YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

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

**In Jewish thought**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**The Purpose of Creation in the Thought of Rabbi Ashkenazi (Manitou) (1)**

The next few *shiurim* will deal with the teachings of Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, known as "Manitou" (5682-5757 [1922-1996]), regarding the purpose of creation. I dedicated [a separate series](https://etzion.org.il/en/series/thought-manitou) entirely to the teachings of Rabbi Ashkenazi (in the wake of which the book *She'arim le-Mishnato shel Ha-Rav Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi* was published). Here, we will relate only to passages from his writings that deal with the purpose of creation and the mission of man, an issue that Rabbi Ashkenazi dealt with extensively.

We will begin with the basic concepts used by Rabbi Ashkenazi when addressing the issue, "creation" versus "the intention of creation," and in the following *shiurim* we will see how he explains through them the purpose of creation and the mission of man.

**Was the World Created in a Perfect State?**

A simple reading of the creation story leaves us with the general impression of a good and complete world. This picture is conveyed throughout the first chapter of *Bereishit*, which repeatedly uses the phrase, "And God saw that it was good," as well as from the conclusion of the story in chapter two, which states that God finished all His work. The entire world, including man, is all very good.

But when we consider the reality in which we live, it is not so easy to accept this conclusion. When we look at the world, at human life, at our immediate environment, we do not see only good. The real world seems very far from the perfection conveyed by the Torah’s description of creation.

One could explain, as did some of the Jewish thinkers we have studied thus far, that the world in which we live is intentionally imperfect. This approach is based on a certain understanding of the purpose of the world for man, according to which both good and evil exist in the world so that man can freely choose between them – and so one can receive reward for choosing the good and observing *mitzvot.* The existence of both good and evil allows for free choice throughout each human "biography," culminating with reward in the world-to-come.

However, this perspective does not satisfy Rabbi Ashkenazi. One of the problems with it is that it ignores a central axis that we find in the Torah: history. As Rabbi Ashkenazi emphasizes, history is not a biography – that is to say, the life of a particular individual – but a course of thousands of years. The very existence of a historical process means that changes are taking place in the world. If the world were meant to provide initial conditions that enable absolute free choice, these conditions would have to be eternal, since there would be no reason to change them. Even if each individual undergoes ups and downs in himself during his one hundred and twenty years of life, the world as a whole should remain the same. But this is not the case; the historical axis demonstrates that the world is constantly changing and developing.

Rabbi Ashkenazi sharpens the issue of the historical process by pointing to several *midrashim* that relate to the same verses about creation that were already mentioned but that paint a picture different from the one we have seen thus far.

**The World Requires Completion**

A careful study of the creation story reveals some surprising things. In the first verse, we encounter the initial and fundamental creation of the world, and immediately afterwards, it becomes clear that the world is in a state of chaos. This is not how we would expect an ideal description of Divine creation to begin. In addition, when man is created, God commands him to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the earth. This demand is cast upon man, but it depends on his choice; he will not necessarily comply with it. At this point, it is revealed that the world’s perfection depends on man, and now the question is whether or not he will work to ensure its completion.

We have already seen the *midrash* that expounds the word *bereishit*, "in the beginning," to mean “for the sake of *reishit*”: there is something called *reishit*, for the sake of which the world was created. At first glance, the creation story does not describe its purpose or goal. God does not explain why He created every individual element in the world, nor the purpose of the world as a whole. *Chazal* learn from the word *bereishit* that there was an intention that preceded creation, and that is the purpose that the entire creation was meant to fulfill.

Two other *midrashim* relate to the end of creation. One expounds God's impression of all of creation:

"Behold, it was very good" – this is the good inclination; "And behold, it was very good" – this is the evil inclination. (*Bereishit Rabba*, *parasha* 9)

This verse appears to be a description of the perfection of creation, but *Chazal* in fact find in it an allusion to the world’s great shortcoming. Another *midrash* cited by Rabbi Ashkenazi (which we have in a slightly different formulation) completes the *midrash* on the word *bereishit* in connection with the last words in the creation story – "which God in creating had made":

Everything that was created in the six days of creation requires some action [to bring it to its perfected state]. This is what is written: "which God in creating had made," literally, "which God created to make" [*bara la'asot*]. It does not say "created and made," but rather "to make"; that is to say, everything needs repair. (*Bereishit Rabba*, *parasha* 11)

According to this *midrash*, the word *la'asot* teaches that the world still requires action. *Chazal* are saying here that everything created in the six days of creation was deficient; the world was not perfect. This statement is completely contrary to the simple impression we received, but it explains the entire Torah that comes after the creation story: it relates the beginning of the process of action that completes and perfects the world.

Everything needs repair, that is, completion in the world of action, in historical reality. This is the mission that the man takes upon himself at the end of the six days of action. In the intention of creation, everything already exists in a perfect state. However, in the real world it is not like that: action is required in order to reach the desired level. The process of repair is not a mystical process but a historical process that brings about a complete alignment between the reality of this world and the mind of the Creator. When this world becomes the world-to-come, there is no more gap. The world is fixed. (*Sod Midrash ha-Toledot*, III, pp. 64-65)

There is a gap between the truth – the way that God wants the real world to look – and reality – our world at the beginning of its historical journey. The very existence of this gap between the truth and reality leads us to perceive the world as a dynamic world, aspiring, in need of perfection, completion, repair in the language of the kabbalists. (*Sod Midrash ha-Toledot*, III, p. 50)

In the view of Manitou, there is an intention that preceded creation, a mission that creation came to realize. This mission was not achieved when the world was created; rather, creation was only a starting point for a long process of bringing the intention to realization.

**The Intention of Creation and Reality – The Ideal and the Actualization**

Let us elaborate further. In contrast to various philosophical and religious approaches, which are not ready to accept two claims together – that God created the world, and that the world is deficient – and therefore they reject at least one of the two claims, the Torah teaches that indeed, God intentionally created a world that is deficient. How is this possible?

To understand this, we must distinguish between the intention of creation and creation, or as Rabbi Ashkenazi formulates it – between the intention of creation and reality. The world was created for a purpose that will be called "the intention of creation." The intention of creation describes the intended perfect state of the created world, as it should be in the eyes of the Creator. But God made the real world deficient and far from this proper state at the beginning of its journey. It was meant to rise from its deficient starting point to the point of the ultimate goal, where it will be complete.

This distinction between created reality and the intention of creation is noted by *Chazal* through the terms "this world" and "the world-to-come." This world is reality as it *is* at every stage; the world-to-come is the world as it *should* be and as it *will* be when it reaches its perfection and purpose. In the text and in the language of the kabbalists, this is indicated by the terms "the world of creation" and "the world of action." The contrast between these two poles is the contrast between ideal and reality.

God intentionally created the world lacking – "unformed and void and darkness…" (*Bereishit* 1:2) – so it would reach its perfection through a process.

**Completion of the World – On the Historical Axis**

How is the completion of the world carried out? The axis on which the process takes place is history. We see this clearly in another Midrash, on the second verse in *Bereishit*:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish interpreted the verse *(*Bereishit1:2) with regard to the [four] exiles: "The earth was unformed" – this is the Babylonian exile, as it is stated: “I have seen the land, and behold, it is unformed" (*Yirmeyahu* 4:23). "And void [*va-vohu*]" – this is the Median exile, [as it is stated:] "They hastened [*vayavhilu*] to bring Haman" (*Esther* 6:14). "And darkness" – this is the Greek exile, which darkened Israel’s eyes with their edicts, as they used to say to them: "Write on the horn of a bull that you have no portion in the God of Israel." "Upon the face of the deep" – this is exile of the evil kingdom [Rome], which cannot be calculated, like the deep; just as the deep cannot be calculated, so too the wicked. "And the spirit of God hovered" – this is the spirit of the messianic king, as it says: "The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him" (*Yeshayahu* 11:2). (*Bereishit Rabba* 2)

According to Reish Lakish, the verse enumerates four infrastructural shortcomings that are at the foundation of creation. These deficiencies are the basis for the negative forces that will develop from them, and each will appear at a different point on the stage of history, until all the shortcomings are completed. This is the historical sequence: from the Babylonian period to the Persian period, from there to the Greek period, and from there to the Roman period and beyond. This process is supposed to end in the days of Mashiach; "on that day [i.e., the days of Mashiach], God will be one and His name will be one."

According to Reish Lakish, the history of the people of Israel – the heart of humanity, according to the definition of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi (*Kuzari* II, 36, 44) – appears as a sequence of exiles and persecutions, of abnormal situations. Is there an end to this sad history? The source of Reish Lakish's optimism is the presence of “and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" already at the beginning, when everything seemed to be mere chaos, unformed and void. There is a goal, there is a purpose to the history of this world, and this purpose is already included in the beginning. There is a purpose of our toil in this world, and thanks to our toil, the world-to-come emerges from this world.

The concept of "the light of Mashiach," which directs world and human history to the desired goal, to success, is a central concept for *Chazal* because a developmental process, dynamic in itself, can be random and accidental and it may lead to a dead end or a return to the starting point – a return to disorder and chaos, in a case of total failure. There is a unifying force in the world. Everything starts from absolute unity, and that unifying force leads to the manifestation of unity – the unity of opposites, at the end of the historical process. Between these two points is the history of our world – this world. (*Sod Midrash ha-Toledot*, III, pp. 68-69)

This understanding does not accord with a static, complete world, a world full of human beings who each observe the *mitzvot* and receive reward. The world is dynamic; it is a sequence of events that aims to lead the world through a historical process in order to actualize the intention of creation.

**The Implications of the Notion of the Intention of Creation**

Rabbi Ashkenazi argues that when this idea is understood, other foundations of Judaism also become clear. Besides the concept of history, the concept of prophecy can also be understood in this way. We see throughout the Bible that God examines reality and announces His judgment of it by way of His servants, the prophets. The same concept also finds expression in the judgment that is carried out every year on Rosh Hashana. What is the meaning of God’s judgment? What are its criteria?

Divine judgment is made in accordance with the intention of creation, the goal which the world is supposed to reach. The criteria for judgment are not reality in its current state, but rather the purpose toward which the world is moving. As we continue our discussion of Manitou,we will discuss the nature of this goal, and the criteria for judging reality that are derived from it.

I mentioned the central place of Mashiach and redemption in Manitou’s approach. The simple meaning of these concepts is that a perfect reality will exist in the future, that the world has a purpose that will be realized. This principle also finds expression in the character of the nation of Israel, in a very real way: throughout the generations, the people of Israel have been at the lowest levels, yet they have been characterized by unusual optimism, by an absolute belief that things will be better. It is a belief in the process of the world advancing toward the realization of its purpose.

**History and Messianism – A Comparative View**

The Torah is the source of the belief that the world is advancing towards perfection. The idea of the intention of creation is unique to the Jewish people. This point is significant for Rabbi Ashkenazi, whose writings engage in extensive dialogue with other currents in the world. He always tries to emphasize what is unique about Judaism, what is the novel statement of the Torah. Regarding this issue, the prevailing understanding in the world is one of constancy and cyclicity. According to perspectives of idolatry, reality moves in place in a cyclical manner (like the annual seasons that move in an unceasing circle that stays in place). Greek philosophy advocates a static-eternal world and a primordial world that has always been and will always remain the same. A world without purpose and without direction.

In Islam, this concept appears in fatalistic garb. The whole world is a Divine present. Everything is "written," everything is predetermined by God, and man's entire role is to submit himself to Him and accept His decree. This is his inward-facing role; outwardly, he must subdue others as well. Even in the East, the ideal involves escaping from history; not activity aimed at repairing the world, but rather at being released from trying to fix it and from the disappointment that accompanies it. Reconciliation with reality as it is.

In Christianity, a central place is indeed dedicated to the Messiah – which is not surprising, since it built itself on the foundations of Judaism and "stole" the concept of the Messiah, with a change (see the Rambam's remarks at the end of *Hilkhot Melakhim*). Christianity rejected the Jewish people's identity as the people of Israel but kept the principle of a perfect future. (Christianity also rejected the element of process in the Jewish understanding, as will be explained in the next *shiur*.) Later, Christianity developed into modernity, which adopted the element of a process that strives for the perfect state, and set the aspiration to develop the world. In practice, it took the Jewish idea, after it appeared in Christian garb, but removed God from the story and replaced Him with man. But the very idea of the world's advancing toward its perfection is an innovation of Judaism.

Many currents of philosophy describe life as a theatre of the absurd and claim that there is no point in moral effort, that any hope for change, for improving the situation, is false hope, because in the end, the natural law of the world will prevail. Absolute pessimism. Here comes the Torah with a great innovation: reality appears indeed to be a reality of absolute injustice, of disorder, of blind, terrible natural law, and the fate of the righteous seems similar to the fate of the wicked, but this reality is not the last word but an intermediate stage, necessary, but temporary… We must know that even though reality seems unsatisfactory to say the least, this reality is the result of the act of creation, of a voluntary, free act, without any compulsion of the Creator of the world, and there is a reason and a purpose for it. This world is not the end. The world-to-come develops from it and will eventually appear. (*Sod Midrash ha-Toledot*, III, pp. 66-67)

We have not yet clarified what the intention of creation *is*; that is to say, what the proper and perfect form of reality is, or why the world was created incomplete, or what needs to be done in order to bring it to perfection. These questions are related to our general topic, the purpose of creation and the mission of man, and in the next *shiur* we will see how Rabbi Ashkenazi addresses it directly. In any case, the fundamental principle is that creation has a purpose, to actualize an intention, and this is the significance of the historical axis.

(Translated by David Strauss)