YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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

**In Jewish thought**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 15: The Purpose of Creation in the Thought of the Maharal (4) – Conclusion**

To conclude our discussion of the Maharal, we will move on to the dimension of man's service of God, as it derives from the purpose of creation, and examine two issues within that service: *mitzvot* and prayer.

**The Reasons for the *Mitzvot***

Regarding reasons for the *mitzvot*, the Maharal, in a manner that is relatively unusual for him, refers to two approaches that preceded him and rejects them both. Usually, he brings only his own approach, and even when he discusses the approaches of other Jewish authorities, he does not mention them by name. Here, however, he explicitly mentions the opinions of the Rambam and the Ramban.

One of the main points of discussion regarding reasons for the *mitzvot* begins with the following *mishna*:

If one [while praying] says: "May Your mercies extend to a bird's nest," "Be Your name mentioned for well-doing," or "Give thanks, give thanks [i.e., repeating the word *modim* instead of saying it once]," he is silenced. (*Berakhot* 5:3)

One of the explanations given by the Gemara for the prohibition to say "May Your mercies extend to a bird's nest," is that in so doing "he presents the measures taken by the Holy One, blessed be He, as springing from compassion, whereas they are but decrees" (*Berakhot* 33b). The Rambam in his *Guide for the Perplexed* understands this to mean that according to the *Tanna* of this *mishna*, the Torah's commandments are decrees that have no reasons. The Rambam himself disagrees with this position, arguing that it is a sole dissenting opinion among the *Tannaim* and that we follow the opinion that says the commandments do have reasons. The Ramban (*Devarim* 22:6) disagrees with the Rambam's interpretation and says that even according to this *mishna*, the commandments have reasons; however, their goal is not mercy for the world's creatures, but correction of man himself. In the case of the mitzvaof sending away the mother bird before taking its young, the goal is not mercy for the bird but our own moral development.

The Maharal disagrees with both of these approaches:

The Rambam wrote in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (III, 48) that the reason for the mitzvaof sending away the mother bird is with the eggs over which the bird sits, and the young that are in need of their mother – in most cases, there is reason to leave it all alone, because what he would be taking is, as a rule, unfit for food. If the Torah is concerned about such grief in cattle or birds, how much more so regarding people! You should not object based on what they said: "If one says: 'May Your mercies extend to a bird's nest,' [he is silenced]," for it is one of the two opinions mentioned by us, namely, that the Torah's commandments have no other reason but the Divine will – and we follow the other opinion. Thus far the Rambam.

The truth is that these words are very difficult, to say about a *mishna* that was taught without dispute, and the *Amoraim* explained its reasoning, and we have not seen or heard anyone raising an objection against it, and it is also taught as is in tractate *Megilla* (25a), to say that it is all not in accordance with the *halakha* – and all the more so when it is a matter relating [not to practice, but] to belief.

And the Ramban in *Parashat Ki Tetzei* (*Devarim* 22:6) elaborated extensively on this matter and said that the reason for the mitzvato send away the mother bird is so that we should not become cruel, as he wrote at length there. He explained the reason of the mitzvaof "it and its young" (*Vayikra* 22:28) in similar fashion, that we should not become cruel. This is his position regarding the *mitzvot* that God commanded the people whom He chose, to establish in them good attributes, for their benefit – without Him receiving any good from this, but just to benefit us. This is the foundation of his position.

While it is not appropriate to criticize the great rabbi, nevertheless, it is Torah, and we need to study it, because with this too my mind is not at rest, and my spirit is not at peace in my heart. This is because it does not explain the position of the one [in the Gemara] who says [the reason for sending away the mother bird is] so that he not create jealousy among the acts of creation, that he not cause discord and division among His creatures, that He commanded that we should not be cruel to this one, but He did not command about the other one. While it could be argued that this is not jealousy among the acts of creation, because it comes not from God, but from man, that He commanded man not to be cruel with this one, but He did not command him about the other one, nevertheless, we have not gotten ourselves out of this question, for why did He command us about this creature, and not about another one…

But from the words of the Sages, it would seem that we should not say that the *mitzvot* that were given by God are for the benefit of the receiver, namely, man, but rather they are decrees from God, who issues decrees on His people, like a king who issues decrees on his people. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, 6)

The Maharal protests vehemently against the Rambam's position. This accords with his fundamental view that the words of *Chazal* are the basis of our worldview, and if we do not understand them, we must deal with them and not reject them. In his opinion, we cannot possibly accept the Rambam's approach to reject an explicit *mishna* and say that we do not follow it. The Ramban's approach is also unacceptable to the Maharal, because it reflects an assumption that the world is deficient and God had to give us *mitzvot* in order to correct and fill in gaps in it. Since the world was created in accordance with the will of God, there should be no need for *mitzvot* that are intended for correction. Therefore, the Maharal's position is that the commandments come not for our benefit, but for the glory of God. God did not command us to perform the *mitzvot* for us, to improve our lives in some way, but so that we would accept His kingship and do the King's will.

This approach parallels the Maharal's approach to the issue of the purpose of creation The Maharal rejects the possibility that the world was created in order to do good to its creatures, arguing that this reason does not suffice to explain all of creation, and therefore we must say that everything was created to reveal the honor of God. Regarding the reasons for the *mitzvot*, as well, he rejects the possibility that their purpose is to benefit man, and argues instead that they are meant to reveal the kingdom of God. It is not about us, but about the King. The purpose of creation is that there be a world that reveals the King's kingship.

The Maharal goes on to clarify a significant point:

Although it is true that from this, namely, from the fact that one fulfills the decree that was decreed upon him, there ensues for him good and the utmost success, nevertheless, the decree was not initially given for the benefit of the receiver. That which is stated in the verse: "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always" (*Devarim* 6:24) – the meaning is not that God commanded the *mitzvot* in order to benefit us, for that is incorrect. Rather, He commanded us like a king who issues an edict, only that this edict is to our benefit, that He might preserve us alive, as it is to this day [an allusion to *Devarim* 6:24]. And that which is stated: "The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to confer merit upon Israel, and therefore He increased for them Torah and *mitzvot*"(*Makkot* 23b) – it means that because they have many decrees, therefore they have many merits. About this there is agreement in the Gemara in several places, and it is a great principle in the Gemara, upon which several laws were built. For they said in many places that the *mitzvot* of the Torah were not given for our enjoyment; rather they were given as decrees. And therefore they said (*Rosh Ha-shana* 28a) that one who is forbidden by vow to have enjoyment from a shofar is permitted to blow it, and one who is forbidden by vow to have enjoyment from his neighbor, that other person is permitted to blow shofar for him, and one who is forbidden by vow to have enjoyment from a spring is permitted to perform ritual immersion in it. There are many other such examples in the Gemara, and the reason in all cases is that the *mitzvot* of the Torah were not given for our enjoyment, but only as a burden on a person… But certainly the *mitzvot* are upon us like a king who commands his people, as we have explained.

In practice, the commandments are indeed beneficial and make a person better. Since God is good, His commandments are good and bring good to man, and therefore the verse in *Devarim* says that the *mitzvot* are "for our good" – but our benefit is not their fundamental purpose .

The Maharal points out that in the creation story, in chapter 1 of *Bereishit*, we find only the name *Elokim*, which signifies the Divine attribute of justice. If the purpose of the world were benefaction, we would expect to find the Tetragrammaton, which signifies the Divine attribute of mercy. Hence, the creation is intended to reveal the kingdom of God, but since God is good and upright, His kingdom manifests in the world in a way that is consistent with Divine justice and uprightness.

On this point, the Maharal differs from those who argue that the *mitzvot* have no content (as was argued, for example, by Yeshayahu Leibowitz). The *mitzvot* are good, and they derive from Divine truth and uprightness, but it is impossible to say that their entire purpose is for the greater good of man. We have already seen that the Maharal did not categorically reject the opinion of the *Or Hashem*,that the world is a revelation of Divine benefaction; rather, he agrees in principle with the statement that the way of the perfect is to benefit, but also argues that this does not suffice to serve as the purpose of creation. Similarly, regarding the question of reasons for *mitzvot*, the Maharal maintains that the *mitzvot* bring good, that they are not arbitrary but are logical and upright. Their purpose, however, is revealing the honor of God, not benefitting man.

**The Reason for Prayer**

A similar principle appears in the Maharal's explanation of the essence of prayer. The Maharal discusses prayer in *Netivot Olam*, in the section entitled *Netiv ha-Avoda*. He begins that section with a discussion of Divine service through sacrifices:

"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but the prayer of the upright is His will" (*Mishlei* 15:8). King Shlomo, peace be upon him, comes to say about service that is directed to God, that one should not say that He desires this service because He receives some benefit from it. For were He to receive benefit from the service, it would make no difference to Him from whom He receives the benefit, from an evil man or from a good man. But for God,, this is not the case, for the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. If so, the service is not for the benefit of God, but exclusively for the benefit of man.

Because this service is exclusively for the benefit of man, “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination,” because God does not want the wicked to benefit, “but the prayer of the upright is His will,” because prayer is also service of God, and that is His will.

Perhaps you will object: If so, that the service brings no benefit to God, why did He command about this service, that one should bring a sacrifice to God?

This is not a question, because even though this matter is not for the benefit of God, nevertheless, the person dedicates himself to God. And even if he does not give his life for Him, but only his money, offering a sacrifice to Him, nevertheless, this too is considered as dedicating himself to Him, when he offers his money to Him. And this is called service [*avoda*], because a slave [*eved*] is owned by his master, and he and his money all belong to his lord, and therefore, when a person brings an offering to Him, he demonstrates that he is His like a slave who is owned by his master, and therefore this is called service to God when he brings a sacrifice to Him…

This also demonstrates that He is one, and there is none other, for when one sacrifices an offering to Him, that shows that everything is His, and since everything is His, if so, there is none other, and God is one. If this were not the case, it would have been possible to say that there is another apart from Him, but the offering that is offered to Him demonstrates that He is everything and there is none other, and thus God is one.

And for this reason, regarding all the sacrifices, mention is made only of the Tetragrammaton, and no other Divine name, and all this is because by way of the service, it becomes evident that He is one and there is none other, as we have explained. This also demonstrates that God is perfect, with ultimate perfection, and removed from all deficiency.

Because were there, God forbid, another apart from Him, He would be lacking that other, and thus He would be deficient, God forbid. When we serve Him, everything is His, and when everything is His, there is no deficiency, because He is everything and lacking nothing.

Therefore it is stated about the sacrifices: "My offerings, My food [lit. bread], [which is presented to Me] as offerings made by fire, of a sweet savor to Me" (*Bamidbar* 28:2). For when a person has no food, he is lacking, and food is his completion, until he is not lacking. Therefore the sacrifices are called "My offerings," indicating His perfection, "My food, as offerings made by fire," indicating that He lacks nothing. (*Netiv ha-Avoda* 1)

The Maharal's words here seem to be the opposite of what we have seen so far. He rules out the possibility that the service of God is for a Divine need, and explains that it is for a human need. The Maharal clarifies why it cannot be said that the service comes to satisfy a Divine need – because this is an idolatrous concept. Unlike the idolaters, who prayed to please their gods, the God of Israel does not need anything and does not gain anything from prayer – and therefore, He does not desire the prayers of the wicked. If He would receive any personal benefit from the sacrifices, then He would have an interest in the sacrifices of the wicked as well. "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but the prayer of the upright is His will," because He does not need the sacrifice or prayer themselves, and the question is only whether the person is upright or wicked. All of this seems contrary to the Maharal's position that the world was not created for a human need, but for a Divine need.

"But the prayer of the upright is His will" – even though the prayer that he asks of God is for his own benefit, like every prayer, nevertheless this service of the upright, the prayer, is God's will. It will be further explained below. One should not ask: How is it possible to say that prayer is service of God? Surely, this service is in order to receive a reward, and if so, why is prayer called service? For we have already said that the entire matter of service demonstrates that everything belongs to God and is His, and this is what is indicated by the service of the sacrifices, as was explained. This is also true about prayer that one offers before Him like a slave who prays before his master for his needs, and in this way the person shows that he needs Him, and if the person is dependent upon Him, he is His, for whatever depends on another is his, as will be explained below. Therefore, prayer is absolute service which indicates that the person depends on God, and therefore is His. (Ibid.)

Here, the Maharal moves on to explain the idea of prayer. At first glance, the idea of prayer is the opposite of that of a sacrifice. With a sacrifice, the person gives something to God, while with prayer, he asks for something from Him. However, the Maharal explains the ultimate purpose of prayer: a person prays for his own sake, but the fact that he prays to God expresses his acceptance of His kingship and his absolute dependence upon Him. God's kingdom is an existing and absolute fact, but man has to reveal it, and this is done through prayer.

Similar to the Maharal's position that we saw in the previous *shiurim*, that the truth is truth in itself but the creation is tasked with bringing it to expression, a person who engages in prayer acknowledges the fact that the whole world is in God's possession and that He alone can help him and decide what will happen to him. Thus, he sees himself as a servant of God who has no existence without Him. The purpose of this recognition is Divine.

The Maharal clarifies the difference between service of the God of Israel and the idolatrous concept that sacrifices are a divine need. The service of God does not mean that God is, God forbid, deficient, but in fact emphasizes His perfection. In the case of humans, when we give a person food, we make up for his deficiency. But with God, "My offerings, My food, [which is presented to Me] as offerings made by fire" – the sacrifice expresses the fact that everything is His, and thus there is no deficiency. The service does not make up for a deficiency, but rather expresses His completeness.

The Maharal goes on to say that it is precisely according to this approach that we can understand why God desires the prayer of man:

And it for this reason that it is also written: "And it shall come to pass that before they call, [I will answer, and while they are yet speaking,] I will hear" (*Yeshayahu* 65:24). How is it possible to say He hears before they call out? Rather, this means: I want to hear. This is the meaning of: "I will hear," that is to say, I ask to hear their prayer. This is all alluded to in the verse: "But the prayer of the upright is His will," because He delights in service that demonstrates that He is one, and that everything is His, and this demonstrates HIs perfection. Therefore, He yearns for the prayer of the righteous, as one who yearns for his own perfection.

According to idolaters, the gods desire their service because they are deficient and in need of the sacrifices. However, God desires His service for itself, according to the Maharal, because it is the truth. The truth is the kingdom of God, with nothing outside of Him, and God desires that this be revealed by man.

To summarize the Maharal's approach: The fundamental anchor of his approach is the words of *Chazal*, who tell us the world was created for the *kavod* of God. The world was created for God – not because He needs anything, but precisely because He is whole, because He is the supreme truth, and the truth by its very essence should be revealed. The world is not meant to benefit man, and precisely for this reason, it gains more significance for man. Instead of God creating a world only to "serve" man on his earthly level and to benefit him, man takes part in a Divine world. The principle of creation being for His honor also finds expression in the fact that the creation is absolutely dependent on the Creator; this dependence expresses itself in our absolute obligation in the *mitzvot*, and in prayer, which indeed deals with the good of man, but also expresses his absolute dependence on God.

(Translated by David Strauss)