YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #30: The Ramchal (3)**

The Ramchal is one of the most fundamental and systematic Jewish thinkers. This is reflected, among other things, in the fact that he opens his discussions of every major topic with the reason for creation. Everything else is derived from the reason and purpose of the world. We will, therefore, expand a bit on this subject, and see how it illuminates the topic of prayer according to the Ramchal.

*Derekh Hashem, Da'at Tevunot*, and *Mesilat Yesharim* all start with the assertion that the world was created for the benefit of man. There is service required of man, but in the end, God's desire to benefit His creatures is realized.

At a certain point, however, in the book *Da'at Tevunot*, there is a sudden shift to the idea that the world was created in order to reveal God's unity. For anyone who reads *Da'at Tevunot* without noticing the change, the book itself draws attention to it, and raises the question of why another explanation is necessary for the reason of creation. This *shiur* will not address that explanation, or the relationship between the two explanations. I wish merely to note the depth and complexity of the topic; the Ramchal’s work *Kelach Pitchei Chokhma* implies that the revelation of God's unity is a means for bestowing good, whereas *Da'at Tevunot* impliesthat bestowing good is a means for revealing God's unity. In any case, whatever the relationship between the two goals, both occupy a central place.

**The Recitation of Shema and the Revelation of God’s Unity**

*Derekh Hashem* seems to mention only the element of bestowing benefit upon God's creatures. There is, however, one place where God's unity is mentioned – in the chapter dealing with the recitation of *Shema*:

Two [acts of] daily worship were imposed upon us, in order to worship before Him, may He be blessed. And they are the recitation of *Shema* and prayer; and at the time of the Temple, [also] the daily and additional sacrifices. And now we will explain their content: Regarding the unity of His existence, may He be blessed, and the unity of His control, behold, the first is the recitation of *Shema* – and its content is His unification and the acceptance of the yoke of His kingship. And the idea is that the Creator, may His name be blessed, brought all the different entities into existence – the higher and the lower, the spiritual and the physical – and placed them in different arrangements and put into the properties of each of them to act and do deeds, to move in patterns and to move many other things in various ways, according to what His Wisdom, may He be blessed, distributed to each and every one. Nevertheless, note that He, may His name be blessed, is the only root and cause for all of them. And this matter is understood from two angles – from the angle of existence and from the angle of action. Regarding the angle of existence, we have already explained in Part I (“On the Creator” 6) how all entities are all dependent upon Him, may He be blessed, and extend from His Will; whereas His existence is a necessary existence from Himself, and is not dependent on anything else besides Him. But all other entities only exist from the fact that He, may His name be blessed, wants them and sustains them with His will. Regarding the angle of action, even though He placed into the properties of the creatures to have control over certain things, according to the scope of their capabilities, and to perform great acts – each one according to its properties – in truth, they surely have no power nor control besides that which the Creator, may He be blessed, gave over to them. For He is the true Master, Controller, and omnipotent One. And all that they do is only that which He, may His name be blessed, gave and gives power to them in order that they should act. But He is the Master over them, to add or take away as He wishes at any minute and at any time. (*Derekh Hashem* IV, 4, 1)

The unity of God has two implications – from the angle of existence and from the angle of action. God is the one being whose existence is necessary, and He is the sole controller of everything that exists. If we compare this to the teachings of the Rambam, we find that the Rambam focuses exclusively on the unity of God from the angle of His existence:

The second *mitzva* is the command that He commanded us about belief in [God's] unity. And that is that we must believe that the mover of existence and its First Cause are one. And that is what He, may He be exalted, said: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (*Devarim* 6:4)… And they often said, The commandment of unification. And they also called it the commandment of the yoke of Heaven. As they say: "In order to accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven" (*Berakhot* 13a) – meaning, to acknowledge His unity and believe in it. (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, positive commandment 2)

The Rambam speaks of belief that God is the one being whose existence is absolute, and he argues that this is also the meaning of accepting the yoke of Heaven. Accepting the yoke of Heaven is not about the relationship between us and God, and it does not require accepting His control and submitting ourselves to Him. All it involves is believing in His unity. According to the Ramchal, however, there is a second aspect to the unity of God – believing in his absolute control.

The Ramchal continues in *Derekh Hashem*:

And the depth of the matter is that truly, according to the arrangements ordered by His Wisdom, may He be blessed, for the refinement of His creatures – as we wrote in Part I (“On the Spiritual Realm” 8) – behold, there are many matters of evil that move in patterns and move other things in the world; whether from the free choice of people who sin, or whether from that which is decreed about them to punish them. And at first glance, this matter appears as if it is surely the opposite of His will, may He be blessed. For He, may His name be blessed, surely only wants the good; and all of His desire is to do good. And His name is [even] profaned by the dominance of evildoers and the increase of evil things and breakdowns. However, one who knows His ways, may He be blessed, and has a deeper understanding of [these] things, knows that all of this nevertheless only causes that – in a deep way – everything brings about the perfection of the creation and will then end with it, as I wrote in Part I (“On Mankind” 4). So it turns out that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the One that truly directs everything. And it is only His counsel that stands, such that it will bring His good and His perfection to His creatures, as we wrote there. However, according to the truth of the matter, things must move in these processes according to the foundations of the amazing wisdom and the true good. And in the end of all the processes, it will be made known that He, may His name be blessed, is one, a unity, unique, and that He caused all of these causes – in their [various] ways – to come toward the true goal, which is the true good that we mentioned. (Ibid.)

The Rambam says nothing about the matter of good and evil, but for the Ramchal, this is part of the foundation of creation – both in terms of the benefit to the created and in terms of the revelation of God's unity. The two explanations assign great significance to the existence of evil. Why is there evil in the world, if God wants to do good? Non-Jewish approaches might say: This is an accident, a mistake; man has spoiled the good world that God created. The Ramchal, however, says: Indeed, at this time, the existence of evil causes a profanation of His name – but at the end of a long Divine process in the world, it will become clear that all evil comes from God, and its purpose will be clarified.

The Ramchal takes the matter one step deeper:

And of that which is included in the depth of this matter is the revelation of the truth of His unity, may He be blessed. And that is because, behold, we have already explained that the aggregate of all the causes in the world are such that, behold, the Creator, may He be blessed, created evil in order for people to remove it and to establish good in themselves and in creation. And note that there are many axioms and great roots that were planted in this matter, so that it will be perfected in all of its parts and aspects. For there are truly many details to be found about the existence of evil in creation, its actions, and its control. And many details as well regarding the matter of man's relating to it, and that he is put beneath it and placed among it, and in the matter of his overpowering it and opening up his prison and conquering it; and the matter of the existence of good and its spreading and its becoming strengthened according to the submission of evil and its being conquered. However, the root of the existence of all evil, its actions and its control, is the Creator's hiding His unity, may He be blessed, such that He not reveal His truth in the world to all. And according to the measure of the hiding is the measure of the power of evil, as we wrote in Part I (“On the Spiritual Realm” 8). And the root of all its nullification and its removal, and the establishment of all creation with good, is the revelation of the truth of His unity, may He be blessed. And that is what the verse states (*Devarim* 32:39): "See, then, that I, I am He, etc." and it is [also] written (*Yeshayahu* 43:10): "In order that you will know and you will have faith in Me and you will understand that I am He; before Me no god was formed, and after Me, none will be, etc." So it comes out that the end of the refinement of all creation is dependent upon the revelation of His Unity, may He be blessed. (Ibid.)

With respect to the goal of bestowing benefit, one can still ask: What will happen if man chooses evil of his own free will? Might we never reach the state where it will become clear that everything is from God? However, due to the goal of revealing God’s unity, He will make sure that this happens regardless of our choices. Beneath the surface, behind all the events and circumstances in history, a Divine process moves forward which will ultimately reveal that God is one:

But surely He was, is, and always will be one, a unity, and unique. However, now He is not revealed to all as is appropriate. But in the future to come, He will be completely revealed to all the creatures, as it is written (*Zekharya* 14:9): "On that day, He will be one and His name will be one." Yet the Israelites who merited to [receive] His true Torah know this truth and testify to it also now. And this is that which is written (*Yeshayahu* 43:12), "And you are My witnesses, says the Lord." And this is a great merit for us. (Ibid.)

The process leading to the revelation of God's unity is currently hidden. It is just beneath the surface, and will be revealed to the entire world in the future. But twice every day, we express the unity of God openly – in the recitation of *Shema.*

We have seen that the most fundamental question, according to the Ramchal, is why God created His world. From this question, two elements arise: the purpose of creation is to do good, and the purpose of creation is to reveal the unity of God. From these two foundations are derived the two main services in our daily lives: the recitation of *Shema* and the *Amida* prayer. We approach the *Amida* prayer in order to realize the Divine benefit towards us, and we approach the recitation of *Shema* for the purpose of revealing God's unity. Prayer stems from the purpose of benefit: we make an effort for the benefit to be realized, and even beyond that, we have seen that through prayer we elevate the worlds so that God's abundance descends into our world through them. The recitation of *Shema*, on the other hand, stems from the goal of revealing God's unity. We connect ourselves to the fact that God does everything, directs everything, navigates everything. Despite those things that are ostensibly given over to our free choice – ultimately, He will arrange for His unity to be revealed. The revelation of His unity is itself a Divine process, but we have a part in the revelation of this process, through reciting the *Shema.*

In this way, the recitation of *Shema* and the *Amida* prayer realize the two main elements in the Ramchal's thought, the goal of bestowing good and the goal of revealing God's unity.

(Translated by David Strauss)