YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT(VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE # 7: CHOL AND KODESH: DISTINCTION AND SEPARATION

 In previous shiurim, we dealt with the concept of unifying the worlds of the holy and the secular, of the kodesh and the chol. We explained that these two worlds must not remain at odds with each other, rather we must strive to look beyond the apparent differences between them and attempt to understand the similarities between them. Today, on the other hand, we will see that it is also necessary to separate and distinguish between them.

Rav Kook writes: (Ma'amarei Ha-reiya p.399-411 #12)

"The world suffers from the mixture of chol and kodesh without order. This leads to mutual opposition between the two foundations, the chol against the kodesh and vice versa. And this opposition also leads to confusion of ideas until it becomes very difficult at times to discern what is chol and what is kodesh. All the labors of the wise of the nation must be concentrated on discerning these two foundations (from which together the world is built, human society is established and all longings will be uplifted) to discern their special boundaries and values and where each one is to be used; and when they must be separate, each one in its boundaries, and when they must be unified for the overall benefit."

 Rav Kook maintains that we must first clearly understand the differences between kodesh and chol before we attempt to unite them. We should not say "everything is kodesh, and we must unify everything;" rather, we must first view them separately, or the attempt to combine them will ultimately lead to internal tension. Harmony may only be achieved when both sides are first distinguished individually. A lack of clarity may lead to the combination of good and bad ideas, which will result in conflict.

 What exactly is the danger that kodesh and chol pose to each other? Both stem from the same source, supernal holiness. According to Rav Kook, they do not originate from two separate sources, but rather exist as different rungs of the same ladder. The highest source, the kodesh kodashim, is inclusive of everything. If so, what is the difference between the holy and the secular? Both worlds are connected to God. But while the world of the holy is clearly connected to God, the secular appears to be unattached to its Divine source.

 As long as we still live in the regular world of appearances, losing sight of the differences between the kodesh and chol may lead to great danger. The ability to combine them requires a higher understanding. Many mystical sects failed in that they tried too hard to achieve unity while continuing to live in the world we are used to. Our "cruel" reality still contains a "battle" between kodesh and chol. This "battle" has emerged as the secular has lost its connection to the holy, or as the "tree has lost its taste" (see previous classes). As long as the secular views itself as a means of achieving holiness, it is not dangerous. However, when the secular completely breaks its ties with the holy, and declares that it must "rule" - it must determine the fate of the world - the battle between the holy and the secular begins.

 This phenomenon is very familiar to us. We all recognize the tremendous attraction of the "secular" - and were it not for the small bit of holiness we infuse into our lives (through observing the Sabbath, learning Torah, etc.) the "external" side of life would surely dominate. The secular, however, can be "redeemed," and can receive meaning and true depth, but only with the recognition and awareness that it serves the "inner," - the holy.

 We live in two worlds; in the "beit midrash" we understand the idea of unity; elsewhere, we may find it impossible to achieve that unity. While we ought to speak of the unity between the holy and the secular, and believe in it and attempt to achieve it, we must also maintain a distinction (havdala) between kodesh and chol in our lives. In the future, there will be a "day which is completely Shabbat...forever." Then there will no longer be a need for this distinction, as there will be perfect unity, with the holy now hidden within the secular, revealed.

 However, there is a time when it is impossible to see things from the point of view of the kodesh kodashim, and it is important not to think of ourselves as being on the level of kodesh kodashim, as this can cause great problems. A certain element of realism regarding ourselves is necessary. When society is not ready to be unified, we will not be able to achieve that level, and things will remain on the level of conflict between the two worlds. Like the individual who has been outside the cave in Plato's famous parable, even if one has reached the level of kodesh kodashim, he will not necessarily be able to convince others of his position. They will perceive him as being "blinded" (by the light which he has seen outside the cave) and unable to cope with the reality which they perceive.

 As we have said, there is a danger in the total abolition of any division between the secular and the holy. The external side (chol) has a strength which can harm the delicate, internal kodesh. We must, therefore, protect the delicate from the aggressive. The more lofty a thing is, the more delicate and vulnerable it is to the aggressiveness of the lower side.

 On the other hand, the kodesh may retaliate against the chol through delegitimization. For example, a religious Jew's challenge to a secular Jew, the threat of delegitimization, may remove the secular Jew from the whole. This is more threatening even than the aggressiveness of the chol. The chol often maintains a desire for "deeper meaning," and the threat of delegitimization deprives it of that. For example, a secular person may ask, "if I fast on Yom Kippur but don't fulfill the other mitzvot, am I still a real Jew?" Another example is that of (secular) Zionism; it is removed from Jewish tradition, yet wants to be a part of its future. One may even say that secular life constantly exists with a fear of delegitimization from the ever confident holy.

 Only by distinguishing between the chol and kodesh can they both achieve a level at which they may have contact, out of a mutual understanding of importance of the other.

 On a personal level one sometimes needs to remove himself from surroundings which may interfere with his spiritual growth. Similarly, Am Yisrael was separated from the surrounding nations, who worshipped idols and were not worthy of receiving the Torah. The Rambam, for example, maintains that the purpose of the commandment to wage war against the seven Canaanite nations was so that the Jewish nation should not be influenced by them. One who desires a genuine relationship with others can only achieve his aim when the others are on a high level as well. Until then, one must maintain in one's independence and grow until the time that he reaches a level from which he can influence his surroundings. This explains the sort of distinctiveness required; one must achieve a distinctiveness born of carefulness, and not out of desire to separate oneself completely.

 This is the difference between distinctiveness (havdala) and complete separation (hafrada). Distinction is temporary, done out of necessity. The higher, holy side strives to connect once again to the secular side and to sanctify it. The solidarity and sense of responsibility remains. Furthermore, while hafrada represents a complete break, distinction entails merely keeping one's distance. In this situation, there is room for both sides to co-exist, and under the surface, secretly, each side realizes the importance of the other.

 As a religious community which lives in a secular world, we must understand two principles: the value of distance and carefulness not to get entangled and swept away by the secular world, and the will and the motivation to sanctify and to elevate it.

(This lecture summary was prepared by: Alan Gersch)