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 17: The Purpose of Creation in the Thought of the Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) (1)**

**The Life and Writings of the Ramchal**

The Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, is one of the leading voices on the issue of the purpose of creation, as we will see in the upcoming *shiurim*.

The Ramchal was born in Italy and died in the Land of Israel before reaching the age of forty, with many accomplishments in this short period of time. The Ramchal's best-known book is *Mesilat Yesharim*, *The Path of the Just*, which has been accepted by all streams and communities of the Jewish people. Two other relatively famous books are *Da'at* *Tevunot*, an in-depth study of several basic topics of faith, and *Derekh Hashem*,which covers many topics of faith but in a concise way. The Ramchal also authored many kabbalistic works, not all of which have reached us, as well as books that relate to the revealed levels of the Torah, from *Derekh Tevunot*, which teaches a person how to study a Talmudic passage, to books on grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The range of his works attests to a scholar of extraordinary breadth, regarding both inward-facing and outward-facing studies.

The Ramchal grew up with the great kabbalists in Italy, including Rabbi Yeshayahu Bassan, who was the son-in-law of the senior kabbalist of Italy, Rabbi Binyamin Ha-Kohen. By the time he was 23 years old, however, he found himself at the center of a storm among Central European Jewry.

A group of students had gathered around the young scholar, some of whom were older than him (the most famous was another unique Torah figure, Rabbi Moshe David Valle, many of whose writings have been published in recent years). One of these students, Rabbi Yekutiel Gordon, sent a letter describing special phenomena in the *beit midrash* of the Ramchal, that he merits to be inspired by *ruach ha-kodesh* (the holy spirit) and writes his novel kabbalistic insights based on direct instruction of special angels (*maggidim*) that appear to him. It was claimed there that the Ramchal was writing a continuation to the *Zohar*, something that even the greatest kabbalist, the holy Ari, did not dare to do, to the best of our knowledge. This was only a few decades after the trauma that Shabbetai Tzvi left in the Jewish world, and the letter raised a cloud of suspected Sabbatianism over the Ramchal as well. The protest against the Ramchal was led by Rabbi Moshe Chagiz, who had experience exposing Sabbatians. Rabbi Moshe Chagiz feared that a dangerous sect was developing around the Ramchal that would lead to another disaster for the Jewish people, and so he led a war against the Ramchal in whose wake the rabbis of Italy conducted an inquiry along with Rabbi Yeshayahu Bassan, the Ramchal's teacher, who asked the Ramchal for explanations. The Ramchal explained his actions in a way that tempered some of what was described in the letter, but also confirmed that some of the other statements were indeed true. Rabbi Binyamin Ha-Kohen, the senior kabbalist of Italy, sent the Ramchal a clear letter of support, but he passed away a few months later, leaving the Ramchal without his main supporter. In an attempt to settle the dispute, the Ramchal promised that he would not write any more books based on his *maggid*, and that he would lock the works he had already written in a box, the key to which he would entrust to Rabbi Yeshayahu Bassan.

Time passed, and the Ramchal pressed Rabbi Yeshayahu Bassan to allow him to print a book of *Kabbala* (apparently, it was *Kelach Pitchei Chokhma*). Rabbi Yeshayahu Bassan tried to persuade him to refrain from doing so and warned him that it might harm him, but he ultimately gave in to the Ramchal's pressure. The Ramchal embarked on a journey to print his book, but the rabbinical court in Frankfurt arrested him on the way, on the suspicion that he had violated his first promise, and elicited from him an additional commitment not to write any more books of *Kabbala* whatsoever. The Ramchal moved to Amsterdam, where he gained more support and recognition. There he wrote his last books, including *Mesilat Yesharim*, which seems to belong to the revealed levels of the Torah – though one who examines it more closely sees that it describes the way the Ramchal reached the levels of *ruach ha-kodesh* that he merited.

In generations following the Ramchal’s death in the Land of Israel, the Vilna Gaon attached great importance to his writings, and some streams of Chasidism also adopted him, and thus his teachings entered the heart of the *beit midrash*.

**Benefaction – By Merit and Not by Grace**

The issue of the purpose of creation is very central to the Ramchal. The Ramchal is the most distinctive figure among Jewish thinkers who placed this issue at the beginning of his books, and on that foundation, built the rest of his discussions of faith.

The first principle we encounter regarding the purpose of creation in the writings of the Ramchal is his development of the position that God created the world in order to bestow good. We saw this idea mainly in Rabbi Saadya Gaon and Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, and we also saw it mentioned in one of the traditions in the name of the Ari. The question arises: Is this a significant milestone in Jewish thought, or merely a repetition of the words of Rabbi Saadya Gaon and the Ari?

In fact, the Ramchal introduces ideas that did not appear previously, or that appeared incidentally and not in the context of the purpose of creation. The first such idea is found in *Da'at Tevunot*:

What we can grasp in this matter is that God, may His name be blessed, is certainly the ultimate good. And indeed, it is the way of the good to do good, and this is what He, may His name be blessed, wanted – to fashion creatures in order to do good for them, for if there is no one to receive the good, then there is no giving of good. And indeed, in order that the bestowing of good be complete, He knew in His sublime wisdom that it is appropriate that those who receive it [the good] should receive it by way of the work of their hands, because then they will be masters of this good, and they will not have residual embarrassment in the receipt of the good, like one who receives charity from another. And about this they said (Jerusalem Talmud *Orla* 1:3): "One who eats not from his own is ashamed to look at his [benefactor's] face." (*Da'at Tevunot* 18)

Opening with the sentence, "What we can grasp in this matter is," indicates the Ramchal’s awareness of the complexity of the issue and the fundamental difficulty inherent in dealing with it. Is it possible, with the limited tools that we have, which were themselves a product of creation, to know what preceded creation? As mentioned in previous *shiurim*, the reality before creation was completely different from our entire conceptual world, and it is doubtful whether we can grasp anything of it. The Ramchal’s words offer an implicit answer to this question. On the one hand, it is clear that our means are limited – "what we can grasp in this matter" is not everything. On the other hand, the Torah and our means of comprehension are tools that God placed in our hands so we would use them to understand creation, and therefore, what we understand is what God wants us to understand, and that is what is appropriate for us. It will not be the full explanation of the purpose of creation, but the purpose of creation as it is reflected and revealed through the tools given to us – as it was intended to be reflected.

After that, the Ramchal mentions the principle that it is the way of the good to do good, which was explained in detail by Rabbi Crescas. He adds an explanation as to why God did not benefit us immediately, and why the entire world of Torah and *mitzvot* is necessary, if His goal is only to do good. The reason for this, according to the Ramchal, is that the most perfect benefit to a person is precisely the good that he merits by virtue of his own efforts, without shame. "When you eat the labor of your hands, happy shall you be, and it shall be well with you" (*Tehillim* 128:2) – the reward that you receive by virtue of your labor, that you deserve, is the foundation of happiness. The Ramchal bases his words both on the Jerusalem Talmud, which states that one who receives his food from another person is embarrassed to look that person in the face, and also on the *mishna* in *Avot* that says: "Who is rich? He who is happy with his portion" (*Avot* 4:1). The precise meaning of that *mishna* is that a rich person is one who is happy with what is *his*, i.e., with the fruits of his labor. This view has roots already in the words of Rabbi Saadya Gaon, who writes that the good is given to a person in reward for his performance of *mitzvot*, but the Ramchal emphasizes that the good a person attains by virtue of his own labor is greater than any other good.

**Man's Self-Good**

An obvious question arises here: The need for man's service of God stems from the need to solve the problem of shame, but God could have created man with a different psychology. It would have been possible to eliminate the mechanism that causes a person to feel ashamed when he receives good without any effort. Why did God prefer to create an entire world on the basis of service and labor, just so that a person will not feel ashamed when he receives His goodness?

A more fundamental point emerges in the Ramchal’s words in *Da'at Tevunot*, namely, *deveikut*, devotion. The relationship between service and reward is not just doing as many *mitzvot* as possible in order to receive as much compensation as possible, as implied by the words of Rabbi Saadya Gaon. Man does not accumulate merits that grant him a benefit in the future; rather, his goal is to achieve devotion to God, this devotion being the highest good and happiness. For this, he needs a full process of personal development and observance of the *mitzvot*.

The Ramchal also adds an essential element in *Derekh Hashem* – selfhood. In order to achieve complete devotion to God, man must emulate Him, and just as God's goodness is essential to Him, and is not external, so too the good in man must come from within himself; that is, it must grow out of his labor.

According to this explanation, shame is not an arbitrary psychological phenomenon that could have been eliminated from the plan for creation, but a spiritual expression of a real and essential point. In truth, man should not receive his good from others, in the sense that this would be good that is external to him; rather, his good should be his own. He himself needs to cling to God, so that his identity will emulate God.

In light of this foundation, one of the most important principles for the Ramchal is free choice. Man is the only creature in the world who has been given free choice, and his life is full of situations in which he must choose between good and evil. According to the Ramchal, free choice is very the heart of human life; with it, a person builds himself through his own choosing, reaches the level of devotion, and becomes worthy of goodness.

**Man Was Created to Delight**

The central place of the purpose of creation is also reflected in *Mesilat Yesharim*, the Ramchal's foundational book in the realm of Divine service. The Ramchal opens the book with a discussion of man’s mission:

The foundation of [all] piety and the root of complete [Divine] service is that a person comprehend the true nature of his duty in life and the aim and objective he must adopt in all his labors as long as he lives. Our Sages, may their memory be blessed, have taught us that man was created solely to delight in God and take pleasure in the radiance of the *Shekhina*. For that is the true delight and the greatest enjoyment that can possibly be. The place in which this enjoyment is truly realized is the world-to-come…. (*Mesilat Yesharim* 1, *Man's Duty in Life*)

This introduction includes the words delight, take pleasure, and enjoyment. At first glance, this goal may seem surprising, because pleasure and enjoyment sound like selfish goals, which are the opposite of man's devotion to the service of God. However, if the premise is that the purpose of the good is to do good, and that God created man for this purpose, then man should be a partner in carrying out this Divine purpose. He is obliged to make sure that he reaches the good that is intended for him. Later on in the book, and especially in his elaboration on the elements of piety, the entire purpose of which is to give pleasure to the Creator, it becomes clear that this purpose is more complicated than it appears in the opening passage of the book; nevertheless, this initial statement, with which the Ramchal opens his book on Divine service, must be deciphered in light of the fundamental determination that the purpose of creation is to do good, because the nature of the good is to do good.

All that has been said so far, regarding benefaction as the purpose of creation, is only the first element of the Ramchal’s position on the issue. In the next *shiur*, we will see additional aspects of the purpose of creation that have not yet been mentioned.

(Translated by David Strauss)