YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THe Purpose of creation and the Mission of man**

**In Jewish thought**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 10: The Purpose of Creation in the Thought of Rabbi Chasdai Crescas (1)**

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas lived in Spain and was a student of Rabbeinu Nissim (Ran), a colleague of Rabbi Yitzchak ben Sheshet (Rivash), and the teacher of Rabbi Yosef ibn Chabiv (*Nimukei Yosef*). His students include several major thinkers, the most prominent among them being Rabbi Yosef Albo, author of *Sefer Ikarim*, but it is important to know that some of his students were also halakhic authorities. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas is known primarily for his philosophical work, but he was also a great Talmudist and halakhist. He writes in his introduction to *Or Hashem* (*The Light of the Lord*)that it was intention to author two books – one on Jewish thought and one halakhic – each of which would present an alternative to the Rambam. His halakhic book was to serve as an alternative to the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, as he saw several shortcomings in its structure and editorial style. For example, the omission of the names of the speakers and the dissenting opinions mentioned in the Mishna and Gemara, as well as the wording of *halakhot* as localized rulings for specific cases, without explaining the halakhic principles that underlie those rulings, which would enable ruling in other cases as well. We will now see how he disagreed with the Rambam in his conceptual worldview.

Rabbi Crescas's book, *Or Hashem*, represents a dramatic turning point in the history of Jewish philosophy. Most of the thinkers who preceded him accepted the fundamental assumptions of Greek philosophy, especially the views of Aristotle, and tried to reconcile Jewish principles with those ideas. Almost every basic principle of the Jewish faith was re-explained in order to reconcile it with Aristotle's principles, even if the correspondence was not total and included certain reservations. The most prominent example of this is the Rambam's book, *Moreh Nevukhim*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. At the beginning of the second part of that book, the Rambam explicitly presents Aristotelian premises as axioms, without proving them (not because they cannot be proven in his opinion, but in order not to enter into prolonged philosophical discussions that are not relevant to the book). After a few chapters of presenting only the philosophical premises, he uses them to prove the existence of God. Later he also confronts Aristotle, disagreeing with him on certain points, but the entire discussion is conducted based on the fundamental assumptions that he made.

In contrast, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas makes a move that no Jewish thinker ever made before him: he takes Aristotle's principles, one after the other, first explaining in detail what led Aristotle to that conclusion (something that did not appear in the words of the Rambam) and then systematically challenging the principle. He refutes Aristotelian premises with rational tools. Regarding many issues, Rabbi Crescas's claim sounds more logical than that of Aristotle; for example, Rabbi Crescas argues that space is infinite, against Aristotle's position that space is finite.

Rabbi Crescas was the first to question the entire philosophical system, opening it up to new possibilities. (He was preceded to a certain extent by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, who criticizes philosophy in several places in his *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, but Rabbi Yehuda Halevi does not argue to the same extent, nor through such a systematic discussion of all the philosophical premises.) Rabbi Crescas's approach as expressed in *Or Hashem* was not initially accepted by all, but subsequent generations brought other thinkers who, following in his footsteps, allowed themselves to challenge the basic assumptions that had been accepted until then – until the world of Jewish thought was eventually freed from Aristotelian limits.

*Or Hashem* is a very organized book, but similar to some of the other thinkers we have studied, it does not contain an organized discussion of the purpose of creation. It does, however, discuss the purpose of the Torah, and from that, the purpose of man; we can learn from these discussions about his perspective on the purpose of creation.

**The Purpose is Not Intellectual Perfection**

*Or Hashem* opens the discussion with the assertion that a single purpose must be found for all of existence:

We need to investigate the ultimate purpose of this Torah.... (*Or Hashem*, part 2, section 6, chapter 1)

Though no names are mentioned, it is reasonable to assume that this assertion is directed toward the Rambam, who opposed the search for a single purpose for all of existence. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas first discusses the possibility that actions alone lead to the purpose, and then the possibility that the purpose of man is perfect intellectual attainment. He rejects this possibility, thereby placing himself in opposition to the school of Jewish philosophy that focuses on intellectual attainment. Each of the thinkers belonging to that school emphasized the importance of reason in a different measure, but it is clear that the Rambam stood at their center. Rabbi Crescas does not explicitly attack him, but simply says: "Since the feet of some of the sages of our nation have already stumbled on this," and these words are certainly directed primarily against the position of the Rambam.

Similar to Rav Saadya Gaon, Rabbi Chasdei Crescas checks his words against both reason and Torah sources, and for him as well, the two channels come together. For him, the order is first study of the sources, and only afterwards, rational discussion. This is not only an issue of methodology, but also a statement of principle – that the basis of discussion is the Torah. We do not approach a question from the perspective of human reason, draw conclusions, and then consider how to reconcile the Torah with them. Rather, the Torah is the source; reason comes after it.

Rabbi Crescas raises several difficulties from the sources. His wording is difficult to understand, and I will quote only an excerpt:

Indeed, the perfection of the mind was already considered more essential for this purpose. It is impossible not to expand on the explanation of this matter, since, it seems to us, the feet of some of the sages of our nation have already stumbled on this. Through this we will try to understand the true purpose of this Torah.

I will say that it is agreed among them that the intellect becomes strengthened through acquisition of rational ideas, bringing into being the acquired intellect, unmixed with the potential intellect. As it is distinct from the potential intellect, it having come into being anew, it will remain eternal. Since it does not have causes of loss – as is explained in *Metaphysics*, that matter is the cause of loss and evil – therefore, eternal success pertains to acquired ideas. The more ideas we attain, the greater will be the success, and all the more so when the ideas are more valuable in themselves.

It is also agreed upon among them that anyone who has achieved intellectual enlightenment will rejoice and delight after death with what he has achieved. They have assumed this based on the pleasant feeling in our lives when we comprehend ideas; all the more so after death, when we will comprehend them together continuously. From this it follows that there is no relationship between the pleasant feeling obtained from the lesser ideas and that obtained from the superior ideas, for the pleasant feeling that comes from them in our lives is very different.

This is what they generally agree upon, though we have found a difference between them… And these opinions, besides destroying the Torah and uprooting the roots of tradition, are clearly deficient based on rational investigation.

That they destroy the principles of the Torah and tradition is evident in [multiple] aspects; among them, that according to the principles of the Torah and tradition, a person achieves eternal life through performance of *mitzvot*, as it is stated explicitly in the Mishna (*Kiddushin* 1:10): "He who performs one mitzvais well rewarded," and the Gemara explains that this refers to the good that is stored away for the righteous. And behold, according to these [philosophers’] opinions, the practical *mitzvot* are merely a setting for ideas, and if the mind is not strengthened with them, then there is no advantage to performing the *mitzvot*.

And [also] among these [aspects]: that according to the Torah and tradition, among the practical *mitzvot* and prohibitions there are special matters of reward and punishment, which would be impossible according to those opinions. Regarding reward – you might say those who sacrifice their lives for the sanctification of God's name, like they said: "Those martyred in Lod, no one can stand within their barrier" (*Pesachim* 50a). This is not conditioned on their having become strong in ideas, and if they were thus strengthened, what is added by the death of their bodies? Regarding punishment – such as slanderers and informers and he who puts his fellow to shame in public, about whom it is known by tradition that they do not have a share in the world-to-come. Now, if their minds were strengthened with ideas, it would be impossible [according to these philosophers] for them not to remain eternal, unless God were to innovate a miracle with them to punish that acquired intellect, which by nature should remain eternal, and cause it to perish. The heretics, as well, who are included in this category, e.g., one who denied one of the principles of tradition, such as one who says resurrection of the dead is not in the Torah – if his mind became strengthened with other ideas, granted that the idea that he denied, because of which he is deemed a heretic, is not eternal, but why shouldn't his other ideas be eternal [according to these philosophers]? Yet according to the true tradition, he has no share in the world-to-come.

And [also] among these [aspects]: that it is already known and accepted in the nation that the degree of delight and distress of one's soul corresponds to the quantity of one's merits and sins – as we have received, by tradition and in many *midrashim*, the idea of the Garden of Eden and *Gehinom*. But according to these opinions, reward and punishment relate exclusively to the continuance or loss of the acquired intellect, and nothing else…

And [also] among these [aspects]: that according to *Chazal*, the ultimate goal is the practical part, as appears in their words (*Kiddushin* 40b) that some of them said practice is greater, and the end they concluded that study is greater, because study leads to practice – behold, they placed the practical as the ultimate purpose of the rational.

From all these aspects, it is clearly apparent that these opinions run counter to the roots and principles of the Torah. (*Or Hashem*, part II, section 6, chapter 1)​

Rabbi Crescas objects to the argument that intellectual achievement leads to human perfection and thus entitles a person to the life of the world-to-come and to the eternity of his soul. He cites sources according to which it is possible to reach the world-to-come through observance of practical *mitzvot*, and not necessarily through intellectual attainment. Among other things, he cites the statement that "study is greater, for it leads to practice" (*Kiddushin* 40b). In addition, he cites sources from *Chazal* in which a single moment of self-sacrifice led to a place in the world-to-come, even though it was not accompanied by any type of intellectual transformation. For example, "Those martyred in Lod, no one can stand within their barrier" (*Pesachim* 50a). He brings another proof from school children, who are considered as being on a particularly high level, even though their intellectual level is low. In the opposite direction, there are people whose intellectual level is high, but according to the Sages, this does not entitle them to the world-to-come. Even the Rambam himself agrees that one who understands the Torah intellectually, but denies the foundations of the faith, has no part in the world-to-come – which may be difficult within his fundamental position. Rabbi Crescas further objects that it is implicit in the words of *Chazal* that punishment is administered actively against the wicked, and is not just as the automatic result of failure to achieve intellectual perfection.

Apart from the difficulties from the sources, Rabbi Crescas raises many rational arguments against the view that the ultimate goal is intellectual achievement. After a lengthy philosophical analysis, he comes to the conclusion that according to the approach of the philosophers, it emerges that the perfection is of the intellect, not of the person himself.

From all of these arguments, Rabbi Crescas arrives at harsh criticism towards philosophy and those who follow its path:

These opinions were made up by the philosophers, as if the nature of truth compelled them to believe in the eternity of the souls, and they thought thoughts, and came up with many empty ideas. And some of the wise men of our nation were drawn after them, and they did not notice nor did it occur to them how they were destroying with this the wall of the structure of the Torah and breaching its fences, while the matter itself has no support.

Rabbi Crescas's words present an acute question: Why did almost no one before him challenge these basic assumptions? Why was he the only one to recognize the fallacy in all the philosophers' claims? Rabbi Crescas presents the philosophers as "believers" in Aristotle, as it were. They do not raise objections against him, not because his position is indeed established and proven, but because they are committed to his approach, and follow him with blind faith.

**The Purpose: Love of God**

What, then, is the purpose of man? From a simple religious view, the purpose of man is to keep the Torah and the *mitzvot*; a person must observe the *mitzvot*, and thereby he will attain perfection. However, such a statement does not suffice for Rabbi Crescas, because he is looking for one complete purpose that encompasses everything, not a purpose that is actually a collection of many separate tasks. The purpose he identifies is love of God!

And when we investigated it and its parts, we found in it a small portion of wisdom, great in quality, that is neither wholly opinions nor wholly actions, namely, true love and fear of God. I say that this must be the ultimate purpose according to the Torah and tradition and according to rational examination itself. As for the Torah, surely the verse states: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 10:12); and it is stated: "In that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways" (ibid. 30:16); and it is stated: "To love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him" (ibid. 30:20). This love is also mentioned in the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven [i.e., the recitation of *Shema*]: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (ibid. 6:5).

The purpose is not found in the actions in and of themselves, nor in reason in and of itself, but in a third realm that is in the middle – the emotional realm. The Rambam linked love to knowledge, but according to Rabbi Crescas, intellectual knowledge is not necessary in order to love God. Even if there is a connection between love and reason, love in its essence is not intellectual. It is a matter of emotion and desire, which is a different channel in its very essence.

Rabbi Crescas also emphasizes that we are dealing with mutual love; some have talked about the love of God and focused on our love for Him, but Rabbi Crescas talks about His love for us as well. Rabbi Crescas refers to the recitation of *Shema* and its blessings, in which we first bless regarding God's love for us and His choosing of us (in the blessing "*Ahavat olam*" or "*Ahava rabba*"), after which comes acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and afterwards, the obligation to love God: "And you shall love the Lord your God." This is a mutual relationship; God loves us, and based on this, we are to love Him. According to Rabbi Crescas, God's love for us is even greater than our love for Him, for our relationship to him is called love [*ahava*], while His relationship to us is called desire [*cheshek*], expressing a deeper love: "Only the Lord desired [*chashak*]your fathers to love them" (*Devarim* 10:15).

Now we will have to clarify, as we did with respect to the earlier positions we saw, whether Rabbi Crescas only offers a local answer to the question of the purpose of man – or whether his approach stems from a conception of God that reflects the purpose of creation.

(Translated by David Strauss)