YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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**Shiur #10:**

**The Theory of Alternatives — Comparison with Seforno**

In this *shiur* and the next we will pursue a deeper and more accurate understanding of Manitou’s “theory of alternatives” by comparing him to earlier commentators who adopt a similar conceptual framework. In this *shiur,* we will deal with sources from the commentary of Rav Ovadya Seforno; and in the next *shiur*, sources from the Shela.

**Degeneration of the world at the beginning of *Sefer Bereishit***

The first source we will look at is from the introduction to Seforno’s commentary on the Torah. This is the gateway via which Seforno invites us into his exegetical approach. Here he emphasizes man’s free choice and the ramifications of man’s actions on the way in which God manages the world. His main emphasis is on man’s sins, which bring not only punishment but also a change in what happens in the world:

The Torah starts off by telling us how God created man in His image and in His likeness, in order that man might choose to resemble his Creator, as far as possible, for he will thereby be perfected, and all his actions perfected and esteemed above all other [creatures], as befitting [one created in the likeness of] God, Who is elevated above all. And the Merciful One in His compassion provided for all man’s needs, without his needing to struggle, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden, until he perverted his ways and ruined his sustenance, whereupon God expelled him from there to toil on the earth, and he needed to exert much effort in order to eat bread.

The purpose of Creation, according to Seforno, is that man should resemble God to the greatest degree possible. God entrusted man with this task, to be pursued using his free choice. At first God placed man in the Garden of Eden, and Seforno describes his conditions there: his every need is provided for, and he sustains himself without any effort or struggle. Why is it important for Seforno to note this point? Firstly, a reminder of man’s starting point serves to deepen our appreciation of his punishment after the sin. In order to understand that he was cursed and sentenced to toil and cultivate the ground, we first have to remember that originally he had no need to exert himself. However, it would seem that the mention of man’s original state is also significant in its own right.

The change that Seforno notes in man’s living conditions — “[God] provided for all man’s needs, without his needing to struggle… until he perverted his ways and ruined his sustenance” — is formulated similarly in the Mishna:

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: Have you ever seen an animal or fowl that engaged in an occupation? And yet they [the animals] have all their needs provided for, without needing to struggle — and they were created only to serve me. I, having been created to serve my Maker — is it not proper that I should be able to sustain myself without struggle? But I acted wickedly and deprived myself of my sustenance. (*Kiddushin* 4:14).

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar speaks in the first person, as though discussing something that happened to him personally, but from Seforno’s commentary we understand that he is speaking about mankind in general. Seforno’s allusion to Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar’s words is intentional. Like Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, he too emphasizes that the world we live in is not necessarily the one originally intended for us. Our situation, in which man spends most of their energy and vitality taking care of their existential needs, is not the format with which the world was created. According to the original plan, man should not have had to work so hard for their basic needs, but this changed as a result of their sin.

What does this insight add to a simple reading of the verses? The simple reading reveals a system of reward and punishment: man sins, and he is punished. However, Seforno emphasizes that the results of man’s sin are not limited to his punishment; there is a complete change in the way the world works. From this moment onwards, the world is a place where one must toil in order to survive.

Thereafter, the Torah tells us that God nevertheless did not want to obliterate man, and the fruits of the earth were beneficial and sufficient for his nourishment, such that he could live almost a thousand years.

This continued until the generation grew exceedingly wicked and it was decreed that the earth would be destroyed on their account, along with the plant and animal kingdom comprised of its elements. And the nourishment of the fruits was no longer sufficient for man’s sustenance, as it had been in the beginning.

Seforno tells us here that subsequent stages in history follow the same pattern, with man’s evil choices and actions leading not only to punishment, but to changes in the world order. After the first upheaval in the world order, man is still able to enjoy the abundance provided by God. Admittedly, it is no longer freely available — man has to work for it — but the food sustains them into exceedingly old age. It is not eternal life, as they would have had before Adam’s sin, but still they live for close to a thousand years, thanks to God’s beneficence. Even after Adam’s sin, man is permitted to continue to live in a world of long life, but they continue to choose the path of evil and degenerate further and further. The result, according to Seforno, is not only the Flood — a punishment that arrives, causes its devastation and then ends — but also a change in how God runs the world. There is a reduction in the level of Divine abundance, with a corresponding decline in longevity, and this situation continues even after the Flood is over:

The Torah then goes on to tell us that despite everything, God still had compassion on their remnant and permitted them [to eat] the flesh of all living things except for other humans, and the earth was given to mankind, insofar as the fear of man was upon all creatures of the earth.

And the lifespan of humans still reached four hundred years or more, until they came together to call in the name of some foreign god that they chose for themselves, and to place an image of that god in a tower so they could worship him there, so there would no longer be any trace of God's Name among them. Therefore God dispersed them and their lifespan was cut in half, so that man lived only about two hundred years, and less as time went on.

Even after the second "revolution" — the Flood and the conditions that prevail afterwards — God's mercy keeps man alive. As in the previous excerpts, Seforno notes once again that mankind's annihilation is a real possibility — since if man fails to realize their purpose in the world, then they have no right to exist — but God is compassionate and permits them to continue to exist. Life grows shorter and people grow weaker, but God in His mercy permits man to eat the flesh of animals in order to strengthen the body. Still, mankind continues in its evil path and builds the Tower of Bavel (which Seforno interprets as idolatry), following which the human lifespan is shortened even more.

We see that Seforno, like Manitou, attaches great importance to man's choices — not just on the level of their personal reward or punishment, but also from a broader historical perspective. He, too, reads the Torah as a chain of human decisions. At each juncture in human history, man's choice of evil changes the world order.

**Transition from absolute free choice to a covenant**

After three colossal failures (by Adam and Chava, the generation of the Flood, and the generation of the Tower of Bavel) — in other words, three missed opportunities — the format shifts from the universal to the national:

And hence the Torah recounts that with no hope left for repentance of mankind in general, after three rejections of repair and a return to God, God chose a righteous person from amongst the human race, selecting Avraham and his descendants through which His plan could be achieved, out of all men upon the earth, as would become apparent. And the three-fold cord — comprising Avraham, his son and grandson, who caused the world to be filled with His Glory when they called in His Name — found favor in God's eyes and He forged a covenant with them, to be a God to them and to their descendants after them, for all eternity, and He designated a place for their descendants when they would become a nation of sufficient size to warrant their own national home, and where they would be united under God, to serve Him together.

The expression Seforno uses is borrowed from *Iyov*: “Behold, all these things God does, twice, even thrice, with a man” (33:29). After three times, a pattern of sorts is established. God will no longer act in the same manner, which has failed, but rather will take a different direction. What happens at this stage — the forging of a covenant — seemingly goes against the principle of free choice. God forges a covenant with the Patriarchs, and this creates a situation that is independent of man’s free choice. The choice of the Jewish people is not dependent on the nation’s actions; it will remain valid even if they sin, as promised for example in *Parashat Bechukotai*: even after the Jewish people sin, and even after they are punished and exiled, the covenant between God and the Patriarchs remains.

At the same time, the picture is not completely different. There is still a range of free choice, which influences God’s interaction with the world — only now it is more limited, and it rests on a basis that is irreversible. Ultimately, Seforno develops the principle of free choice even after the covenant with the Jewish people, maintaining this perspective throughout the journeys of the Israelites through the wilderness. Within the limited boundaries of free choice, there are still ups and downs, all in accordance with human free choice; and within this same limited arena, Seforno continues to emphasize God’s mercies.

An example is the Sin of the Golden Calf: here too, the Jewish people fall into a terrible moral decline, but God in His great mercy presents a path of repair and even dwells amongst the nation:

This tells us that when God sought to give them honor, He spoke with them face to face, such that they were endowed with two spiritual crowns at Mount Chorev; but they rebelled and rejected their crowns, and the Divine Presence was removed from them. Thereafter the text tells us that nevertheless God did not relinquish completely any hope of bringing about their repair, still retaining some form of dwelling in their midst; [therefore] He commanded the fashioning of the *Mishkan* and its vessels, and the appointment of *kohanim* to perform their service, thereby restoring His Divine Presence in their midst following their ultimate offense and wretchedness.

Thus, there is a significant resemblance between Manitou’s approach with regard to the weight and importance of free choice and its influence on the development of history, and the approach of Seforno on this subject. However, it is important to note a distinction between their respective views. For Seforno, the biblical narrative is mostly a chronicle of repeated failure on man’s part, and repeated gestures of mercy and compassion on the part of God, Who gives man another chance, over and over again.

The same flow of events is perceived by Manitou from a more positive perspective. God gives the human race an arena of free choice, and through its exercise of this free choice, mankind builds itself up and the world progresses. It does not progress at every given moment, but it is also not constantly in need of Divine aid. The world does not rest solely on Divine mercy, but also — mainly — on human choice.