YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT(VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

Based on a shiur by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE #17: Heresy V

Review

In the previous lecture, we saw how R. Kook recognizes heresy as a tool which can help believers purify and refine their faith. The challenge of heresy shatters inaccurate or undesirable models of God, and this can enable the religious community to progress to a fuller and more truthful understanding of God. Atheism cannot deny God's existence per se; it is unable to fight against God Himself. Rather it acts to destroy Man's representations of God.

Religious Crisis

Confronting God can be an enjoyable and enriching experience for Man. However, if a person's confrontation is based on a misconception of God, this can lead to crisis. This crisis may eventually result in a denial of God's existence.

A Supernatural Force

God is commonly described as a Supernatural Force. It is this common perception of God which R. Kook believes to be erroneous and thus dangerous. To understand why, we shall use an allegory.

There was once a very important and charismatic guru, who was surrounded by completely devoted, impressionable followers. They would listen eagerly to every word the guru uttered, analyzing and passing it on to others, and diligently obeying the guru's wishes. One day, a stranger happened to overhear a group of followers sitting round, excitedly telling one another stories about their guru. This irritates him, and he challenges them: stop idolizing and being idle, go and do something! Go and become gurus yourselves!

The followers are not only nourished by their connection with the guru, but they are also restricted by it; it impedes their personal development. They are dim, flickering candles overwhelmed by a blazing bonfire; their light is insignificant in the unavoidable comparison and they despair of their own ability. Some members of the group become inspired by the prospect of an independent, creatively fulfilling lifestyle without the imposing figure of the guru at its center. They break away from the group.

So it is with God. If God is an entity separate from and foreign to the Human soul, then Man confronting God may well feel threatened. When faced with His tremendous power, Man feels suffocated and repressed, his creativity strangled, his ego belittled. Nothing he can do will ever be significant. In order to be one of the faithful, you must be submissive, accepting, passive. An individual seeking true free spirit must escape from God, because worshipping a Supernatural Force is stifling.

The Failure of Classical Monotheism

The theological system represented by this allegory is known as transcendental monotheism. In this classical view of God, an I-Thou relationship exists between creature and Creator, where God is other to the Human self: a bonfire surrounded by candles. When presented with an omnipotent Being, Man cannot but annul his ego in the face of divine infinity. In a world filled by God's greatness, there is no room for personal growth. This is so threatening that it leads to a rejection of God, and atheism.

When faced with a Supernatural Force, Man naturally begins to struggle. It is in Man's essence to wish himself free of the constraint of this external Power which squashes his self. Nietzsche sums up this tension: If there is a God, how can he be other than me? Rav Kook names this phenomenon "Divine Envy" - the inability of Man to accept that there is an extra-corporeal entity next to which he is seemingly irrelevant. This unwillingness leads to an instinctive disbelief in God. (See Orot HaKodesh, volume 2, page 397.)

Pantheism

In a volume of eulogies -"Eder Ha-Yakar" - written for his father-in-law, Rav Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim (Aderet), Rav Kook has a pamphlet - "Ikvei HaTzon." In this collection of articles there is an article entitled "Da'at Elokim." Here Rav Kook discusses a metaphysical paradigm diametrically opposed to that of Transcendental Monotheism: Pantheism - an approach associated with Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Pantheism has as its central dogma "Deus sive natura" - God is nature.

Against this, Rav Kook claims that if God is identified with existence, reality itself becomes divine. Superficially, this does not appear problematic; indeed Spinoza seems to be very religious - he has succeeded in sanctifying all of the profane! In reality, though, he has desecrated the holy and the idea becomes a farce. As soon as one enters this mindset, the God idea loses all its significance. If everything is holy, nothing is. When God is not to an extent removed from mundane reality, where there is no ontological ladder for Man to climb, there is no spiritual challenge and there can be no spiritual growth. If the spiritual hierarchy is deleted, religion is null and the God idea worthless. Judaism cannot accept such a concept of God.

Panentheism

Having rejected Transcendence and Pantheism as problematic theological models, Rav Kook favors a third alternative, panentheism, meaning the world is in God. (Pantheism = all is God; Panentheism = all is in God.)

Taking transcendence as our starting point, we have already seen how it suggests a threatening view of God. Rav Kook points out that God is only threatening if we consider him to be foreign. If, however, we cease to relate to God as other and create a genuine contact between the divine Spirit and the Human soul, this problem vanishes. Panentheism is a middle-ground between Transcendence and Pantheism: everything that is, is in God; however, God is not everything that is. Man, therefore, is a revelation of God and in order to spiritually develop, to become more existentially significant, Man must connect with God. Man ought to view himself as a divine revelation, not an independent entity cowering in the face of divinity. To grow, we must boost the extent to which we are a divine revelation.

Divine Envy is gone. A parent is not jealous of his child, because the child is an extension of the parent: it is impossible for one part of a body to be jealous of another part. Likewise, Man should not be envious of God. God is not Other. The Human soul is not a candle, rather its only source of strength is the glow it receives from the distant divine light. The only way to strengthen that faint glow is by coming ever closer to the Godly source of the Divine Light.

It is comparable to a leaf. Once the leaf "recognizes" that it is one part of a greater entity called a tree, it "knows" that to thrive - to become a better, stronger leaf - it must enhance its connection to the trunk- its source of life. The trunk cannot be seen as an external, threatening force; the leaf competes with other leaves, but competing with the trunk is not only futile, but potentially lethal!!

So it is with humanity. We are nothing more than leaves attached to a divine trunk. God has ceased to be other, and the idea that God stifles our independence is ridiculous. God provides us with the means to fully develop our selves, thus enabling us to recognize our independence and uniqueness.

Panentheism is fundamentally different from Pantheism in that here, nature is merely a limb of a far greater divine Being, and not an equivalence. There is, explains Rav Kook, a higher divine Source. There remains a spiritual ladder which we must try to climb, a metaphysical hierarchy in which Man is towards the bottom. Only by moving up this spiritual ladder and connecting with God can we enrich our egos.

Making the Connection

Being aware of the relationship between mankind and God is only preliminary groundwork. The challenge is to achieve closeness to God. Rav Kook describes two routes by which a soul's connection to the supernal divine light can be improved. The first is common in Eastern mysticism, and involves working with one's consciousness, one's thought, one's spirit. The second is found more in the Western tradition (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and emphasizes the importance of behavior and ethics.

The first method is internal. To merge with the divine mystery a person sits, contemplates and meditates, and ultimately comes to a cognitive appreciation that he is a leaf on the tree of spirituality, a part connected to the infinite divine existence. By thinking and eventually understanding the essence of the supernatural, the mystic has achieved closeness to God.

Rav Kook, however, seems to prefer an alternative process, which he calls Ethical Progress. By utilizing free will and choosing the path of Good, ,man approaches God. By learning to want to choose Good, we can climb the ladder of free will and unite with God.

Rav Kook adds to the standard concept of Imitatio Dei. Ethical behavior as an expression of free will is not simply an external veneer, but effects an internal revolution. Spiritual metamorphosis occurs not only via meditative recognition of fundamental truths, but is also triggered by an individual's decision to conduct himself according to correct ethical principles. In this way man can spiritually ascend and simultaneously deepen his personality by genuinely connecting with God. Walking in the way of God, according to Rav Kook, is not only a prescription how one should act, but grants man actual ontological closeness to God.

The question remains: why does Rav Kook prefer the less direct process of behavioral ethics over the seemingly more spiritual one of contemplative meditation? The reasons are twofold:

First, it is a more far-reaching process. The mystic hides away, cut off from the world, and through mental activity procures internal improvement. The ethical-behavior system, however, is broader in that it facilitates connecting not just individuals to God, but the whole world. By choosing the path of God, you influence others and perfect the whole of surrounding existence.

Second, there is a unique character to free will. At some point, human beings have the power to exercise their freedom and decide how to behave. Rav Kook feels that the genuine route to God is paved by the freedom of action that God grants to mankind.

Summary

Rav Kook sees the phenomenon of atheism as originating from two extreme views of God: God is other and thus threatening, therefore I must escape from Him; God is nature and hence irrelevant to my life. The correct view is that God is connected to the world, but distant, and we must strive to connect to Him (although we can never fully reach Him). The preferred method to do this is by ethical behavior. It is this that will lead to "tikkun olam" - perfecting the world.

(This lecture summary was prepared by: Benjamin Ellis)

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For direct questions or comments to the list coordinator, please send email to rkook@etzion.org.il .

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