YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #11:**

**The Theory of Alternatives — Comparison with the Shela**

Let us now turn our attention to a source to which Manitou attaches great importance, viewing it as the foundation for his own theory of alternatives and for the distinction he draws between fresh and retrospective reading. The excerpt is from *Shenei Luchot Ha-berit*, by Rav Yeshayahu Horowitz — who is better known by the acronym formed by the name of his work, as the Shela. The Shela is one of the best known Kabbalistic masters. He lived in Europe and later in Eretz Yisrael, about a century after the Ari. His works, combining philosophy, homiletics and exegesis, include many Kabbalistic elements.

The Shela addresses our topic within the context of the famous philosophical dilemma concerning Divine knowledge versus human free choice. He starts with the inherent contradiction between them, and the resolution proposed by the Rambam: that God’s knowledge is unquestionably complete and perfect, but there is no contradiction between that and man’s free choice.

From the outset, the Shela questions the Rambam’s conclusion, arguing that not having complete and certain knowledge of the future is not a deficiency in God. The Rambam argues that it is specifically because God knows everything in the knowledge of Himself — since He is the Knower, that which is known, and knowledge itself — that knowledge of possible events outside of Himself, which have not yet happened, would be a deficiency in Him. Since Divine knowledge does not include possible future events, there is no problem with the concept of man’s having complete free choice.

However, the Shela is occupied with a deeper question: How can there be free choice at all? The issue is not from the point of view of a conflict with Divine knowledge, but rather in light of the fact that God is the Source of all of reality, and as such all that happens comes from God. Thus, for him it is not Divine knowledge that conflicts with man’s free choice, but rather Divine Providence; and here the conflict is direct and seemingly inescapable. If God is the Source of all that happens, then human decisions cannot be the source of what happens:

For the true, certain faith is that “in the heavens above and upon the earth below; there is no other” (*Devarim* 4:39). And what is meant by the phrase “there is no other” in this verse is not that there is no other God but Him, for we already know that: “The Lord our God, the Lord is One” (ibid. 6:4). Rather, what it means is that there is nothing that exists in the world except for His Divinity. To put it differently: there is nothing in the world with any form of vitality or power or movement, not even in the inanimate realm, that does not ultimately emanate from God. This is the principle of “You give life to all” (*Nechemya* 9:6): it is God Who brings everything into existence and it is He Who gives them life; for if this were not so, they would not exist. And before He created them, He knew them, for it is He Who creates them, and His knowledge is His decree; He decrees, He speaks, He commands — and it is. And one who does not believe this, and makes a separation and attributes to anything a power of its own, asserts the existence of two ultimate powers, heaven forbid. (*Shela, Chelek Beit Ha-bechira*).

The problem, for the Shela, is the assertion of man’s free will in the face of the fact that “there is nothing that exists in the world except for His Divinity.” If God is the Source of everything, how can there be anything in the world whose source is man?

The Shela reinforces his question by referencing several teachings of *Chazal* referring to events that are foretold as being certain to happen:

* The Torah commands the homeowner to build a parapet on their roof, “lest the faller shall fall from it” (*Devarim* 22:8), but the School of Rabbi Yishmael teaches: “This person was deserving, from the Six Days of Creation, to fall” (BT *Shabbat* 32a).
* “This is the book of the generations of man” (*Bereishit* 5:1) is expounded thusly by Reish Lakish: “This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him each [future] generation with its teachers, each generation with its sages. When he reached the generation of Rabbi Akiva, he rejoiced in his Torah and was saddened at his death” (BT *Sanhedrin* 38b).
* The Midrash teaches that before Moshe’s death, God “showed him all the events of the world, from the days of its creation until the Resurrection of the Dead” (*Sifrei, Devarim* 34:2).

In view of these statements of *Chazal*, can there be any room for human free choice?

Here the Shela develops a most profound idea:

Before a person does anything, whether good or evil, these paths [i.e., good and evil] are already prepared. The proof of this is that the verse in *Parashat Re’eh* says (*Devarim* 11:26), “See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse…” In other words, the paths are ready, set out before one — which means that the paths are there before they are taken. Likewise in *Parashat Nitzavim* (ibid. 30:15-19), we read: “See, I have set before you this day life and good [and death and evil]… therefore choose life.” We see that there is a path of the righteous and a path of the evildoers, and the root of all of them is the Supreme [Divine] will, and that is the knowledge, knowing the essence of His will, in the roots of all coming-into-being, and all that a person does, he does by the power that comes from on High; the difference is that a righteous person chooses to follow the straight, holy path, while the wicked one chooses the opposite. And in accordance with their actions, so is their respective degree of grasping and cleaving to God; everything depends on the awakening from below…

The Shela explains here that the Divine plan includes the span of all possibilities. At every given juncture there are a number of possibilities, each with a scenario that will play out if it is realized. All paths are ready in advance. A person chooses one of the possibilities, and as a result of their choice the appropriate scenario will play itself out. We might imagine a map with many junctions, each of which opens onto a range of paths to follow: a person chooses which path to take, and the road then leads them. All roads are ready and indicated on the map.

In a certain sense, this recalls the modern deterministic approach: the roads are paved in advance by God, they are not paved in accordance with man’s choices, and so it makes no difference which is chosen, since they are all God’s work. Still, the Shela notes that this is not what he means: there are good paths and evil paths. While it is true that it is God Who sketches and molds all paths, He also tells man which are proper to follow. A map contains some paths that are dangerous or worthless. God has created these paths, not so that man will follow them, but rather so that man can choose not to follow them. The Shela quotes the verse, “God has made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions” (*Kohelet* 7:29). Man’s starting point is uprightness. All possibilities are open before them, but they are supposed to choose those that lead to good; that is the direction that they are meant to take.

The Shela then returns to the sources cited above, seemingly proving that everything is determined in advance. He explains that it is the possibilities themselves that are known in advance, but not which of these preordained possibilities will be chosen by man. All that is known is where each road leads.

Thus, a person may have been “deserving” to fall ever since the Six Days of Creation, but that does not necessarily mean that they will fall. They do not fall by chance; there is a Divine plan that leads to them falling, but along the way they have opportunities to exit that path through making choices, and to take a different path — which is likewise ready and prepared in advance. Their fall is not inevitable.

Similarly, God shows Moshe the history of the world, from the past to the present to the future, based on what would happen if the nation maintains its orientation and direction, but the people have the possibility of changing their direction.

In the same way, the Shela explains the verse from the story of the *Akeida*, “Now I know (*yadati,* literally: I knew, I have known) that you are God-fearing” (*Bereishit* 22:12): “Now” — in the present, “I have known” — even before he faces this difficult test, Avraham is worthy of it, but it is only now that he has made the right choice. It could have ended differently.

From this excerpt from the Shela’s writings, we see very clearly two distinct ideas, each of which he pursues to its logical extreme. On the one hand, we have the centrality of human choice; on the other hand, the emphasis that all the possibilities are Divinely prepared.

The Shela’s explanation has philosophical, spiritual, historical and exegetical ramifications. It resolves the philosophical conflict between Divine knowledge and free choice; it explains the spiritual relationship between God as the Source of all of Creation and man’s influence; it clarifies the nature of the course of history, which includes many Divine possibilities, among which man chooses; and it sets down an approach for exegesis of the Torah.

According to his approach, at each stage new doors are opened, and a person has the ability to decide in which direction the story will continue. This is the basis for an entirely new reading of the Torah: at every step we have to think about what could have happened and what actually did happen; but the Shela does not go on to explain the junctions and decisions made throughout the biblical narrative. Manitou is the first scholar to approach the Torah systematically using this approach. As noted, he views the Shela as one of the sources of his exegesis:

I am faithful to the tradition I received from my teachers, and especially the teaching of the holy Shela, who explains clearly the idea of the Divine plan and what happens in the wake of man’s choices… The [Divine] thought behind Creation — the primal Divine will for Creation — includes within it all the alternatives, all the possibilities. This occurs in the world of *atzilut* [emanation, highest of the four Kabbalistic realms]. Out of all those possibilities, man chooses what he chooses, and this happens in the world of *asiya* [action, lowest of the four Kabbalistic realms] (*Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* V, p. 54).

**The Shela versus Manitou**

There are nevertheless some differences between the approach of the Shela and that of Manitou.

The first concerns the point of departure vs. the point of destination: the Shela places the emphasis on the fact that man starts from a point of uprightness; from that point everything depends on their choices. Manitou emphasizes that man will eventually arrive at the final point of acquiring their right to exist, the point to which all roads lead. There are many different scenarios, but everything leads in the same direction, towards the world’s ultimate purpose.

The course of history might be imagined as a globe: two people at the South Pole start off on a journey, and they head in different directions. Although each path is different in terms of its scenery and its length, they will eventually meet up at the North Pole. Some roads are better, others are full of obstacles, but they lead to the same destination. There is a Divine plan, which, following a long and arduous journey with man’s making many choices — positive and negative — along the way, will eventually be realized.

Manitou also adds that aside from the final destination, there are also some stations along the way that are obligatory, as we learn, for instance, from the Midrash:

There was a time when Adam had to enter the Garden of Eden… and a time when he had to leave…

There was a time when Noach had to enter the Ark… and a time when he had to leave… (*Kohelet Rabba* 3:1)

Slavery in Egypt and the Exodus, too, are events that had to occur according to all scenarios. There are some stations that are mandatory, but the question of who passes through them and when remains open. To return to the metaphor of the globe, there are latitudinal lines which all have to be crossed in order to reach the North Pole. The question is at which point along the line the traveler will cross, and this depends on the route that each chooses.

Thus, while the explanation of the Shela, in the excerpt above, leaves all possibilities open, Manitou maintains that the realization of the ultimate purpose of the world is assured.

Translated by Kaeren Fish