YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**JEWISH VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD**

**By Harav Yehuda Amital zt”l**

**LECTURE #1a: the fear of god in Our TIme**

**Part 1 of 2**

I. "Is the fear of Heaven such a small matter?"

Observant Jews generally define themselves as God-fearing people. We, therefore, tend to identify any religious sentiment with the fear of God. "Religiosity" and "the fear of God" are indeed related, but the two concepts are not identical. There is no clearer expression of "religiosity" than the observance of *mitzvot*: a person who takes a *lulav* on Sukkot fulfills a religious obligation. But he does not fulfill thereby the mitzva of fearing God.

The fear of God is characterized by two elements. First, the fear of God requires spiritual effort accompanied by a profound and continuous process: "If you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you shall understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" (*Mishlei* 2:4-5). The Gemara (*Berakhot* 33b) states:

Rabbi Chanina said: Everything is in the hand of Heaven except the fear of Heaven. As the verse states: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear [the Lord your God]…" (*Devarim* 10:12). Is the fear of Heaven such a small matter? But surely Rabbi Chanina said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: The Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His treasury except a store of the fear of Heaven. As the verse states: "The fear of the Lord is His treasure" (*Yeshayahu* 33:6)!

[The Gemara answers:] Yes, for Moshe it was a small thing. As Rabbi Chanina said: To illustrate by a parable, if a man is asked for a big article and he has it, it seems like a small article to him; if he is asked for a small article and he does not possess it, it seems like a big article to him.

The Gemara emphasizes that the fear of Heaven is no small matter; it requires considerable effort from almost everybody (with the exclusion of Moshe Rabbeinu). This is also what Rabbi Moshe Chayyim Luzzatto (Ramchal) writes in his introduction to "*Mesilat Yesharim*":

As Shelomo said: "If you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you shall understand the fear of the Lord" (*Mishlei* 2:4-5). He did not say: "Then you shall understand philosophy, then you shall understand astronomy, then you shall understand medicine, then you shall understand the laws, then you shall understand *halakhot*," but rather "Then you shall understand the fear of the Lord." You see, then, that in order to understand the fear of God one must seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures.

Second, the fear of God requires wisdom and study. Ramchal continues:

Scripture states: "The fear of the Lord alone [*'hen'*] is wisdom" (*Iyyov* 28:28). And our Rabbis, of blessed memory, interpreted the word *"hen"* in the sense of "one," for in Greek *"hen"* means "one" (*Shabbat* 31b). You see, then, that fear of God is wisdom, and that it alone is wisdom. And that which does not require study can surely not be called wisdom.

From the verses mentioned above – "If you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you shall understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" – we may infer that the fear of God and the knowledge of God are connected. Regarding this point, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook writes as follows (*Orot ha-Kodesh* III, rosh davar 10):

The fear of God is the most profound wisdom, it is founded on the most penetrating conception of the universe, and it provides the deepest basis for every science and every teaching, both sacred and mundane.

Elsewhere, Rabbi Kook emphasizes the danger that lies in a superficial attitude to the fear of God (*Arpilei Tohar*, p. 46):

When the knowledge of God is small, then the image conceived of the Divine is also small. Since it is the Divine substance that accounts for man's infinite diminution before Him, one cannot imagine the extent to which man becomes a creeping idler as a result of fear of Heaven that is not based on knowledge.

The fear of God is the cornerstone of our lives, without which nothing else is truly real. We must, therefore, internalize the idea that when we talk about the fear of God, we are not dealing with something that is easily attained through the observance of mitzvot alone. The fear of God is a high level of perfection that can be acquired only through a great investment of intellectual and emotional energy.

II. fear of punishment in the world to come

Some Jewish thinkers base the acquisition of the fear of God on the fear of punishment. Before we address this position in and of itself, let us briefly discuss the issue of reward and punishment in the world-to-come.

As a rule, Rambam relates to the idea of reward, but speaks about punishment only in general terms. Thus, in *Hilkhot* *Teshuva* (3:6), he writes:

The following have no portion in the world-to-come, but are cut off and perish, and for their great wickedness and sinfulness are condemned forever and ever…

All that Rambam says here is that the punishment of the wicked will last forever and ever; the punishment itself he does not describe. In contrast, regarding the reward awaiting the righteous, Rambam writes later in *Hilkhot* *Teshuva* (8:1):

The good reserved for the righteous is life in the world-to-come – a life which is immortal, a good without evil. Thus it is written in the Torah: "That it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days" (*Devarim* 22:7), the traditional interpretation of which is as follows: "That it may be well with you" – in a world altogether good; "that you may prolong your days" – in a world unending, that is, the world-to-come. The reward of the righteous is that they will attain this bliss and abide in this state of happiness; the punishment of the wicked is that they will not attain this life but will be cut off and die. He who does not attain this life will be dead, in the sense that he will never live again but will be cut off in his wickedness and perish like the brute beast. This is the penalty of excision, referred to in the Torah, as is it written: "That soul shall utterly be cut off" (*Bamidbar* 15:31). This has been traditionally interpreted as follows: "'Cut off' in this world; 'utterly cut off' in the world-to-come." This means that the soul, after its separation from the body in this world, will not attain life in the world-to-come, but will be cut off from that life also.

Later in that same chapter (*halakha* 5), Rambam continues:

The severest retribution beyond which punishment can go no further is that the soul shall be cut off and not attain the life hereafter… This is the destruction to which the prophets metaphorically apply the terms "the pit of destruction" … and all sorts of expressions connoting cessation and destruction are applied to it, because it is a ruin that is irreparable and a loss which is irrecoverable.

The plain meaning of what Rambam is saying is that the most severe punishment awaiting the wicked is that they will forfeit life in the world-to-come. This is the punishment "forever and ever" to which Rambam alluded in chapter 3. In other words, we are not dealing here with punishment in a positive sense, but only with the absence of reward.

Rambam came under attack for totally failing to relate to Gehinom and the like, which are concrete punishments. Ramban, however, came to Rambam's defense in his discussion regarding Gehinom. Ramban questioned the possibility of inflicting physical punishment on a corpse (*Torat ha-Adam*, Gate of Reward):

Having explained on the basis of the words of our Rabbis of blessed memory that the ultimate punishment is in Gehinom and the final reward lies in the world-to-come, we must clarify from their words the nature of this judgment called Gehinom, what is judged there, and when does that [judgment] occur. If you say that punishment is meted out to a person's body after his death, [a question arises]: is not a person's body following his death like an inert stone? If you should burn his bones to lime or anoint them with balsam and various spices which help to preserve them, there is [still] no difference between them and that stone. The bodies of the righteous and the wicked share a common fate after death. How could this corpse be in Gehinom and that one in the goodness of the world-to-come when both are lying before you in one grave or are hidden in your house in one coffin? It must be [therefore] that punishment is [reserved] only for the soul. What is the punishment to which the soul is subjected? It is neither a body nor any physical matter: it does not occupy any space nor is there any partition before it! And what is this place called Gehinom where the soul is punished? A "place" encompasses only bodily things and real matters! Furthermore, fire has an effect only upon such things of physical properties!

However, Ramban goes on to prove that Chazal related to Gehinom as something tangible:

They taught thus in tractate *Menachot* (99b-100a): "He has allured you out of the mouth of *'tzor'*" (*Iyyov* 36:16) [which literally means 'tight' but connotes 'adversary' or 'distress.' That is, He allured you] out of Gehinom, whose opening is so narrow that its smoke is piled up inside. You may perhaps say: "Just as its opening is narrow, so is it narrow throughout." Scripture therefore states: "Deep and large" (*Yeshaya* 30:33). Perhaps you will say: "There is no wood in it." Scripture therefore states: "The pile thereof is fire and much wood" (ibid.). The Sages measured the length and breadth of Gehinom. Thus, they said in tractate *Ta'anit* (10a): "The world is one sixtieth as large as the Garden [of Eden], the Garden is one sixtieth as large as Eden, and Eden is one sixtieth as large as Gehinom. You thus find that in comparison to Gehinom the entire world is like the lid of a pot." They have moreover designated entrances to Gehinom, saying in tractate *Eruvin* (19a): "There are three entrances to Gehinom."

Ramban therefore explains:

This, though, is the tradition of our Rabbis of blessed memory: The Holy One, blessed be He, created the souls of the righteous, which are undoubtedly [composed] of the clearest and lightest spirits. They are neither some material body, nor are they limited or confined by space. They are unlike other spirits which can be caught in leather bottles but are rather of the class of angels and are most ethereal. This is not the place to explain all of the concepts thereof. Scripture testifies concerning [the matter], as it is said: "And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (*Bereshit* 2:7). It thus affirms that [man's soul] is given through the breath of God, and it is not something which evolved [from the Separate Intelligences]… It is He, blessed be His name, who created a place called Gehinom and made therein the most refined fire, [composed] of no material substance, which can seize the ethereal substances and destroy them. He empowered the fire of the place mentioned just as He invested power in the Separate Intelligences, the angels, in their various groups in the heavens. Our Rabbis of blessed memory made a great distinction between the fire in this world and that [other] fire. This [distinction] is contained in their statement in tractate *Pesachim* (54a): "Our earthly fire was created on the night following the Sabbath, and the fire of Gehinom was created on the second day [of Creation]."

The fire of Gehinom indeed exists, but it is incomprehensible. When the body perishes, it becomes subject to afflictions that are unintelligible to us, even if they have a certain concrete physical expression.

All this having been said, I find puzzling what Ramchal writes elsewhere (*Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 24):

We must preface our comments, however, by saying that there are two types of fear, which [in effect] are three. The first is very easy to attain; there is nothing so easy. The second is more difficult. The most difficult of all is its subdivision, and its perfection is, accordingly, a very great form of perfection.

The first type is fear of punishment. The second type is fear of God's exaltedness, the fear of sin being its subdivision…

The fear of punishment, as the term simply implies, is that one should fear to transgress God's command because of the penalty, whether to body or soul, that follows in sin's wake. This fear is certainly easy [to acquire], for every man loves himself and fears for his soul. Nothing will keep a person from performing a particular act more than the apprehension that it might bring him harm. Fear of this sort, however, befits only the ignorant and women whose minds are frivolous…

Ramchal's words are difficult: How can he say "there is nothing so easy" to attain as fear of punishment? As was stated above, the "punishment" awaiting the wicked in the world-to-come is totally incomprehensible to us!

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Mussar movement, bases the fear of God on the fear of punishment (*Or Yisra'el*, letter 9):

What is the fear [of God] and how is it acquired? There is one way: by expanding upon those things that are known to all, [namely,] the fear of punishment of body and soul, punishment which is much greater than all the afflictions on earth! But man will not become disciplined through knowledge [of these punishments]… He will become disciplined only by expanding the spiritual impression, broadening the idea through sensory images, awakening the soul through his bodily senses.

Rabbi Itzele of Petersburg (Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, author of "*Peri Yitzchak*"), a disciple of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, relates in his introduction to "*Or Yisrael*" (*Sha'arei Or*, no. 10) that his master

did not occupy himself with great and wondrous [ideas], nor did he speak of the lofty aspects of the fear of [God's] exaltedness and the love of God, blessed be His name. Rather, the righteous man in most of his admonitions held fast to his way, the way of holiness, limiting himself to the fear of punishment. For that is the beginning of knowledge and the first step in His service, may His name be blessed.

An objection may also be raised against Rabbi Yisrael Salanter: how can one possibly arrive at a "sensory image" regarding what will happen to a person following his death? But Rabbi Salanter at least recognizes the great need to work on internalizing the fear of punishment, whereas Ramchal sees the matter as most easy to attain!

Ramchal's position may be explained in one of two ways. Ramchal may never in his life have found it necessary to summon up the fear of punishment, and so he could view it as easily attained. Alternatively, after he had already reached the higher level of the fear of God's exaltedness, the fear of punishment seemed easy indeed. As we already saw above, the Gemara says that for Moshe, the fear of God was "a small matter." We, then, may suggest that for Ramchal, who had already reached a higher level, the fear of punishment was indeed "very easy." Be that as it may, I am not familiar with anyone in our generation for whom the fear of punishment is a simple matter.

It is not my intention to delegitimize the educational approach that relates to the midrashim of Chazal according to their plain sense, for this approach may also lead certain people to the fear of God. It seems to me, however, that on the essential level, and especially among the more rationally-minded public, the worship of God cannot be based on the fear of punishment.

(Translated by Rav David Strauss)