YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE #8: Rav Kook's Approach to Death (Part 1)

Rav Kook's approach to death is very difficult to grasp, because of his multiple approaches to the topic. He addresses the issue in many places, and we will study a few of these sources. Not much has been written about Rav Kook's approach to death, apart from an excellent article by Hugo Bergman in his book "Hogim U-Ma'aminim," and a recent article by Dr. Tamar Ross entitled "Immortality, Natural Law, and the Role of Human Perception" in "Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality," published by New York University.

Until now, we have encountered some of the different foundations of Rav Kook's understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul. We can put together an approach to our subject, using some of the basic concepts of Rav Kook's philosophy with which we are already familiar.

We have examined the concepts of the secular and the holy. It follows that the body parallels the secular, whereas the soul parallels the holy. Still absent, however, is a parallel to the holy of holies. We may suggest that the holy of holies parallels the "resurrection of the dead" (techiyat ha-metim), which is a combination of the body and the soul.

We have also dealt with concepts of the center and the periphery, or the tree and the fruit. The ultimate level, as we have learned, is achieved when the taste of the tree equals the taste of the fruit.

We will see that Rav Kook employs this fundamental model in his approach to death as well. Rav Kook deals with problem of the basic and the elevated. The latter, the holy or elevated, and in our case the soul, is latent. Consequently, the basic loses sight of the elevated, and decides to rule alone. When the tree thus loses its taste, it loses its life, and we bear witness to the event of death.

By combining the external and the internal, the body and the soul, we prepare ourselves for the resurrection of the dead.

The following is a summary of the entire book of the "Tanya": The focus of this life is the resurrection of the dead, which we strive to attain by redeeming all the worlds through the performance of the mitzvot, which attaches the spiritual to the physical. Rav Kook extends this approach beyond the confines of fulfilling the mitzvot.

Rav Kook writes in chapter 40 of "Orot Ha-Kodesh" (part 2, "Ha-Chayut Ha-Olamit"):

"Death is an illusion, its defilement (tum'a) is its deception; what people refer to as death is actually the epitome of life. Yet through the superficial vision into which man is plunged by following his inclination, he paints the epitome of life as a dark and dreary picture which he calls death."

If death is good, why then does the Torah fight against the defilement of death? Why is the priesthood commanded to avoid any contact with death? Rav Kook continues:

"The holy priests must shield themselves from this falsehood, so long as this lie rules the world. They must protect their eyes from this vision which engrains this mistake upon the soul, hence they shall not come into contact with the dead, they shall not defile themselves."

The Kohanim remind us of the correct perspective on death. By distancing themselves from the dead and its defilement, they protest against our mistaken view of death. Death is not bad, but rather, it is the epitome of life.

This approach is the exact opposite of that of Rav Soloveitchik z"l and his "Halakhic Man": for him, death is feared and reviled. Through learning the laws of mourning, the approach of Brisk attempted to give death objectivity, in order to free themselves from the fear of death.

Rav Kook's approach is revolutionary. If taken to an extreme, it may lead us to the danger of the approach of Far Eastern religions. Azriel Carlebach describes an Indian funeral on the banks of the Ganges. The scene of the family bidding farewell to the ashes of their deceased relative is comparable to bidding him farewell as he embarks upon a train journey. This mourning lacks the atmosphere of finality. Does this not contradict the idea of the sanctity of life?

The Nazir, editor of Orot Ha-Kodesh, organized Rav Kook's philosophy in this order on purpose; the initial shock of chapter 40 will enable us to appreciate the contents of chapters 41 and 42, in which we discover that the resurrection of the dead is the holy of holies, transcending the greatness of death. Death functions as a necessary transition to the ultimate level.

In chapter 41, Rav Kook writes (ibid.):

"The fear of death is a general sickness of man, a function of sin. Sin created death. Repentance is the sole cure to obliterate death from this world."

Because of sin, man views death as final. This is readily understandable - when man is engulfed in a world of materialism, death represents to him the final end. What is perplexing, however, is Rav Kook's statements about sin having created death. If death should be understood as the epitome of life, then, on the contrary, the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden created life!

We seem to have discovered an internal contradiction in Rav Kook's approach to death. On the one hand, chapter 40 tells us how "great" death is. Yet, on the other hand, chapter 41 relates to death as a blemish, the product of sin.

To resolve this contradiction, we must skip to a paragraph in chapter 42 (ibid.), where Rav Kook describes the level of man before and after the sin in the Garden of Eden. Before the sin, man lived on the supreme level of the unity of body and soul. The taste of the tree was like the taste of the fruit. Then, man's sin separated the body and the soul.

It is important to distinguish between three different stages: this world, the world of death, and the resurrection of the dead. Our three stages represent the levels of the secular, the holy and the holy of holies. Our view of death (the holy) depends on our point of departure. If we look down upon death from the stage of the resurrection of the dead (the holy of holies), death indeed is a retrogression. However, if we look up at death from this world (the secular), we see death as a progression. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve existed on the supreme level of the holy of holies, the level of the resurrection of the dead. When they sinned and introduced death into the world, the reality of death was a tragic retrogression. Thus we have resolved the contradiction we encountered in Rav Kook's writings.

We shall continue this topic next week.

[This lecture summary was prepared by Ilan Raanan.]