YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #13:**

**Loving God (III): Contemplating Creation and Contemplating the Torah**

**Introduction**

In the previous *shiur*, we discussed two paths through which one can attain the love of God: by contemplating nature and the universe and by studying the Torah and the *mitzvot*.

**Contemplating the Universe: Avraham’s Legacy**

As we have said, Rambam maintains that contemplating the universe is a person’s primary means of attaining the love of God. Accordingly, Rambam stresses the following in his *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

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)

Rambam returns to this theme at the end of *Sefer Ha-Mada*:

It is a well-known and clear matter that the love of God will not become attached within a person’s heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times, as is fitting, leaving all things in the world except for this. This was implied by the command: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5).

**One can only love God [as an outgrowth] of the knowledge with which he knows Him. The nature of one’s love depends on the nature of one’s knowledge! A small [amount of knowledge arouses] a lesser love. A greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Therefore, it is necessary for a person to seclude himself in order to understand and conceive wisdom and concepts that make his Creator known to him according to the potential that man possesses to understand and comprehend**, as we explained in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:6)

Rambam took the same approach in *Moreh Nevukhim* in explaining Moshe’s request from God, “Pray let me know Your ways” (*Shemot* 33:13):

The words “all My goodness” (*Shemot* 33:19) imply that God promised to show him the whole creation, concerning which it has been stated, “And God saw all that He had made and found it very good” (*Bereishit* 1:31); when I say “to show him the whole creation,” I mean to imply that God promised **to make him comprehend the nature of all things, their relation to each other**, and the way they are governed by God, both in reference to the universe as a whole and to each creature in particular. This knowledge is referred to when we are told of Moshe that “he is trusted throughout My household” (*Bamidbar* 12:7); that is, his knowledge of all the creatures in My universe is correct and firmly established, for false opinions are not firmly established. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 1:54)

Rambam does not suffice with this, but adds that in addition to understanding the whole creation and the laws of nature, God made Moshe comprehend “His works” as well, meaning the ways in which God manages the universe:

Consequently, the knowledge of the works of God is the knowledge of His attributes, by which He can be known. The fact that God promised Moshe to give him a knowledge of His works may be inferred from the circumstance that God taught him such attributes as refer exclusively to His works, namely, “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness,” etc. (*Shemot* 34:6). It is therefore clear that the ways that Moshe wished to know, and which God taught him, are the actions emanating from God. Our Sages call them *middot* (qualities), and speak of the thirteen *middot* of God. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 1:54)

The very first person to contemplate the universe and the ways of God – and consequently the first person to love God and cause others to love Him – was our patriarch Avraham. Rambam describes the state of the world prior to Avraham’s theological revolution in *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* (we will quote the original text at length because of its great importance here):

During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred. Their mistake was as follows: They said God created stars and spheres with which to control the world. He placed them on high and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and to treat them with honor…

After many years passed, there arose people – false prophets – who told [their nations] that God had commanded them to say: Serve this star – or all the stars – sacrifice to it, offer libations to it, build a temple for it, and make an image of it so that all people – including the women, the children, and the common people – could bow to it. He would inform them of a form that he had conceived, and tell them that this is the image of the particular star, claiming that this was revealed to him in a prophetic vision. In this manner, the people began to make images in temples, under trees, and on the tops of mountains and hills. People would gather together and bow down to them, and the [false prophets] would say: This image is the source of benefit or harm. It is appropriate to serve it and fear it…

As the years passed, [God’s] glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population. [It was no longer part of] their speech or thought, and they no longer knew Him… The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a [few] individuals, for example, Chanokh, Metushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever.

The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world – the patriarch Avraham – was born… After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake….

He began to call in a loud voice to all people and inform them that there is one God in the entire world and it is proper to serve Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan – proclaiming [God’s existence the entire time] – as it states: “And He invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God” (*Bereishit* 21:33)….

Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are the men of the house of Avraham. He planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle, composed texts about it, and taught it to Yitzchak, his son. Yitzchak also taught others and turned [their hearts to God]. He also taught Ya’akov and appointed him as a teacher. [Ya’akov] taught others and turned [the hearts] of all those who gathered around him [to God]. He also taught all of his children. He selected Levi and appointed him as the leader. He established him [as the head of] the yeshiva to teach them the way of God and observe the *mitzvot* of Avraham. [Ya’akov] commanded his sons that the leadership should not depart from the descendants of Levi, so that the teachings would not be forgotten. This concept proceeded and gathered strength among the descendants of Ya’akov and those who collected around them, until there became a nation within the world that knew God.

When the Jews extended their stay in Egypt, however, they learned from the [Egyptians’] deeds and began worshiping the stars as they did, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, who clung to the *mitzvot* of the patriarchs; the tribe of Levi never served false gods. Within a short time, the fundamental principle that Avraham had planted would have been uprooted, and the descendants of Ya’akov would have returned to the errors of the world and their crookedness. Because of God’s love for us, and to uphold the oath He made to Avraham, our patriarch, He brought forth Moshe our teacher, the master of all prophets, and sent him [to redeem the Jews]. After Moshe our teacher prophesied and God chose Israel as His inheritance, He crowned them with *mitzvot* and informed them of the path to serve Him, [teaching them] the judgment prescribed for idol worship and all those who stray after it. (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1)

Indeed, many *midrashim* describe the way in which Avraham recognized his Creator.[[2]](#footnote-2) The following is one of the various formulations:

Terach hid his son in a cave for three years [in fear of Nimrod]. The Holy One, blessed be He, formed two windows for him; oil came out from one of them and flour came out from the other. When he was three years old, he came out of the cave and wondered in his heart who created heaven, earth, and him. He prayed the entire day to the sun, and in the evening the sun set in the west and the moon rose in the east. When he saw the moon and the stars surrounding the moon, he said, “This is the one who created heaven, earth, and me, and these stars are his ministers and servants.” He stood all night in prayer to the moon. In the morning, the moon set in the west and the sun rose in the east. He said, “There is no power in these [entities].” They have a master above them; it is to Him that I will pray and to Him that I will bow. (*Otzar Midrashim*, *Avraham Avinu*, p. 7)

Avraham contemplates the universe, seeing its beauty and its power. He sees the sun rising and the living world blossoming. In the language of *Chazal* (*Bereishit Rabba* 39:1), he sees a “castle in flames.” Avraham stands and wonders: Who is the owner of this castle?

As he attempts to answer this question, Avraham reveals the answer: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork” (*Tehillim* 19:2). Avraham reaches the conclusion that the owner of the castle is not one of the forces that act within existence, since each one of them only maintains partial control of the world, limited to a specific time or place. Avraham concludes that the sun, the moon, and the stars are not the true power in the world, but only mere servants and attendants to Him.

Through this realization, Avraham understands that the owner of the castle, who rules in heaven and on earth, both during the day and at night, is not one of the creations, nor is He a kind of being that is found among them. He transcends space and time; He has neither a body nor even the semblance of a body.

When we contemplate the universe and see a world that is constantly changing its appearance, when we look at the sun rising and setting, the winter and the summer, when we view the wondrous periodicity of life’s blossoming and withering, we cannot help but conclude that there is one fundamental entity who is the source of it all. In His great, limitless, unfathomable wisdom, God operates, renews, and sustains all of existence.

The Psalmist describes the sun as the central agent in the world’s creation. It may be that this notion stems from an ancient recognition – even then – that the sun is the source of energy that allows life as we know it to exist on earth.

Avraham succeeds in understanding that the sun is only the servant of God, who reigns supreme. God has many messengers, and He – whose power is paramount over theirs – is superior to them (see *Midrash Lekach Tov*, *Kohelet* 5:7).

**Contemplating the Torah and the *Mitzvot***

As we noted in the previous *shiur*, Rambam emphasizes contemplation of the Torah and the *mitzvot* as a path toward loving God in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*. There is a central, prominent difference between Rambam’s language in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* and his language in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*. Contemplating the universe leads to loving God, while contemplating the Torah and the *mitzvot* causes love to “follow automatically”:

And 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 pleasure and love will follow automatically**. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 3)

It seems that the love that follows automatically from contemplating the Torah and the *mitzvot* derives from the fundamental distinction that exists between these two objects of contemplation.

Contemplation of the universe centers on viewing the sheer power of divine wisdom embedded in creation and in its many details, large and small. By recognizing this, the feeling of yearning in one’s heart and soul for an even greater recognition, for closeness and intimacy with God, grows ever stronger.

In contrast, contemplation of the Torah and the *mitzvot* touches on a more fundamental, deep-seated point. The Torah and the *mitzvot* express the divine will and God’s messages to man. The connection that this creates here does not derive from external contemplation of God’s wisdom, outside of His actions and His creations, but from engaging in the word of God Himself, in His desires and in the *mitzvot* with which He sanctified us.

This is similar to the distinction that Rashi draws in *Massekhet Berakhot* regarding the relationship between *keriat Shema* and prayer:

For prayer – He must act as if standing before the King and stand in awe; but for *keriat Shema*, he is not speaking before the King. (Rashi, *Berakhot* 25a, s.v. *le-tefilla*)

Rashi addresses the difference in the nature of how a person stands before the Creator during *keriat Shema* and during prayer. According to him, during *keriat Shema*, one is not speaking *with* the King, but rather *about* the King, in contrast to prayer, in which one actually meets with the King and speaks to Him.

Accordingly, it can be said that contemplation of the universe centers on the desire to focus on the nature of the wisdom of the Creator, a desire that results directly from studying the act of creation and the brilliant wonders that are embedded in the creation. By contrast, contemplation of the Torah means engaging in the word of God and in His *mitzvot* directly. Therefore, intimacy with God follows automatically from this contemplation, as Rambam emphasizes.

This contemplation, recognizing and understanding God through His messages to the world, connects a person more directly and more closely to the essence of God.

It seems that we can delve even deeper and explain the distinction between the two paths to loving God more thoroughly. We must first posit that the purpose of love is to form a connection between the lover and the beloved, to create a union between those who love one another. The more that a person engages in the word of God through His Torah, in the divine wisdom of the Torah, in God’s *mitzvot* and His actions toward His creations, his soul fills with the knowledge of God, His Torah, and His will. As the *Zohar* states, the Torah and God are one (*Zohar* 3, 73a).

Contemplation of the universe teaches a person about the divine wisdom, and through this he will seek out closeness with God and will yearn to connect with Him. By contrast, one who engages in Torah study connects with God through that very act.

**Creation and Torah as One: He Gazed into the Torah and Created the World**

In the previous *shiur*, we examined *Tehillim* 19, which deals with the integration of these two types of contemplation and the mutual impact of each on the other. It seems that we can take this idea one step further in light of Rashi’s commentary there regarding the Torah’s ability to sweeten and temper the power and intensity of the burning sun and to transform this power into a force of justness and healing.

The physical world and the spiritual world are intertwined; both worlds together create the forces of life and intimacy with God. This notion is expressed in the first *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba*:

The great R. Hoshaya opened: “I was with Him as a confidant (*amon*), a source of delight every day” (*Mishlei* 8:30)… Alternatively, *amon* [should be read] *uman* (“artisan”). The Torah is saying, “I was the artisan’s tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.” In the way of the world, a king of flesh and blood who builds a palace does not do so from his own knowledge, but rather from the knowledge of an artisan, and the artisan does not build it from his own knowledge, but rather he has documents and books in order to know how to make rooms and wickets. So too, the Holy One, blessed be He, gazed into the Torah and created the world. Similarly the Torah says, “*Be-reishit*,God began to create,” and *reishit* refers to Torah, as in “The Lord created me at the beginning (*reishit*) of His course” (*Mishlei* 8:22). (*Bereishit Rabba* 1:1)

Thus, in the beginning the world was created based on the Torah. The world continues to be governed in this way even after the initial creation. Through the human act of studying and upholding the Torah, a person can sustain the universe. As the *Zohar* states:

For when the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, He gazed into the Torah and created the world; by Torah the world was created, as they have established, for it is written: “I was with Him as a confidant (*amon*)” (*Mishlei* 8:30). Do not read *amon* but *uman* (“artisan”)… In the Torah it is written: “God began to create heaven and earth” (*Bereishit* 1:1) – He gazed at this and created heaven. In her is written: “God said, ‘Let there be light’” (*Bereishit* 1:3) – He gazed at this statement and created light. And so with every single word written in the Torah: The Holy One, blessed be He, gazed and formed that thing. Therefore it is written: “I was with Him as a confidant.” In this manner was the whole world created.

Once the world was created, not a single thing was firmly established until an impulse arose in the [divine] will to create the human being, who would engage in Torah and for whose sake the world would endure. **Now, whoever gazes upon Torah and engages in her, as it were, sustains the world. The Holy One, blessed be He, gazed into Torah and created the world; a human gazes into Torah and sustains the world. Thus, the creation and sustenance of the whole world is Torah. Therefore, happy is the person who engages in Torah, for he sustains the world!** (*Zohar*, *Teruma*)

A person who contemplates the Torah and attempts to know it connects to his Creator and becomes His partner in sustaining the entire universe.

If so, we can view these two paths of knowing and loving God as two different paths from two different perspectives, forming two levels in a person’s knowledge of God. However, from a deeper perspective, these two paths are actually one. They are two sides of the same cosmic coin. Together, the Torah and the universe, the universe and the Torah, attest to the meaning of existence before God. Our physical being only possesses meaning once it is interwoven with spiritual, Torah-centric meaning as well.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. Also see Rambam’s statement in *Moreh Nevukhim*:

   There are other truths in reference to the whole of the universe that form the substance of the various and many kinds of speculative sciences, and afford the means of verifying the above-mentioned principles as their final result. But Scripture does not so distinctly prescribe the belief in them as it does in the first case; **it is implied in the commandment to love the Lord. It may be inferred from the words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (*Devarim* 6:5), what stress is laid on this commandment to love God. We have already shown in the *Mishneh Torah* that this love is only possible when we comprehend the real nature of things and understand the divine wisdom displayed therein**. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:28) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Chazal* generally focused on the moment when Avraham recognized his Creator, although they disagree regarding his age at the time. However, most *midrashim* do not describe the way in which Avraham achieved his faith in God. Only a few of them, including the one cited here, describe this process. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)