**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur #12: Two Definitions of *Olam Ha-ba***

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

It is clear in many sources that *Chazal* believe that the ultimate reward any human can expect for serving God is *Olam Ha-ba*, the World to Come. Jewish philosophers, however, debate the nature of this spiritual reward which will come to a person after he dies. As Rav Yosef Albo[[1]](#footnote-2) summarizes, the various Jewish thinkers and philosophers have split into two camps. One camp, identified with the Rambam[[2]](#footnote-3) and many other great sages, which Rav Albo himself endorses, admits that there may be some physical rewards for the righteous in this world. One of the proofs for this position is the fact that the forefathers were rewarded with material success. However, the main reward that a righteous person may expect is purely spiritual; it can be experienced only by the soul and not the body. This occurs in the World to Come, which is the place where the souls of the righteous go after they die.

The second group of Jewish thinkers (the Ramban,[[3]](#footnote-4) Ra’avad,[[4]](#footnote-5) Yad Rama,[[5]](#footnote-6) and many others) holds that although some righteous people do receive a physical reward in this world, most do not. The righteous therefore deserve physical reward in the next world. In *Olam Ha-ba,* they will receive both physical and spiritual reward. This will happen at the time when soul and body are resurrected, *techiyat ha-meitim.*

As we see, the Rambam and Ramban argue about what the word "*ha*-*ba*" means in the phrase *Olam Ha-ba*, the World to Come. When is it coming? According to the Rambam[[6]](#footnote-7) it is the World to Come, subjectively, for each person, when they die. For the Ramban and most Jewish philosophers, *olam ha-ba* will come at a specific later time in history, when God resurrects the dead and introduces a new world in the place of the existing one.

**Exegetical Basis of the Dispute**

What is the basis of this dispute? Why does the Rambam think the World to Come is purely spiritual, while the Ramban thinks the World to Come is physical, synonymous with resurrection of the dead? One locus of this argument is exegetical. The Rambam believes it is crucial to interpret the words of *Chazal* metaphorically when it is logically impossible to accept the literal meaning of their words. Since, as we will explain below, the conception of *Olam* *Ha-ba* as a physical space violates the basic laws of nature, we must understand the physical description of *Olam* *Ha-ba* metaphorically.

The Ra’avad[[7]](#footnote-8) and many other opponents of the Rambam think that it is important to interpret the words of *Chazal* literally in almost all circumstances. Since *Chazal* in many places describe the World to Come in physical terms, then it must literally be a physical world. Many of the descriptions of *Olam Ha-ba* sound physical. For example, *Chazal* describe the righteous sitting with crowns on their heads.[[8]](#footnote-9) There are descriptions of the feast enjoyed by the righteous, replete with a discussion of who should lead the Grace after Meals.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The Rambam's approach throughout his writings, though, is to interpret these statements of *Chazal* metaphorically. As an introduction to his interpretation of *Olam* *Ha-ba,* the Rambam gives a fascinating survey of three different ways of relating to peculiar statements found in the Talmud or *Midrash*. [[10]](#footnote-11) One group of people interpret every statement of *Chazal* literally. Even if the literal understanding constitutes an impossibility, they accept on faith that what we consider impossible is true nonetheless. On the one hand this group can be considered very religious, but in truth, claims the Rambam, these people destroy the beauty of Torah and darken its splendor. By taking every word of *Chazal* literally and proclaiming the truth of their words, they make *Chazal* look like fools. Some of the statements we find in rabbinic sources are impossible, even preposterous, and it brings no honor to *Chazal* to claim that we believe them literally.

The Rambam approves even less of the second group. This group also interprets every statement of *Chazal* literally, but since some of those statements cannot literally be true, they reject the teachings of *Chazal* completely and become heretics.

The third group, which is unfortunately much smaller than either of the first two, understands that *Chazal* were very accomplished philosophers, who often spoke in riddles, puzzles and metaphors. Not every word of the Talmud and *Midrash* is meant to be taken literally. One who truly understands the wisdom of *Chazal* realizes that their words have a hidden layer of meaning. That metaphorical intention is philosophically enlightening and scientifically accurate, and demonstrates the wisdom of our tradition and its bearers.

The Rambam believes that if we were to take all statements of *Chazal* literally, we would end up with foolish traditions, and then we must either believe that *Chazal* were fools, or be fools ourselves. However, many of the Rambam's opponents object to this position of the Rambam, and assume that a true believer would not re-interpret the statements of *Chazal* in accordance with their own notions of logical possibility, but rather revise their ideas about what is possible in accordance with the statements of *Chazal*.

Reacting to the Rambam’s metaphorical interpretation of *Olam* *Ha-ba*, Ra’avad objects forcefully based on many *midrashim* which understand *Olam Ha-ba* as a physical world. For example, if the description of the World to Come as a meal is a metaphor, asks the Ra’avad, then why does that *midrash* describe a debate as to who would lead the Grace after Meals? Of course, the Rambam would understand this as a metaphor as well; perhaps it dissects the relative merits of the philosophical ideas represented by different biblical characters. The Ra’avad also quotes various *midrashim* that debate whether the bodies will be resurrected with or without their clothing, and with or without their bodily defects.[[11]](#footnote-12) This proves that in *Olam Ha-ba,* there will be bodies.

However, the Rambam may interpret this metaphorically as well. The Rambam himself explains in detail the correct metaphorical interpretation of *Chazal*’s description of the nature of *Olam* *Ha-ba* as a place where the righteous sit with crowns on their heads and enjoy the glory of the Divine Presence. "Sitting” means that they are not wearied by exertion, since they do not have bodies. “Crowns” on their “heads” symbolize the crown of knowledge of God which is found in their souls. By contemplating God, they derive spiritual pleasure from the splendor of God's existence.

**Philosophical Basis of the Dispute: Different Views of the Changeability of the Laws of Nature**

However, this debate is not merely exegetical. There are a number of philosophical points that may have led the Rambam to his conclusion, and most medieval philosophers (including the Ra’avad, the Ramban, the Yad Rama, Rav Saadia Gaon[[12]](#footnote-13) and the Tosafists[[13]](#footnote-14)) to their conclusion.

One point of contention between the Rambam and the other Rishonim is the scientific possibility of the existence of a body in *Olam* *Ha-ba*. The Rambam quotes *Chazal* as saying there will be no eating and drinking in the World to Come.  Based on the laws of science, the Rambam proves that one can't have a body in the World to Come, because a body cannot survive without eating and drinking. In addition, the Rambam[[14]](#footnote-15) explains elsewhere that any physical object must eventually decompose and cannot last forever. He implies that even God, were He to have a body, would not be eternal.[[15]](#footnote-16) It stands to reason, then, that if *Olam Ha-ba* means eternal life, it must be without a body, because only a spiritual being can last forever.

The Ramban addresses some of these objections in *Torat Ha-Adam*,[[16]](#footnote-17) as does the Ra’avad in his glosses to the *Mishneh Torah*.[[17]](#footnote-18) They answer very simply: in this world, bodies don't live without eating and drinking. However, in the next world, God will create bodies that live forever without eating and drinking, without decomposing, like the Midrash tells us about the prophet Eliyahu. In the next world, God will change the laws of nature. We will have the bodies we are familiar with, but they will be eternal, with no need to eat and drink, and we will be free to enjoy the splendor of God, which will sustain us in lieu of food and drink.

The Rambam follows the approach that he explicates in *Moreh Ha-nevukhim*,[[18]](#footnote-19) which is that the basic laws of nature never change. God created the world, and it exists thus eternally. Therefore, if the rules of science as we know it dictate that bodies do not live forever and do not live without eating and drinking, then in *Olam* *Ha-ba,* the bodies will not do that either. The only way we can achieve eternal life is as disembodied souls.

The Ramban and the other Rishonim are not bothered by this problem. They believe that the laws of science are subject to the whims of their creator. If God decides so, then although nowadays the rules work a certain way, when He is ready, He will change the rules and create a new system of physics under which our bodies will be able to live forever, and as full human beings we will be able to enjoy eternally the splendor of the Divine presence.

**Different Understandings of the Essence of Being Human**

Another philosophical point of divergence relates to the relationship between body and soul. The Rambam[[19]](#footnote-20) tells us that one reason he reaches the conclusion that *Olam Ha-ba* must not be physical is because the ultimate reward cannot be enjoyed by one who is trapped in a body. The Rambam, like many other philosophers, believes that the body ultimately drags down the soul. The only true pleasure is contemplation of God, and a soul is limited in its ability to connect with God because it is distracted by the physicality of its body. Of course, if the ultimate reward can only be enjoyed by a pure soul unhampered by its body, then we cannot have a body in the World to Come.

Other Rishonim, however, understand that the ultimate reward can be enjoyed by a body and a soul. Several Jewish philosophers ask why we have a body in the World to Come. Rav Yosef Albo[[20]](#footnote-21) explains, according to this opinion, that by the principle of Divine justice, since the body helps the soul do *mitzvot* in this world, it is only fair that the God reward the body as well as the soul. Therefore, we must have a body in the World to Come. He goes further in explaining the opinion of those who hold we will have a body in the World to Come, saying that a soul needs a body for its ultimate perfection.

On an existential level, we can see this dispute as an expression of a fundamental disagreement about how to view a human being. What is a human being? According to one opinion, a human being is a soul in a body. The ideal human being is a body ruled, controlled and properly channeled and focused by the soul. However, a human being is only a human being because it combines body and soul. In this way, a human being is better than an angel. An angel is purely spiritual. A human being can take their spirituality and fuse it with their physicality. The true perfection of the soul is in its proper relationship with the body. If so, the body and soul deserve to live out that perfection and be rewarded both physically and spiritually in the World to Come.

The Rambam, however, explains in many places[[21]](#footnote-22) that the ultimate goal of a human being is intellectual (which for the Rambam is equivalent to spiritual), i.e., the knowledge and contemplation of God. According the Rambam, a human being is essentially a soul. The body is an additional feature, which a human being is born with in this world; but the real human being is the soul, which is trapped within the body. Then, of course, in *Olam Ha-ba,* we should be free of this handicap and be merely souls.

The Rambam would admit that the soul uses the body in order to survive and serve God in this world; but it is not the person’s true self, just an external object used by the person. We would not expect the reward in *Olam* *Ha-ba* to include the hammer used by one who builds a *sukka* or the knife used by a ritual slaughterer, because it is a mere tool and not part of the self. Likewise, the body is a useful tool, but ultimately not more than that. This may be the crux of the debate: is the body a tool or part of one’s identity?

**Summary**

We have explained two basic approaches towards understanding the nature of *Olam Ha-ba*. The Rambam, as well as Rav Yosef Albo and other Jewish philosophers, understand that it a purely intellectual, spiritual world where souls contemplate the existence of God, without bodies or any trappings of regular human life. This is the ultimate pleasure. The Ramban, Rav Saadia Gaon, Yad Rama and many others understand that in the World to Come we will live as human beings with body and soul. Of course, our bodies will be improved, and that life will have many advantages over the current world, but we will still be recognizable as human beings.

We explained three underlying philosophical disputes which might have led each side of this debate to its respective conclusions. One is the exegetical dispute, in which the Rambam feels a holy obligation to explain the words of *Chazal* metaphorically so that they dovetail as much as possible with the conclusions of science and philosophy. He accuses those who interpret the words of *Chazal* literally of bringing disrepute to the Torah. The Ra’avad and others believe that we should interpret the words of *Chazal* literally as much as possible, and not give so much credence to scientific and philosophical conclusions that seem to contradict the words of *Chazal*. This issue continues to engender much controversy within the Jewish community to this very day

The second factor we mentioned was that the Rambam believes the basic laws of the universe never change, and therefore we cannot have an eternal physical existence in the World to Come. This would violate the laws of nature. The Ra’avad, Ramban and others believed the laws of nature could change in *Olam* *Ha-ba*.

Perhaps most crucial is the third factor; as we explained, they argue about what it means to be a human being in the deepest and highest sense. The Rambam believes that the ultimate pleasures are intellectual and spiritual. A real human being is a soul; the body is just a handicap, something we are trapped in in this world, which we would happily be rid of as quickly as possible. Therefore, in *Olam* *Ha-ba,* we get to be our truest selves, which is our souls without our bodies. The Rambam's opponents believe that the true uniqueness and depth of being human lies in combining body and soul, and in shaping, fashioning and channeling the actions of the body through the spiritual achievement of the soul. It is this unique combination of body and soul which can provide the service which is so pleasing in the eyes of God, and therefore that unique body-and-soul is rewarded in an improved incarnation in the World to Come.

This basic dispute is not only important for our understanding *Olam Ha-ba;* it affects how we look at this world as well. For the Rambam, in this world, our main goal is to add understanding and closeness to God to our soul. Our body's role is to sustain the soul and make sure that nothing interferes with its contemplation of God. For many other Jewish philosophers, though, our existence is about integrating body and soul, as well as allowing the soul to sanctify the body to the extent that the body becomes part of our service of God and deserves to be rewarded in the next world.

1. *Sefer Ha-ikkarim*, Book 4, Chapter 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva,* Ch. 8; *Commentary on the Mishna*, *Sanhedrin* Ch. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Torah Ha-adam, Sha’ar Ha-gemul.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Glosses to Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva,* Ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Sanhedrin* 90a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Glosses to Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva,* Ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Berakhot* 17a. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Pesachim* 119b. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Introduction to Mishna*, *Sanhedrin* Ch. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Ketubot* 111a; *Sanhedrin* 91b-92a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Emunot Ve-de’ot*, Ch. 6 and Ch. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See, for example, *Rosh Hashana* 16b, s.v. *Le-yom ha-din.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. This is the Ramban's work about life and death, which is mostly halakhic but is philosophical in places. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See, e.g., Book 2, Ch. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. *Commentary on the Mishna.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *Sefer Ha-ikkarim,* Book 4, Ch. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. See, e.g., *Moreh Ha-nevukhim,* Book 3, Ch. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)