YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

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Sponsored by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family   
in honor of the *yahrtzeits* of our esteemed grandparents:   
Neil Fredman (Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, 10 Tevet),   
Clara Fredman (Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, 15 Tevet),   
and Walter Rosenthal (Shimon ben Moshe, 16 Tevet).

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**Shiur #12:**

**Loving God (II): What Is the Path to Loving Him?**

**“Until His Soul Is Bound Up in the Love of God”**

Rambam places great emphasis on the *mitzva* of loving God, which contains within it a person’s constant, lofty aspiration toward connection and intimacy with his Creator. According to Rambam, this connection is fraught with powerful emotions and boundless yearning, as expressed in his intensely resonant statement at the end of *Sefer Mada*:

What is the proper [degree of] love? **That one should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God**. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person’s] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for God should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times, as we are commanded, “[You shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5). This concept was implied by Shlomo when he stated, as a metaphor: “For I am faint with love” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:5). The totality of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a parable describing [this love]. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3)

In the book of *Tehillim*, we find many powerful expressions of longing and thirst for closeness to God. For example:

Like a hind crying for water, my soul cries for You, O God; my soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God! (*Tehillim* 42:2-3)

God, You are my God; I search for You, my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You, as a parched and thirsty land that has no water. I shall behold You in the sanctuary and see Your might and glory. (*Tehillim* 63:2-3)

I long, I yearn for the courts of the Lord; my body and soul shout for joy to the living God. (*Tehillim* 84:3)

Rambam’s innovation, it seems, is that the feelings expressed in the book of *Tehillim* are a fundamental part of the definition of the *mitzva* of loving God. This is despite the fact that these emotions seem like the sole purview of unique personalities. The *mitzva* of loving God, in his opinion, includes the demand that everyone reach the proper degree of love, as described in his impassioned statement above.

**Two Paths of Contemplation on the Way to Loving God**

As a consequence of his demanding interpretation of the *mitzva* of loving God, Rambam must chart out a path that will help the individual stand up to the great challenge that this *mitzva* presents. This path must support the individual in his quest to plunge forth into the realm of closeness and intimacy with God.

Rambam attempts to do this on several occasions, the most prominent of which are found in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (in his *Yad Ha-Chazaka*) and in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*. Rambam opens *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* with the *mitzvot* of knowing God and recognizing His oneness. On the basis of these *mitzvot*, Rambam clears a path for presenting the *mitzvot* of loving God and fearing God: “It is a *mitzva* to love and fear this glorious and awesome God, as it states: ‘You shall love the Lord your God,’ and as it states: ‘Fear the Lord your God’ (*Devarim* 6:13)” (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:1). Immediately thereafter, he states:

What is the path to loving and fearing Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know His great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for God, the living God” (*Tehillim* 42:3).

When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny lowly and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers… What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him” (*Tehillim* 8:4-5).

Based on these concepts, I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide a foothold for a person of understanding to love God, as our Sages said regarding love: “In this manner, you will recognize He who spoke and brought the world into being.” (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2)

Thus, the path to loving God must run through contemplation of the creation and of the wondrous acts of God. Through this contemplation, one will recognize and know the greatness of His wisdom.

In *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, however, Rambam highlights a different path toward loving God:

The third *mitzva* is that we are commanded to love God, i.e., to contemplate and closely examine His *mitzvot* and His works in order to understand Him, and through this understanding to achieve a feeling of ecstasy. This is the goal of the *mitzva* to love God. As the *Sifrei* states: “From the statement, ‘You shall love the Lord your God,’ can I know how to love God? The Torah therefore says, ‘Take to heart these words with which I charge you this day’ (*Devarim* 6:6) – i.e., that through this you will understand the nature of ‘He who spoke and brought the world into being.’” From this it is clear that contemplation will lead to understanding, and then a feeling of enjoyment and love will follow automatically. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 3)

Rambam here speaks of contemplation on God’s *mitzvot* and His works in order to achieve a love of Him. The meaning of the expression “His works (*pe’ulotav*)” here is unclear. It may be that Rambam is referring to the actions that God took in creating the world; if so, his statement here connects very easily to his statement in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*. Alternatively, it may be that Rambam is referring to God’s way of interacting with the world, an interpretation that makes more sense in light of the context and the connection to contemplation of the *mitzvot*.

The second possibility seems to be implied in Rambam’s statement in *Moreh Nevukhim*, where he analyzes the framework of the *mitzvot* in general:

The reason for a *mitzva*, whether positive or negative, is clear, and its usefulness evident, if it directly tends to remove injustice, or to teach good conduct that furthers the well-being of society, or to impart a truth that should be believed either on its own merit, or as being indispensable for facilitating the removal of injustice or the teaching of good morals. There is no occasion to ask for the object of such *mitzvot*, as no one can, for example, be in doubt as to the reason why we have been commanded to believe that God is one, why we are forbidden to murder, to steal and to take vengeance, or to retaliate, or why we are commanded to love one another.

But there are precepts concerning which people are in doubt and of divided opinions, some believing that they are mere commands and serve no purpose whatever, while others believe that they serve a certain purpose that is, however, unknown to man. These are the precepts that, in their literal meaning, do not seem to further any of the three results named above: to impart some truth, to teach some moral, or to remove injustice. They do not seem to have any influence upon the well-being of the soul by imparting any truth or upon the well-being of the body by suggesting ways and rules that are useful in the government of a state or in the management of a household. These include the prohibitions of *sha’atnez* (wearing garments containing wool and linen), of *kil’ayim* (sowing diverse seeds)… **I will show that all these and similar laws must have some bearing upon one of the following three things, whether it is the regulation of our opinions, or the improvement of our social relations, which implies two things: the removal of injustice and the teaching of good morals. Consider what we said of the opinions [implied in the laws]. In some cases, the law contains a truth that is itself the only object of that law, e.g., the truth of the unity, eternity, and incorporeality of God. In other cases, that truth is only the means of securing the removal of injustice or the acquisition of good morals. These include the belief that God is angry with those who oppress their fellow men, as it is said, “My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword” (*Shemot* 22:23), etc.; or the belief that God hears the crying of the oppressed and vexed, to deliver them out of the hands of the oppressor and tyrant, as it is written, “Therefore, if he cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate” (*Shemot* 22:26).** (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:28)

Based on this approach, “His works” are God’s actions in His interaction with the world – whether this refers to His management of the world in terms of reward and punishment in general or to His actions in His day-to-day management of the world, such as hearing the cries of the oppressed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thus, contemplation of the *mitzvot* in general, with awareness of God’s ways of managing the world (“His works”), helps the individual see the great wisdom of God in His management and preservation of the world. The *mitzvot* that are incumbent upon the individual shape him and his path, refining his actions and his character. In this way, a person can become worthy of existing in the world of the Creator – a worthy, upright citizen of God’s world.

According to Rambam, this contemplation is what allows one to understand the meaning of God’s ways in the world, and from there he can proceed to loving God.

Rambam does not suffice with this contemplation of God’s *mitzvot* and His works, but demands an additional contemplation: contemplation of the Torah. This demand is based on the statement of the *Sifrei*, which emphasizes the importance of immersing oneself in “these words” – that is, the Torah – as a means of achieving a love of God.

It seems that these two contemplations do not represent two independent approaches, but rather two foci that complement each other. The Torah and the *mitzvot* together represent God’s wisdom, which instructs a person, teaching him how to deal with the existential challenges that God presents before him. Contemplation of the Torah and the *mitzvot* brings one closer to knowing God’s wisdom, and through this to knowing God Himself. And with this knowledge, love will come as well.

Thus, Rambam presents two paths that lead a person toward a love of God. One path entails contemplating God’s wisdom, as reflected in Torah and *mitzvot*, while the second path entails contemplating the cosmic nature of the universe and God’s act of creating the world.

Even though the first path is found explicitly in rabbinic literature, while the second path has no direct source, Rambam gave the second approach top billing. Rambam maintained that the path of contemplating the universe should be considered central, and therefore recorded only this path in his *Mishneh Torah*.

It seems that Rambam identified two distinct levels in knowing and loving God. The first and most basic level involves contemplating the wisdom of God found in His creation: its greatness, its power, and the subtlety of the delicate and precise relationships between its various parts. The second level involves contemplating the Torah and the *mitzvot*, as we have seen.

***Tehillim* 19 – The Psalm of the Dual Revelation**

This first level, in which the cosmos teaches us about the wisdom and greatness of the Creator, is anchored in numerous chapters of the *Tanakh*.[[2]](#footnote-2) These ideas are found mostly in the book of *Tehillim*, most famously in chapters 8, 104, and 148.

However, only one chapter presents these two levels together in a notable manner. We read in *Tehillim* 19:

For the leader. A psalm of David. The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork. Day to day makes utterance, night to night speaks out. There is no utterance, there are no words, whose sound goes unheard. Their voice carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world. He placed in them a tent for the sun, who is like a groom coming forth from the chamber, like a hero, eager to run his course. His rising-place is at one end of heaven, and his circuit reaches the other; nothing escapes his heat.

The Torah of the Lord is perfect, renewing life; the decrees of the Lord are enduring, making the simple wise; the precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up. The fear of the Lord is pure, abiding forever; the judgments of the Lord are true, righteous altogether, more desirable than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb. Your servant pays them heed; in obeying them there is much reward. Who can be aware of errors? Clear me of unperceived guilt, and from willful sins keep Your servant; let them not dominate me; then shall I be blameless and clear of grave offense. May the words of my mouth and the prayer of my heart be acceptable to You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (*Tehillim* 19:1-15)

The first section (2-7) describes the glory of God that reveals itself in His creation. In the second section (primarily 8-11), King David moves on to the Torah and the *mitzvot*.

It seems that King David is attempting in this chapter to describe the paths toward knowing and loving God. David builds the two levels – the level of creation and nature and the level of Torah and *mitzvot* – in the order of creation, the natural order of the world.

In reality, the creation of the world preceded the Torah, *derekh eretz* (a worldly occupation) takes precedence over the Torah, and the  
Ten Utterances through which the world was created preceded the Ten Commandments. The path of mankind follows this pattern. First, man becomes cognizant of the physical reality of the world, and only later does he recognize the spiritual reality of the world as well – the Torah and the *mitzvot*. Through this perspective, man can find his place in the world and his role in the cosmos.

This is reflected in David’s words in the first section of *Tehillim* 19: Only one who contemplates the universe, who sees with his own eyes its various colors and shades, can then listen to the story told by the heaven and the sky, the day and the night, about the Creator and His glory. Their inaudible voice is greater than the words themselves; it echoes powerfully in the ears of the listener. He can hear them lauding and praising the beauty and the perfect order of creation. Beyond these visions and voices, he can see God Himself actively creating this wondrous world, and he then yearns for and craves intimacy with Him.

The second section of the Psalm deals with praise of the Torah and the *mitzvot*: “The Torah of the Lord is perfect, renewing life… the instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up… More desirable than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb.” When a person learns Torah and fulfills *mitzvot* wholeheartedly, the Torah renews his life and makes his eyes light up. Then his soul fills with joy and sweetness, connecting with the Giver of the Torah and the *mitzvot*, whose great wisdom is revealed through them. Their integrity and justness together allow one’s soul to cleave to his Creator, who gave us the Torah and our way of life.

**The Relationship Between the Two Paths**

The transition between the two sections is exceedingly and surprisingly smooth. This is somewhat astonishing to the commentators, leading to various understandings of the connection between the two sections. The commentators suggest two primary ways of understanding the relationship between the two sections of the psalm. The first views the two sections as parallel and complementary, while the second views them as opposite and contradictory.

Ibn Ezra views the two sections of the psalm in the same way that we suggested at the start of this discussion. In his opinion, the two sections both relate to God, attesting to the greatness of His wisdom and His actions:

In my opinion, he recorded until here how an enlightened person can find testimony about the Divine and recognize his actions. David then said that **there is another witness as well, who is more distinguished than he is** and more trustworthy. This is God’s Torah, His decrees, His precepts, His *mitzvot*, the fear of Him and His judgments. The meaning of “Torah” (lit. “instruction”) is that it instructs one in the upright path… And it mentioned “renewing life” because the Torah removes all doubt from the soul. And the reason it says [that the Torah] “is perfect” is to invoke the sun, since the light of the sun is perfect… It says that the Torah is perfect to indicate that there is no need for another witness in addition to it.[[3]](#footnote-3) (Ibn Ezra, *Tehillim* 19:8)

In contrast, *Metzudat David* interprets that the goal of the Psalmist was to place the Torah in opposition to the sun:

“The Torah of the Lord is perfect” – **But** the Torah of the Lord is more perfect. This means to say that it is whole in its actions and more beneficial than the sun.

“Renewing life” – This means to say that the sun, with all its usefulness, sometimes causes damage in its great heat, to the point that one can become deathly ill. But the Torah always renews one’s life, since it protects and saves one from death. (*Metzudat David*, *Tehillim* 19:8)

Rashi presents both possibilities:

“The Torah of the Lord is perfect” – That too illuminates like the sun, as is written at the end of the topic: “making the eyes light up.” And Scripture states: “For the commandment is a lamp, the Torah is a light” (*Mishlei* 6:23). Another explanation: “Nothing escapes his heat” – On the Day of Judgment, “And the day that is coming shall burn them to ashes” (*Malakhi* 3:19). But the Torah of the Lord is perfect; it renews the soul to ways of life and it protects those who study it from that burning, as is stated: “But for you who revere My name, a sun of victory shall rise to bring healing” (*Malakhi* 3:20). (Rashi, *Tehillim* 19:8)

According to the first approach, the psalm highlights a similarity between the sun and the Torah. They both illuminate a person’s path in the world, one with physical light and one with spiritual light. According to the second approach, however, the psalm focuses on the contrast between the sun and the Torah. Whereas the sun serves as a tool that God will use to burn the wicked on the Day of Judgment, the Torah protects us from the burning flame and regulates its brightness and heat to a level that will always bestow life, renewal, and healing.

It should be stressed that on this point there is an essential difference between Rashi’s interpretation and that of *Metzudat David*. Rashi presents the gap between the Torah and the sun in order to emphasize that the Torah is capable of “regulating” the intense power of the sun. The Torah helps the sun give life to those who seek it: “A sun of victory shall rise to bring healing.”

**Between Terrestrial Existence and Spiritual Existence**

The gap between the two approaches suggested by Rashi leads us to two different perspectives on human existence. One can view human existence as two parallel life-giving frameworks: the terrestrial and the spiritual. The terrestrial framework is the framework of the sun and the terrestrial universe, while the spiritual framework is the framework of the Torah and the *mitzvot*. Each framework, in its respective area, helps build a person up to his full stature, physically and spiritually.

In contrast, one can view human existence as one physical framework that is influenced and tempered by the spiritual framework. The spiritual framework of the Torah and the *mitzvot* influences the physical, terrestrial existence of the world, thus making human existence possible. The Torah thus regulates the terrestrial framework.

The second approach, which sees an essential connection between the two frameworks of human existence, leads to significant conclusions. This approach clarifies for us the need for the dual contemplation that we discussed above: study and immersion in the principles of creation through the study of science, as well as comprehensive study of the realms of God’s wisdom as expressed in His Torah. Thus, a person can grasp the secrets of being and its various meanings within the limits of the human intellect.

In *Tehillim* 19, King David views these two frameworks – creation and Torah – as intertwined. Both lead a person toward loving God and achieving connection and intimacy with Him.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See also *Moreh Nevukhim* 1:54. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See numerous verses in *Yeshayahu* 40-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Also see Radak, *Tehillim* 19:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)