YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak and Rivkah,   
by the Wise and Etshalom Families.   
9 Tevet. Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**Shiur #09:**

**Applying the Concept of the Fresh Reading**

We may broaden our perspective on the idea of fresh and retrospective reading of biblical narratives by looking at the Rambam's discussion of Divine Providence in *Moreh Nevukhim*.

**Divine Providence vs. free choice: the range of possibilities**

The Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* III, 17) presents five different views of Divine Providence. They may be summarized as follows:

The first approach is that of the heretics, who maintain that there is no Divine Providence.

The second approach, proposed by Aristotle, is that God concerns himself with the upper worlds (heavenly spheres and monarchs), while the inhabitants of the world in which we live are not governed by individual Divine Providence.

The third approach is the view of the Islamic Ash’arism sect, which tends to the opposite extreme, fatalism. God's absolute Providence extends to every element of reality. According to this approach, nothing at all is under man's control; everything that happens, at any time, is decreed by God. Thus, there is no free choice, and the Torah cannot have any meaning.

The fourth approach, according to the Islamic Mu’tazilite sect, is that the world operates not in accordance with God's absolute will, but rather in accordance with Divine wisdom. The Mu’tazilite is the most intellectual sect in Islam, and this belief is an attempt to avoid the fatalistic religious view that would render all religious commandments meaningless. It argues that man has a sphere of free choice, but still attributes absolute control to God. This view speaks of "Divine wisdom" rather than "Divine will" as the central concept defining God's control, regarding this mode of control as defined by logic rather than being arbitrary.

The fifth view is that of the Torah. According to the Torah, man has complete free choice, and there is also Divine Providence over the world which operates in accordance with man's actions.

Who, then, is responsible for what happens in this world, according to all of the above approaches? There is no difference between the first approach and the second with regard to this question; both agree that everything happens in this world by chance. The active agent in the world is man, not God; through their choices, man has almost exclusive control (except for the laws of nature, which influence their environment) over what happens. According to the third approach, God alone dictates what happens in the world; everything is decreed from Heaven. According to the fourth view, too, God's control is unilateral — albeit in accordance with His wisdom, rather than in arbitrary form. Only the Torah teaches that what happens in the world is the result of a combination of both factors, man and God: man acts and God acts towards them in accordance with their actions.

This mutual relationship is referred to as justice (*mishpat*). Among the Sages, opinions are divided as to how exactly it works. There are different ways of understanding how God runs the world with justice, but all agree on the fundamental principle: God acts in accordance with man's freely-chosen actions, such that human actions and Divine reactions create the totality of what happens in reality.

The Rambam explains that the concept defining the fifth approach is accepted by all Jewish thinkers. There are a great many disagreements in the realm of Jewish philosophy, but if we broaden our perspective and look at all the approaches outside of Judaism, these disagreements shrink to much smaller proportions. The same central idea is common to all: within Judaism, everyone agrees that our reality is determined by two factors: God and free-willed man. Proceeding from this foundation, the question concerns the relative weight of each factor. What is God's part in this partnership and what is man's part, and what is the formula for their reciprocal relations and influence?

Having clarified the point of departure for Jewish philosophy and the agreed-upon boundaries of the discussion, let us return to Manitou and see how he focuses on the impact of man's free choice — perhaps more intensively than any Jewish scholar before him.

**First example in history: Kayin and Hevel**

The first example we will look at was mentioned briefly already at the end of the previous *shiur*: the story of Kayin and Hevel. This is the first event recorded outside of the Garden of Eden, and it is highly instructive as to the structure and workings of our world.

After Hevel's sacrifice is accepted by God and Kayin's is not, creating bad feelings on Kayin's part towards his brother, God address him and says:

If you will act well, shall you not be accepted? And if you do not act well, sin crouches at the door, and its desire is directed to you, but you may rule over it. (*Bereishit* 4:7)

This is the first time that God addresses man outside of the Garden of Eden. The first thing that God tells man in this world is the following: your fate is in your own hands. Man has free choice; just as they can descend to the depths, they can climb high. The verse also sets out the axis for self-work: raising oneself up from a fall happens on the moral axis: “If you will act well…” A person has to engage in constant moral self-improvement, and thereby repair their misdeeds. At this stage in the story, Kayin has a choice.

The world is not meant to remain static. Man sets out on their journey, and there are challenges along the way. The first challenge is the bringing of the sacrifices by Kayin and Hevel. Kayin chooses to bring a sacrifice, and it is not accepted; he then faces the next challenge: the question of whether he will work on himself. If Kayin overcomes his anger and repairs his actions (to be discussed in later *shiurim*), he becomes the symbol of man’s effecting repair. He would be the living proof that it is possible to change and to improve, and thus would embody man’s moral purpose, earn his right to exist and bring the world to the Messianic Age.

Had Kayin made room in the world for his brother Hevel, during the conflict between them, he would have turned into the “son of man (Adam)” — the upright, moral human being — that all of mankind awaits; the Messianic Age would have arrived there and then, and all of human history would have taken a different direction. Instead, from the moment of Kayin’s descent, the course of history becomes strewn with a great many trials, until ultimately, after a long, protracted process, humanity will finally merit to produce the perfected “son of man,” the perfected human being. (*Sod Ha-Ivri* I, p. 134)

**Preventing the Flood**

After Kayin, the Torah goes on to record the progress of human history and arrives at the generation of Noach. We tend to read the narrative at face value, with a sense that the world is unstoppably headed towards complete corruption and degeneration, which can only be solved by a great Flood. Manitou, however, focuses on the rather unique verse recording the birth of Noach:

And he called his name Noach, saying: This one will comfort us (*yenachameinu*) in our work and in the toil of our hands, which comes from the ground that the Lord cursed. (*Bereishit* 5:29)

When we read the Torah with the knowledge that the Flood is on the way, we dismiss this verse as an illusion that is soon to be shattered; a vision that could never materialize. However, Manitou reads it differently: the generation of Noach has the possibility of choosing good and repairing the world from the curse on the ground resulting from Adam’s sin. The special conditions at that time offer a golden opportunity for repair. Nevertheless, after the birth of Noach, humanity descends even further in its moral corruption. Instead of seizing the opportunity, mankind turns to acts of theft and sexual immorality: “And they took themselves wives from whomever they chose” (ibid. 6:2). God responds to this failure to seize the moment, decreeing, “My spirit shall not abide in man forever, insofar as he also is flesh; therefore his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” (6:3). Humanity descends even further and takes yet another step in the direction of evil and degeneracy, to the point where “the wickedness of man was great in the earth” (6:5). This further decline brings the Flood.

However, the Flood was not unavoidable. It could have been prevented at any one of the preceding stages, and the course of events would have been different. The hope that was born with Noach was not an illusion. There was a real possibility that Noach, rather than being saved alone, would have drawn the entire world after him. Elsewhere Manitou cites a Midrashic source (Rabbi Acha, *Shemot Rabba* 30:13) teaching that the generation of Noach was supposed to receive the Torah (which is compared to water, BT *Bava Kama* 82a), but man’s choice to pursue the path of evil brought a Flood instead.

**Further examples**

Another good example is the story of the *Akeida*, which concludes with God telling Avraham, “Now I know that you are God-fearing” (*Bereishit* 22:12). When we read the story retrospectively, it is clear to us that Avraham will take Yitzchak and bind him as a sacrifice, as commanded. This creates the impression that Avraham’s success in this test is assured in advance, and the point of it is only to show his righteousness to the world. However, Manitou’s fresh reading views Avraham as having two real possibilities available to him, and the choice is entirely up to him. Avraham faces a bitter and difficult test, and the result hangs in the balance. It is his own choice to take his son and bind him on the altar that decides the matter, making him worthy of God’s blessing. It is only after this decision that the Torah can say, “Now I know that you are God-fearing” — a statement that makes no sense from the perspective of the retrospective reading.

**Beyond reward and punishment**

What all of this means is that the events of our world go beyond a simple system of reward and punishment. A person’s choices and deeds entail not only a localized reward or punishment as decreed by Divine Providence, but much more: their actions influence the direction in which history develops.

The abovementioned *midrash* concerning the generation of Noach and its potential to receive the Torah indicates how profoundly man’s actions impact the totality of the manifestation of Torah in the world: the Torah could have been given to all the children of Noach — i.e., to all of humanity — but humanity takes a different direction, and so ultimately the Torah is given only to the Jewish people. Thus, the general idea that a person’s choices not only bring them reward and punishment, but affect God’s management of the world, can be traced all the way back to *Chazal*.

Later on, Rashi, in his commentary (*Shemot* 31:18) on the building of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), cites the view that the commandment to build the *Mishkan* is a result of the Sin of the Golden Calf. According to this view, had it not been for that sin, half of *Sefer Shemot* and all of *Sefer Vayikra* would have looked completely different. An entire, vast body of religious ritual — a vast sphere of *avodat Hashem* (Divine service) — is consolidated as the result of one great sin.

This perspective highlights the importance and impact of free choice. It can change the world significantly.

Manitou points out that throughout the Torah, it is a human being’s choices that lead God to choose that person. Avraham and Moshe are chosen by God: the former to set out for the land of Israel and to be the founder of the Jewish people; the latter to deliver the Jewish people from Egypt. At first glance, these instances would seem to suggest that God’s choice has nothing to do with man’s actions. However, Manitou notes that the initial journey to the land of Canaan is wholly human initiative, as recounted at the end of *Parashat Noach (Bereishit* 11:31-32); only afterwards does God instruct Avraham to leave his homeland and set out for “the land which I will show you,” as recorded at the beginning of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* (ibid. 12:1-5). Similarly, Moshe goes out to his brethren and acts on their behalf on his own initiative (*Shemot*, Chapter 2), and it is only in the wake of his actions that he experiences the Divine Revelation at the Burning Bush (*Shemot*, Chapter 3), in which God appoints him to save Israel. Once again, the Divine control of the world is determined by man’s choices:

The question that I wish to ask is whether **from the outset** it could have been different. Obviously, it is difficult for us to imagine how it could have been different, but we must exert the necessary intellectual effort. The principle of the Torah is that at every stage, in every generation, from Adam to the End of Days, everything is open. Kayin could have chosen not to kill Hevel. As history progresses, there is less and less free choice because certain things have already happened and they cannot be undone. Nevertheless, on both the individual and the collective level, we have the ability to choose among different alternatives. (*Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* II, p. 158)

In summary, we must read Torah from a fresh perspective rather than retrospectively. The progression of events that is familiar to us from *Tanakh* did not necessarily have to develop in the way that it did. At every stage there are several different possibilities available for man to choose. A fresh reading takes note of the alternatives, the actual choice, and the results and ramifications, as well as what the outcomes could have been if a different choice had been made. It is man’s free choice that determines the continuation of the story and the Divine Providence accompanying it.

A retrospective reading knows the ending and assumes, whether consciously or unconsciously, that so it always had to be. Accordingly, it views each development as the one and only possibility, determined in advance and moving inexorably towards realization. We must not suffice with such a resigned, accepting reading, but rather seek and strive for a fresh one.