YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The teachings of the Maharal**

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**Shiur #02: What is the Maharal Looking For?**

We saw in the previous *shiur* that the Maharal emerged on the Jewish stage during a significant period in Jewish history – the generation of the two great halakhists, Rabbi Yosef Karo and Rabbi Moshe Isserles, and the two great kabbalists, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero and Rabbi Yitzchak Luria. Despite their significant developments in the fields of Halakha and Kabbala, there was a notable void in faith-related literature at the time, and the Maharal stood as a lone beacon in the darkness. We saw that the Maharal reacted to the perspectives that preceded him; he wanted to establish a comprehensive alternative to the conceptual systems that had emerged among the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, and to emphasize the *aggadot* of *Chazal* and draw his worldview from them.

We also noted that the Maharal's writing is unique and challenging in its style, in its multiple repetitions, as well as in its firm and decisive tone, which presents statements that are not always easy to understand and formulates them as unequivocal and incontrovertible assertions. To these challenges we may add the Maharal's complicated attitude toward philosophy, which adopts its language and concepts but opposes its positions. All of these challenges raise difficulties in the study of the Maharal.

How should one study the teachings of the Maharal in the shadow of these challenges? I will first describe three possibilities, none of which brings us to the desired goal. One option, that seems appealing at first glance, is to accept all of the Maharal's words as written, by virtue of our faith in him as an authority and scholar, while ignoring difficulties in the content and style of his writings. An opposite approach is to raise objections against those problematic statements, and thereby negate the Maharal’s words. A third, more refined approach is to clothe the statements of the Maharal with other principles, that are familiar to us from other thinkers, and thus try to reconcile the Maharal with the religious world with which we are familiar.

Each of these approaches largely misses what the Maharal wishes to teach us.

In fact, it is precisely in the places where a gap emerges – between the words of the Maharal and the perspectives most prevalent among us – that we can find an opening to discover new meanings and ideas. If we ignore the gap and skip over it, or on the contrary, dismiss it because it is not immediately clear to us, we will miss the places where the Maharal presents a unique approach that is not familiar to those who have not yet studied his words. We must pay particular attention to the places where his words seem difficult, delve more deeply into them, and uncover the insights they conceal. This task involves, among other things, the ability to decipher the Maharal's difficult language and translate it with all its profundity into our own language.

**New Questions**

In order to understand the Maharal's approach, we must first try to identify the lenses through which he sees things and to understand the perspective from which he looks upon the world of faith and the words of *Chazal* in general.

Clarifying the Maharal's perspective begins with paying attention to the type of questions that he asks. What are his questions, what is he looking for, and what is the interpretation that leads him to the insights he reaches? The basic questions posed by the Maharal serve as fertile ground for the development of a conceptual world, no less so than the particular answers that he gives, and to a certain extent even more. They have opened up a whole new and fertile world of ideas, and influenced generations to come.

Let us jump ahead a few hundred years, and take as an example Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, the author of *Pachad Yitzchak*, who lived in the 20th century and was greatly influenced by the thought of the Maharal. Overt influence is visible in many places in his books where he cites the words of the Maharal and explains them, but the deeper influence of the Maharal's principled approach is present even when the Maharal is not explicitly mentioned, in the type of thinking that accompanies all of Rabbi Hutner's books. Even when he discusses issues different from those addressed by the Maharal, or when he offers answers different from those given by the Maharal regarding issues that they both addressed, the stamp left by the Maharal is evident in the type of questions that Rabbi Hutner asks and the type of answers that he gives. Similarly, Rav Kook, in the introduction to his book of *derashot*, *Midbar Shur*, indicates that his fundamental approach to Midrash continues that of the Maharal.

As an example to help understand the novelty of the questions raised by the Maharal, let us examine the Maharal's commentary to the first *mishna* in tractate *Avot*, which states about the members of the Great Assembly: "They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] *din* (law, or justice), rear many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah." Quite surprisingly, the Maharal dwells not only on the content of the words of the members of the Great Assembly, but also on the fact that they said three things:

They said three things. It may be asked: Why did the members of the Great Assembly say these three things? What did they see about this and what reached them? For without a doubt, wise men like them could have added [words of] wisdom and understanding to an immeasurable extent. (*Derekh Chaim* 1:1, p. 21a)

The Maharal raises two questions. First, why did the members of the Great Assembly say these things in particular, and second, why did they say specifically three things, when surely in their great wisdom they could have said many more things. These questions are different from the questions raised by the classical commentators to tractate *Avot*. Until the Maharal, commentators examined each statement of the Sages, clarified its meaning, and explained why it was an important instruction. They analyzed and deciphered the phrases "patient in *din*," "many disciples," and "a fence around the Torah," and explained their significance and importance. The Maharal's two questions are new in the landscape of Mishna interpretation. The word that best characterizes his questions is the search for the "precisely (*davka*)": Why precisely these pieces of advice and not others, and why precisely three pieces of advice? The Maharal applies the question of "precisely" to all of the statements of *Chazal*, thereby opening a new perspective on the entire Oral Law!

In the eyes of previous commentators, the question of why it was necessary for *Chazal* to say *precisely* what they said was not a central question, and perhaps not even a correct question; the Sages of the Mishna could indeed have given additional or other advice, and in a different number. It is possible, for example, that owing to the need for brevity, the Mishna gave room to only three things, and these are the three that were selected. The fact that the Maharal asks this question shows that he sees the Torah differently; in his eyes, nothing in Torah is "accidental"’ everything is precise. Statements of *Chazal* do not only express information, but are essential assertions. The question of "why precisely," when it is asked consistently, is aimed at revealing the essential idea that each statement comes to teach. Each of the three things stated by the members of the Great Assembly expresses an essential principle, and therefore that is precisely what was stated; moreover, it is precisely they who stated it.

The Maharal’s interpretations, from his perspective, return the crown of Torah to its original splendor. The fact that the commentators who preceded him did not interpret the Mishna in this way is a flaw in his eyes. He seeks to restore the Torah to being a Torah of truth, a Torah of absolute statements, regarding which nothing can be said otherwise. With such *mishnayot*, the words of the Maharal are not just another interpretation added to all the other interpretations of the Mishna. They constitute a brand-new interpretation, which stems from a different view of the Torah.

To illustrate further, let us consider the Maharal's commentary to the words "be patient in the administration of *din*." He explains that the members of the Great Assembly saw a decline in intelligence in their generation, in the transition from the level of the prophets to the level of the members of the Great Assembly, and this is precisely why they advised patience in administering *din*– because the human intellect found in the body requires time and a thought process in order to reach the proper conclusion, in contrast to prophecy, which involves direct and immediate comprehension. In this way, the Maharal explains why the instruction "be patient in the administration of *din*" belongs precisely to this transitional period, and therefore it was precisely the members of the Great Assembly who offered it.

The second question raised by the Maharal – Why did the members of the Great Assembly say precisely three things? – is an even more novel question. Here, however, the question is supported by the fact that the Mishna itself, which is usually sparing in its words, emphasizes what seems to be a side point when it states: "They said three things." These apparently superfluous words indicate that there is a fundamental reason for the number three. In addition, many *mishnayot* in tractate *Avot* continue to cite precisely three statements made by the Sage in question. The Maharal is unwilling to see this phenomenon as merely a coincidence, and he insists that there must be a meaningful, essential explanation for it. What can this explanation be?

**The Specifics and the Whole**

Before we try to understand why tractate *Avot* is saturated with sets of three statements, let us take a look at a simpler example of the issue of "precisely," in a set that contains only two components. Here too, we encounter the two questions introduced by the Maharal: the question about the essence of each component considered on its own, and the question of how to understand the set as a whole.

Excellent is the study of the Torah together with a worldly occupation, for the energy [taken up] by both of them keeps sin out of one's mind. (*Avot* 2:2)

The simple interpretation of the *mishna* is that when a person is preoccupied with existential matters, and is not idle or engaged in the pursuit of pleasure, his mind is distracted from his baser inclinations; thus, he is saved from sin. This is how Rabbeinu Yona, for example, explains the *mishna* in his commentary:

Because he toils in Torah and work, the evil inclination will not control him… because whenever he is not fattened and satiated, it will not be pleasant for him to commit transgressions. Therefore, one should occupy himself with Torah, which exhausts a person's strength, and so too he should work for a living, and never be idle, lest he engage in delights and his heart be raised up and he will forget the Lord his God.[[1]](#footnote-1) (Commentary of Rabbeinu Yona, ad loc.)

However, the Maharal raises two questions against this approach:

But it should not be understood in its plain sense, that because he toils in these two things, this will keep sin out of his mind. For if so, even if he toils only in worldly occupation or only in Torah study, this should keep sin out of his mind, as we said. And furthermore, it is impossible for a person to always toil [in Torah and worldly occupation], and it is impossible for him not to rest for a moment from these two things, and thus come to sin. (*Derekh Chaim* 2:2)

First, if the goal is to distract a person from the desires of his evil inclination, why does the Mishna require the two components together – Torah and worldly occupation? Why is it not enough to engage intensively in one of them, in order to distract the person and his inclinations from sin? Second, even for a person who occupies himself in both matters – Torah study and worldly occupation – there are moments when he is not engaged in either of them, and according to the explanation offered above, he will not be saved from sin.

In light of these difficulties, the Maharal offers an interpretation in line with his fundamental approach:

Because it is proper for a person to toil in these two parts of man, for a person has a body and a soul, and the Torah represents perfection of the soul, and worldly occupation is what a person must do for the sake of his body, for his living and other things. [The Mishna] states that when a person toils in both things, that is, in worldly occupation by way of which he provides his body with its needs, and what a person does for the perfection of his soul, which is the Torah, just as worldly occupation perfects his body, then there will be no sin. (Ibid.)

*Chazal's* guidance to combine Torah and worldly occupation is fundamental and necessary. The essence of mankind comprises a body and a soul, each of which must find expression in that which suits it; if either aspect does not find such expression, an inner void is created that can bring a person to sin. The Torah in its essence is suited for the soul, and worldly occupation is suited in its essence to express man's physical dimension. Therefore, a person who toils in both Torah and in worldly occupation gives expression to all his aspects, and prevents the development of a void that would be liable to lead him to sin.

**The Three-Fold Whole**

Having now discussed a whole that has two components – mankind, whose essence is comprised of body and soul and thus requires guidance with two parts – let us now go back to the Maharal's explanation of why most of the moral teachings in tractate *Avot* are made up of precisely three pieces of advice:

Know that these three things mentioned by the members of the Great Assembly are like most of the moral statements of the Sages, which come to perfect the person in every way, as will be explained in these chapters. For the number three includes the matter and its opposite and the middle between the two, and therefore most of the moral teachings in this tractate come to perfect man in one thing and in its opposite and in that which is in the middle between them. (Ibid., p. 23b)

The Maharal begins by saying that *Chazal*’smoral teachings come "to perfect the person in every way." He is making two assertions here, the first of which we already encountered in the previous citation: the essence of mankind involves several aspects and layers. At first glance, this passage contradicts the previous one; there, the Maharal said man is comprised of two parts – body and soul – while here he says man is comprised of three parts (which he will spell out later in his commentary). But in fact, there is no contradiction. It is possible to consider the essence of mankind at several levels of specification, and on several axes of contemplation. The most basic description of man indicates that he is comprised of a soul and a body, but more detailed descriptions may indicate more detailed resolutions of the essential components within man. We must consider the prism through which *Chazal* chose to contemplate each phenomenon under discussion, and the level of detail through which they were analyzing humanity. Therefore, we should not be surprised if sometimes the Maharal presents man as being made of two parts, sometimes of three, and sometimes even of four; there is no contradiction in this, but rather different frameworks of contemplation, all of which are correct.

The second assertion is that *Chazal* are careful not to relate to just one or another partial aspect of man; instead, they offer comprehensive guidance that addresses all sides of the whole. The members of the Great Assembly did not simply offer a list of three instructions, each of which stands alone, but rather a precise whole that together comes to encompass the different sides of man.

An examination of the Maharal's writings shows that this assertion, which deals with *Chazal's* moral guidance to man, is a particular case of *Chazal's* fundamental approach in general. The Maharal is consistent in his commentary, that regarding every issue that *Chazal* deal with, they first consider the matter as a whole in order to identify its parts, and from there they strive to relate to its various sides and dimensions, to encompass them, and thus to offer full guidance that relates to the entire picture – not just a series of localized instructions, however important they may be.

Now that we have seen the general principles, let us consider the Maharal's explanation of the meaning of the structure of the division into three that characterizes tractate *Avot*. The Maharal explains that "the number three includes the matter and its opposite and the middle between the two." We have here an example of another general phenomenon that is prevalent in the writings of the Maharal – a focus on the meanings of numbers. The Maharal shows how each number bears different spiritual and conceptual meanings. His extensive teachings on these meanings are scattered throughout his writings, and for now we will not dwell on the details but will explore his comments on the structure expressed in the number three in tractate *Avot* – two extremes and the middle between them.

Every realm can include two extremes – something and its opposite. The ends are opposites, and therefore there cannot be a third factor that is also opposite to the first two, for if it is the opposite of one, it must be similar to the second. Accordingly, any third factor will have to contain, to one degree or another, each of the opposite sides. The Maharal explains here that most of the three-fold sets of guidance in tractate *Avot* are built in accordance with this format.

This meaning of the number three – two extremes and the mean between them – is found primarily in kabbalistic writings. For example, this is how kabbalists perceive the relationship between the *sefirot* of *Chesed*, *Gevura*, and *Tiferet*, which parallel the attributes oflovingkindness, justice, and mercy. Lovingkindness and justice are opposed to each other: the former gives without any kind of reckoning, whereas the latter gives only to the deserving and only in accordance with the measure they deserve. Mercy is a middle-of-the-road attribute: on the one hand, it gives beyond what is dictated by justice; on the other hand, it does not give without any reckoning at all, but rather in relation to the plight of the one being shown mercy, or the amount of mercy that is right to show him, and thus to soften the judgment issued against him.

The Maharal applies this general principle to the three statements in our Mishna:

And the members of the Great Assembly said: "Be patient in [the administration of] of *din*." This is entirely a matter of law. The opposite of this is: "Make a fence around the Torah"; this is the opposite of "Be patient in [the administration of] *din*" because a fence is not a law, for it is not required at all by the Torah. And they said: "Rear many disciples" to clarify the Torah – for this is not like *din*, whichis obligatory for all… while this is the “law” according to human reason. But the words of Torah, even though they are obligatory in themselves, and therefore the Torah is called *mishpat* (law) in several places – that this should be obligatory according to human reason is not so, for according to human reason, a mitzva is not necessary, which is not the case with *mishpat*, which is necessary according to human reason. Therefore, the words of the members of the Great Assembly include *din*, which is necessary, and its opposite, “Make a fence around the Torah,” which is not necessary at all, and they said, “Rear many disciples,” because this is not a law like *din*,which is necessary according to human reason, and it is also not unnecessary; rather, it is necessary according to the Torah, because this is the matter of the disciples to clarify what the Torah obligates, and this is repair of the Torah itself. And thus everything is included. (Ibid.)

Here, the three sides are expressed as follows: *Din* and fences are opposites because a fence by its very essence is not obligatory according to law; rather, it is an initiative to forbid that which by law is really permitted. Rearing many disciples is not *necessary* (perhaps just as during most of the period of the prophets, there were only isolated prophets), but it is desirable and logical (especially in light of the new situation, in which there are no prophets and the people of Israel must accept full responsibility for the word of God).

Elsewhere, the Maharal articulates his argument in a sharper and more decisive manner:

These three statements repair everything, and therefore the matter is formulated with a number: “They said three things,” as if to say that there is nothing more than this at all, because these three statements repair everything. (Ibid., p. 22a)

What does the Maharal mean when he says these three things repair everything? Is there nothing else to repair? Why are there more *mishnayot* in the tractate, if the words of the men of the Great Assembly already repaired everything?

This is an example of the Maharal's absolute form of expression, which is intended to express a principle. It is clear that the three statements of the men of the Great Assembly do not bring about a complete repair of the world. The Maharal is not speaking in literal terms, but rather addresses the essence of the matter. The members of the Great Assembly were addressing the fateful question of their generation: how to build Torah in a new reality that lacks prophecy. They related to the three areas that together encompass all areas of the subject under discussion – that which is necessary by law (be patient in the administration of *din*), that which is clearly not necessary by law (make a fence), and that which is not necessary but is logical and desirable for the continued clarification and development of the Torah (rear many disciples). The Maharal emphasizes that these three things were chosen because they were the three things needed in that generation for the transition from prophecy to the members of the Great Assembly; it is understood that there were other things left to repair (in other generations), but with regard to that generation, the repair was intended to encompass the entire range of areas. At the essential level, *Chazal*’s guidancemust be comprehensive, and it must deal with the subject under discussion on all its planes.

**One Essence in Different Shades**

There is, however, a surprising phenomenon in the Maharal’s commentary. The Maharal explains each of the three statements of the members of the Great Assembly in several ways; we cannot go into the details of these interpretations here, but note that for the statement, "Make a fence for the Torah," he brings no less than six explanations! This approach seems similar to that of the earlier commentators to the Mishna, who did not look for a "precise" explanation. If it is possible to interpret the statements in so many ways, it seems that none of the interpretations can be described as "precise," and that all approaches are possible. How then can this be reconciled with the fundamental declaration of the Maharal?

After bringing five explanations, the Maharal offers a comment that is very important for understanding his approach:

All of the explanations that we have offered amount to the same thing if you understand them correctly.

The Maharal clarifies that his goal is not to offer different and diverse explanations of the *mishna*, but rather to express a single principle in different shades. There is a close connection between the six explanations, and they all express the same principle on different planes.

Let us examine another example, which can also shed light on the previous example. Division into three also appears in the introduction to *Derekh Chaim* (pp. 8b-9b), where the Maharal divides the entire service of God into three categories that together encompass all of man's relationships: between man and God, between man and his fellow, and between man and himself. The first two categories are well known, but the Maharal clarifies that there is also a third category – between a man and himself. The prohibition to eat forbidden foods, for example, does not fall in the realm of the relationship between a man and his fellow, nor in the realm of the relationship between a man and God; rather, eating such foods constitute an injury against oneself.

In that context, the Maharal quotes three answers given by *Chazal* to the question of how to be a pious person: "Rav Yehuda said: He who wishes to be pious must [particularly] fulfill the matters of [the order of] *Nezikin.* Rava said: The matters of [tractate] *Avot.* And others said: Matters of [tractate] *Berakhot*" (*Bava Kama* 30a). Here, it is not one speaker saying three things, as in the examples from tractate *Avot*. Instead, the three answers are given by three different *Amoraim* – the first says one must study *Nezikin* in order to become pious, the second says he must study *Avot*, while the third says he must study matters of *Berakhot*. The Maharal says, however, that this is not a dispute among the Sages; rather, each one is dealing with a certain aspect of the issue, and the three together encompass the issue from all sides. Perfection is comprised of "between man and God" (*Berakhot*), "between man and his fellow" (*Nezikin*), and "between man and himself" (*Avot*). Afterwards, the Maharal brings a seemingly different answer, which based on the idea that perfection is comprised of three parts of man – the intellect (*Berakhot*), the body (*Nezikin*), and the soul (*Avot*). Even though this is an additional explanation, the Maharal says it reinforces the previous explanation. Since the whole is one, it can find expression on different levels. The system of intellect-body-soul and the system of between man and God-fellow-himself are different realms in which the same whole finds expression.

Similarly, the many explanations of "make a fence" are not different, according to the Maharal, and thus they do not undermine the standard of unambiguous, single meanings. On the contrary: there is one essence, complete and comprehensive, which is expressed by all the different shades of the explanations. The combination of the instructions "be patient in the administration of *din*," "rear many disciples," and "make a fence for the Torah" can together encompass different areas of the human world.

In conclusion, we have seen that the Maharal introduced a perspective that has ramifications for understanding each and every matter in Torah. He was not satisfied with understanding the words of the Torah, but asked about each: "Why, precisely?"

From this premise, we saw several fundamental principles that run through the Maharal's writings. In every statement of *Chazal*,one must look for the essential idea that it expresses and understand how all its parts were stated with precision, encompassing together the totality of the sides of the issue under discussion.

This whole can be built on various different levels of specification that cover the entire issue. In this *shiur*, we saw, for example, several statements that deal with man. In one of them, the Maharal establishes that man is divided into two – body and soul; in another, he describes man as being divided into three – body, soul, and intellect. However, there is no contradiction, but rather different levels of resolution of contemplating the essential structure of man.

In spite of this, several different explanations of a statement can be possible – and yet, they are all essential and precise explanations, expressing the same principle in different ways.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. Editor’s note: cf. *Devarim* 8:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)