YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

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LECTURE #9: Rav Kook's Approach to Death (Part 2)

We ended last week by mentioning  
three stages or levels (this world, the world of death and the resurrection  
of the dead) that Rav Kook discusses. Let me give an example to illustrate these three levels:

Imagine a politician whose entire life centers around politics. One day, he loses his position. At first, he feels as though he's died. Gradually though, he discovers the world of spirit, of books and learning. After a while, he looks back in disgust at the world of politics, amazed that this superficial world ever attracted him. And then, one day he is called to return and lead the party. Let us imagine that he accepts. His return now is different than before. What is central and what is peripheral has been completely transformed.

These three stages are similar to the three stages of life. The first is where the body is dominant and occupies central stage. The second stage, where there is separation, allows the soul to be discovered. The third stage represents the return, where the soul returns to the body and controls it.

In chapter 41, Rav Kook describes how the average man attempts to fight death. Rav Kook declares that all man's efforts are aimed at defeating death. This is reminiscent of the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who begins his work, The Star of Redemption, with the statement that all philosophizing arises from the fear of death. Rosenzweig mocks the consolation which philosophy holds out to man. Philosophy tries to encourage him by pointing to the eternity of spiritual values, implying that death is not the final word. Rosenzweig argues that the individual can take no comfort in that, for he asks about himself, as an individual, a person - what will be with me?

What is Rav Kook's response?

One thing, Rav Kook says, is clear. The usual attempts to fight death are futile. Man attempts to fight death by maximizing his enjoyment of life, by involving himself deeper and deeper in the experiences of life. The result is that he deepens his commitment precisely in the material aspects of life, precisely in those aspects which death will attack and destroy. Man cannot elude the recognition that the beauty which he worships is destined to fade, the things he acquires are talientaransitory, and therefore that the repression of death cannot succeed. Death cannot be fought in this manner. The solution is in maximizing the soul, "from its inner source."

Man's occupation with the spiritual awakens the spiritual within him. From without, the spiritual life appears dead, empty. But the spiritual man discovers the vitality, the reality, the power, and the fullness of spirituality. Man develops confidence in the spirituality with which he is occupied. The sacred awakens the inner qualities of the man who directs himself towards it, and he gradually becomes committed to the inner, spiritual aspect of existence. Man's sense of proportion changes. He discovers a sense of depth to his life, where external things derive value from the extent they are connected to the inner world, to the world of holiness.

The inner aspects of life are spiritual, and also universal. From the external perspective, every particular stands alone. Every individual man is separated from his fellow. From the spiritual perspective, however, a man begins to perceive the underlying unity of existence. In the same manner that the scientist discovers that the multiplicity of data is based on a few general principles, spiritual man uncovers the unity of which we each are the particular manifestations. Sometimes, when I know someone very well, I understand a particular response of his differently than other people. A stranger perceives the particular response and no more. I, who know him, grasp how that response flows from the unity of his personality, and the specific response has a completely different significance for me.

Spiritual man penetrates the depths of existence and discovers eventually his own unity with the whole of reality. The deepest perception, to which such a man aspires, is to perceive God as the source of existence, who permeates and is revealed in every one of its particulars. A depth-perception of this sort has room for everything, including the external material world of particulars. Rav Kook declares that the depth-perception includes a complete world, one of soul-in-body. Therefore he states (42), "Why should not the soul cleave to the body in order to animate it eternally?"

Rav Kook aspires to an exalted world of unity, but he knows that first we must uncover the inner spiritual world. In other words, the goal is that man live a life of soul-in-body; however, not one of dependence on the body, but one of centrality of the soul.

The path taken up to this point has been one of turning towards the inner life of man in order to awaken the spiritual side of his existence.

Rav Kook also points out that the opposition to the internal life is sin. Sin arises from a debased will. A debased will is comprised of man's cravings and lusts. Lust is an alienated will, alienated from the true depths of the ego, an external will, physical, impersonal. A man's lust is a powerful force, but not an inner force. To the extent that man's lusts are dominant, there exists an alienation between the deep aspect of his existence, between his soul, and the external aspect, his body. If we wish to re-create the unity of body and soul, we must bring his will to act in accord with the inner direction - and the inner direction of a holy individual is directed to the profoundest depths - to God. The conclusion is that the unified personality is one who binds within itself the internal and external, centered on the internal world - and in this way it overcomes death. This is the great "tikkun", the great rectification, to which Rav Kook aspires. He knows that no single individual can rectify the original sin, and that therefore a whole series of rectifications are necessary, but the path, the direction, is clear.

It is noteworthy that Rav Kook is aware of the danger for the average man in emphasizing the spiritual. He states that in our day love of life stems from the imaginary fear of death. In other words, the feeling of fear of death as oblivion provides the energy and the power of the life in this world. Rav Kook is hinting at the fact that in Eastern cultures a preoccupation with the spiritual often results in a disregard for human life, for life in this world.

From this, it follows that there is a benefit in the distorted conception of death held by man. Hence, the lengthy educational process we have outlined requires a deep and profound struggle. To illustrate this, let me return to our example of the politician from the beginning of the lecture.

Our politician returns finally to the life of politics. We continue to wonder, however - can he really and seriously return to his previous life? Is it not superficial and trivial in his eyes?

The educational process we are describing has as its goal that the external world shall be indeed secondary in importance, relative to the internal, but nonetheless be imbued with importance, with value and mission. Our politician will perform his job with seriousness and commitment - based, this time, on an enthusiasm for values and not personal honor and prestige.