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 #15: ANOTHER EXPLANATION OF KEFIRA

Orot Para. 47

 In the previous lecture, we discussed two causes for the dominance of the material, practical side of life. The first reason is clear: Man consists of body and soul, two sides, both of which need to achieve fulfillment. The same is true for a nation. In this world, it is impossible to imagine a wholly spiritual nature. The two thousand years of exile of the Jewish people are the equivalent, on the national level, of being a soul without a body. It is like the life of the soul after death in the next world. The return to the Land of Israel is a return to the body; it is a kind of resurrection. It is therefore understandable that it would be accompanied by an eager embrace of materialism, of a kind of simple naturalism, together with a return to the soil and bodily health, after such a long period where all this was totally absent.

 Rav Kook claims that this is a temporary situation. The proper balance between the spiritual and the material will naturally reassert itself in time. This is the first cause.

 The second cause of secularism appears, on first glance, to be the opposite of the first. People abandon Torah and mitzvot because they are searching for something greater. Paradoxically, it is precisely the greatness of the modern Jew which leads him downward, away from the divine. He is seeking something more sublime, more lofty and exalted. Religion appears to them to be limited and unsatisfactory.

 How can both of these tendencies be explained simultaneously? Is non-observance the characteristic of materialistic individuals compensating for an excess of spirituality in galut, or of elevated spiritual individuals disappointed with the spirituality being offered them?

 One might answer, of course, that there exist both distinct types and the rise of secularism is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon. But I would suggest that it is possible to understand Rav Kook's analysis as two strata of one basic situation. On the first level, there are two worlds, one of spirit and one of body, a world of the holy and a world of the secular. Since both are important, both part of the whole, any deprivation of one incurs a necessary compensation.

 However, on a deeper, more inward, level, the picture is totally unified, with only one cause behind the process, and not two different aspects. What is the manner in which one principle underlies both the material and the spiritual? On the first level, we saw two distinct and even opposing aspects.

 The answer is that superficially our generation appears to be characterised by an absence of holiness and spirituality. However, they haven't really disappeared; rather, they are hidden, buried deep in the recesses of the soul. Rav Kook does not explain why this has happened. We can perhaps suggest the explanation offered above - people are disappointed with conventional answers. In any event, the force of this buried holiness is immense, and it cannot be contained in the recesses of the soul. It seeks to break out, and, not finding a spiritual course, does so in the realm of practical life, by driving man to build and transform the material world. This activity lays the foundation of life in this world, foundations that ultimately will serve as the basis for a world of holiness, as soon as the inner inhibitions will be removed and the buried yearnings for holiness will burst forth directly without being sublimated.

 There is a fascinating correspondence between this position of Rav Kook and the Freudian theory of sublimation. Rav Kook does not speak of the unconscious, but of the recesses of the soul. However, the process is similar - a repressed force is active, indirectly, and causes effects in the external world. There is, of course, a crucial difference between the Freudian perception of a mental disorder that needs to be treated and Rav Kook's description of an inner process which naturally corrects itself and results in ultimate existential harmony.

 There is one place where Rav Kook describes the aspiration to holiness which doesn't succeed in expressing itself as resulting in destruction and catastrophe. He speaks of "great souls" whose source is the "world of chaos" ("olam tohu"). Their inner power, the total ideological commitment, and the ensuing disillusionment with the world that has disappointed them leads not to construction but to a destructive impulse, seeking to wipe out everything, everything which seems based on lesser principles. The "light" of these souls is greater than the capacity of the vessels which must contain them, and the result is destruction.

 The mission of the righteous, both according to the model of sublimated construction and the second model of destruction, is to always understand the process, to perceive that in both cases the underlying cause is sublime and lofty, to increase the scope of spiritual answers, to widen the channels of holiness and to justify and legitimatise any "tikkun," any constructive act, both spiritual and material. These therapeutic acts will result in the uncovering of the hidden thirst for holiness, the light of redemption.

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