrael*. We do not rush to return. The real test of exile is the choice to leave it. Throughout our exile there were those who left and moved to *Eretz Yisrael*; in some periods, it was mainly the spiritual leaders who did so, while the masses remained behind. We have to believe that we are worthy of redemption. If we do not believe, then truly we are not yet worthy. The exile goes on and on because it takes so long for us to become persuaded to return.

In conclusion, let us return to the question of the reason for the subjugation in Egypt. How does the subjugation in Egypt in particular, and exile in general, bring repair for the fundamental question of “by what shall I know”? Here Manitou’s answer is surprising in its originality and simplicity. Whoever takes action and leaves the exile shows that he has faith that he will inherit the land – in other words, he thereby demonstrates that he has corrected the weakness that caused his exile in the first place. Just as the one fifth of the nation that was redeemed from Egypt proved its faith in redemption, so it is in our times. The length of the exile reflects the time it takes until Jews realize that they are in foreign lands and must return to their own land. Their act of return to the land is in itself the proof that they have made repair for the sin of “by what shall I know,” which is what led to their exile.

Translated by Kaeren Fish