YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Thought of the Maharal of Prague**

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**Shiur #12: Moral instruction (7) – Humility**

The preceding *shiurim* examined two sets of *middot* (traits, or moral qualities) that appear in the first part of *Netivot Olam*, *middot* that are essentially values: 1) kindness, justice, and mercy, and 2) truth, faith, and peace. We dealt with the internal relationships between these qualities, and with the tensions that exist between them. We will now move on to the three “paths” that open the second part of *Netivot Olam*: humility, fear of God, and love of God.

Fear of God and love of God are cardinal qualities of the service of God. Humility is a *midda* that holds great importance in human life, but it too has significance in the dimension of the service of God. Unlike the qualities enumerated in the first part of the book, which are characterized as *values*, fear, love, and humility are first and foremost *emotions*. At first blush, we might define them by saying that someone who is humble feels himself to be small or lowly, a fearful person feels fear and withdrawal from the other, and a loving individual feels a desire for closeness with his beloved. Furthermore, not only are they all feelings, but all three describe one’s feelings in relation to other people. Love and fear pertain to an outside factor, which is loved or feared, and humility as well is usually a person's perception of himself relative to others. This, for example, is how the Ramban defines humility in his famous epistle:

Therefore, I will now explain to you how to always behave humbly. Speak gently at all times, with your head bowed, your eyes looking down to the ground, and your heart focusing upward. Don't look at the face of the person to whom you are speaking. Consider everyone as greater than yourself. If he is wise or wealthy, you should give him respect. If he is poor and you are wealthier or wiser than he, consider yourself to be guiltier than he, and that he is more worthy than you, since when he sins it is inadvertent, while you act knowingly! (*Iggeret ha-Ramban*)

The Ramban’s words on humility raise certain difficulties: Why should one be humble before *every* person? Can one not recognize that there are those who are inferior to him? Is it logically possible that everyone is inferior to everyone else? This conception of humility is possible only if humility is not a true quality, but a way of conducting oneself that stems from something akin to courtesy. A person is supposed to consider himself as if everyone were greater than he, but this is not necessarily the objective truth.

In light of the previous *shiurim* on the thought of the Maharal, it is reasonable to assume that he would not accept a definition of humility based on courtesy, nor would he accept a definition of it as a mere emotion. He will strive for a deep and essential definition, which will also reveal how this quality gives expression to a true perception of the world.

**"One who is humble is clothed in the *midda* of his Creator"**

This is how the Maharal introduces the path of humility:

It is stated in the book of *Mishlei* (22:4): "The reward (*eikev*)of humility is the fear of the Lord… [riches, and honor, and life]."… For fear is drawn after humility; just as the heel is drawn after the body, so fear of God is drawn after humility. And it is stated in a *midrash*: "What wisdom proclaimed as a crown to its head, humility made as a heel to its sandal. What wisdom proclaimed as a crown to its head, as it is stated: 'The beginning (or: head) of wisdom is the fear of the Lord' (*Tehillim* 111:10); humility made as a heel to its sandal, as it is stated: 'The reward [or: heel, *akev*) of humility is the fear of the Lord'" (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 1). What this means is that it is by means of wisdom, a person attains to the fear of God. As *Chazal* have said: "An ignorant person is not pious, nor is a fool afraid of sin" (*Avot* 2:5). From here you see that wisdom is a rank and elevation through which a person attains the fear of Heaven, for by means of wisdom, he recognizes his Cause and fears Him, and this does not need proof. And the explanation of the verse, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord," is that the fear of God is the “head” of wisdom, that from wisdom one reaches the degree that is higher than wisdom, namely, the fear of God, which is the beginning and head of wisdom. And fear is the “heel” of humility, that is to say, when a person is humble, it is impossible that he will not be God-fearing. It is not like wisdom, for it is possible that a person will be wise but not God-fearing, as you find that there are people who have wisdom but do not have fear of god. Even though wisdom is certainly the preparation by which one reaches fear of God, as it is stated: "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord," nevertheless, it is not a necessary and certain thing, for wisdom is a preparation and a ladder by which one reaches the fear of God, but it is possible that he will remain standing on the ladder and not reach the rank of fear. But when a person is humble and he humbles himself, he will certainly humble himself before his Creator and recognize his own insignificance. This is the essence of fear, when he recognizes his own insignificance, and this is the simple meaning of the verse: "The reward of humility is the fear of the Lord," that is to say, this is a certainty, that a humble person fears God, for a humble person humbles himself before all, so how could he *not* humble himself before the Holy One, blessed be He? (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Anava* 1)

In the *midrash* cited by the Maharal, *Chazal* take two verses containing the word "fear" and use them to create a hierarchical array of three qualities: fear, wisdom, and humility. Fear is above wisdom, based on the verse: "The beginning (or: head) of wisdom is the fear of the Lord," and humility is found above fear, based on the verse: "The reward (or: heel) of humility is the fear of the Lord.” The Maharal first offers a brief definition of fear, and then elucidates its relationship to wisdom: Fear is the recognition of God as being above man, and wisdom that does not bring about this recognition is not wisdom. The more a person grows in wisdom, the closer he should come to understanding the gulf between himself and the Divine reality. We can see this in the world of science: one who is truly engaged in science and research, and is not merely trying to score points and make discoveries, finds that his investigations reveal more and more mysteries, and the more things he discovers that he understands, the more new things he discovers that he does not understand, and the more he realizes how vast are the realms beyond his comprehension. If wisdom does not bring a person to understand his deficiency in the face of the absolute Divine reality, he has not touched the root of its essence.

From here the Maharal proceeds to speak of humility and to explain why it is superior to fear of God:

For the difference between humility and fear is that when a person is humble, he emulates his Creator, as *Chazal* said: "A person should always learn from the mind of his Creator; for behold, the Holy One, blessed be He, ignored all the high mountains and rested His *Shekhina* upon Mount Sinai" (*Sota* 5a). This is because the *midda* of the Holy One, blessed be He, is humility, and this quality is more essential to Him than all others, as will be explained. Therefore, one who is humble is clothed in the *midda* of his Creator. This is certainly greater than fear, for the quality of fear is that the person humbles himself before Him, and in this there is no resemblance to Him at all; he merely recognizes that He is his Cause. About this it is said: "What wisdom proclaimed as a crown to its head, humility made as a heel to its sandal.” For the fear of Heaven, which is greater than wisdom, is inferior to humility, for the humble person, because he has in him part of the mind of his Creator, has a greater rank, which is greater than the fear of God, for the God-fearing man, because he was caused by God, he has *deveikut* (cleaves) to his Cause. Therefore, humility is greater than the fear of God, because one who is humble has a likeness to the *midda* of his Creator, as is expounded in the first chapter of *Sota* (ibid., explaining *Yeshayahu* 57:15): "I am with the contrite." That is to say, God rests His *Shekhina* on the humble man, and comes to him to be with him, for God ignored all the high mountains and rested His *Shekhina* on Mount Sinai, and He did not elevate Mount Sinai. This is because the humble man has something of the quality of his Creator, and those who are similar are found together, as was explained in *Netiv ha-Ahava*; see there. This is not true of the fear of God. And these matters are exceedingly profound. (Ibid.)

Here, the Maharal mentions a striking idea of *Chazal*, who attribute humility to God, and asserts further that the quality of humility is "more essential to Him than all others." Unlike fear, which expresses a relationship to God but does not describe God Himself (God is never described as "a fearful God"), humility is a quality that involves emulating God Himself. In this respect, humility is greater than fear, for it can bring a person to cleave to God. We see here another distinction that the Maharal draws between the different qualities. In previous *shiurim*,we saw the distinction between broad qualities (such as kindness, which does not require precise or necessary action) and precise qualities (such as truth, from which one cannot deviate in the slightest); now we see a distinction between qualities that can be attributed to God, so that one who has that quality imitates God, and qualities that cannot be attributed to God, so that one is not imitating God through it. The qualities that involve imitation of God, including humility, are of a higher rank.

In order to clarify the meaning of the Maharal's contention that humility is the Divine attribute par excellence, we shall first consider it in light of the Ramban's definition of humility. Can it be said of God that He should "consider everyone as greater than Himself"? Obviously not! How then does the Maharal understand humility? The *midrash* indicates that humility must be defined in a way that is applicable to God, and we must understand what this definition is.

**Humility – freedom from measurement**

The Maharal continues with another *midrash* about God’s humility:

And it is stated in the last chapter of *Megilla* (31a): "Rabbi Yochanan said: Wherever you find [mentioned in Scripture] the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, you also find His humility [mentioned]. This fact is stated in the Torah, repeated In the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings.

It is written in the Torah: 'For the Lord your God, he is the God of gods and Lord of lords; the great God, the mighty, and the awful, who does not show favor nor take a bribe' (*Devarim* 10:17), and this is followed by: 'He executes justice for the orphan and widow' (ibid. v. 18).

It is repeated in the Prophets: 'For thus says the high and lofty One, who inhabits eternity and whose name is holy' (*Yeshayahu* 57:15), [and this is followed by:] '[I dwell] with one who is of a contrite and humble spirit.'

It is stated a third time in the Writings, as it is written: 'Sing to God, praise His name; extol the One who rides the clouds, whose name is the Lord; and exult before Him' (*Tehillim* 68:5), and this is followed by: 'Father of the fatherless and judge of the widows, is God in His holy habitation' (ibid. v. 6)."

And now we must ask why it is that wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, there you find His humility. If it is because Scripture is coming to tell us that unlike the way it is with flesh and blood, where greatness negates humility, with the Holy One, blessed be He, it is not so, for with His greatness there is humility – then why is it necessary to say that this fact is stated in the Torah [and repeated in the Prophets and stated a third time in the Writings]. It would be enough to find it once; why must it be everywhere? Rather, Rabbi Yochanan came to say that humility is the very essence of greatness, and it is the greatest of all greatnesses, to the extent that there is no greatness above it. If this were not so, it would not be that everywhere that you find His greatness, there you find His humility. But because wherever you find His greatness, there you find His humility, from this you know that humility is the greatest of all greatnesses. (Ibid.)

*Chazal* cite three places where God’s greatness appears alongside His humility. We might have understood that they are using different verses to prove one principle: that with all His greatness, God is also found in the lowly world and rules over it. However, the Maharal is not satisfied with this, and strives to understand why three verses are needed. After all, if the whole point were to teach us that in addition to the greatness of God, He is also humble, one verse would have sufficed. From this, the Maharal understands that the concept of humility in relation to God is not "added" to the description of His greatness, but is intrinsically connected to it. If we see the description of humility recurring "everywhere" His greatness is mentioned – in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings – it is because God's humility is an intrinsic part of His greatness. The humility of God and His greatness are one and the same, not two separate descriptions, and therefore whenever His greatness is described, His humility is described alongside it.

The Maharal explains why humility is "the greatest of all greatnesses":

This is because one who is humble is not defined or limited in any way, and this indicates the utter simplicity, which is utterly unlimited. And therefore, after the verse mentioned the greatness of God, it said that the greatest of all His greatnesses is His humility, which is absolute simplicity, for He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, which is because of the simplicity of it, that He does not limit Himself to execute justice for the great and not for the small, but rather He executes justice for all alike, and this is absolute simplicity, and this is the highest rank of all. And you must know that the term "high" is meaningful only in relation to those who are low or to those who are high – in any case, there is a relationship to another, such that you say one is above those who are low or those who are high. This is not the praise, that He is higher than anything else. But what gives Him humility is that He watches over the lowly, and the fact that He watches over the lowly indicates that He is simple with the utmost simplicity, and simplicity is the highest of all, for that which is simple to the extreme is first to all. And furthermore, that which is simple cannot be defined, and therefore it has no end, for it is unlimited, and therefore wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility, for humility is a greater rank than all, and we have explained this elsewhere. And therefore, the quality of humility is even greater than His greatness, for His greatness, that He is exalted and lofty, does not mean that He is all-inclusive. But the fact that He is humble is because He is of utmost simplicity, and in that He is simple, He is all-inclusive. So too regarding humans, this quality is the highest ranking one. Thus we have explained the matter. (Ibid.)

The Maharal proposes a profound and revolutionary understanding of humility, which resolves the question of what humility has to do with God. A truly humble person is not one who measures himself against others and concludes that he is more lowly, but rather one who abrogates measurement, one whose attitude toward others is not measured through the lens of whether I am more than he is or he is more than I am. Measurement is connected to a limited and finite world; humility is the liberation from the realm of measurement, and it thereby allows for a relationship and connection with each and every individual as he is, regardless of his station and place in the world.

If God were to engage in measurements, He would be “found” in the highest places, and not lower Himself to the earth. He would also have chosen the highest mountain and not Mount Sinai. But God is free of all notions of measurement, and therefore there is no difference to Him between heaven and earth, in both of which He can equally rest His *Shekhina*. Humility is the release from a perspective that measure things in comparative and quantitative terms. Measurement belongs to the world of limited boundaries. It is sometimes necessary in our world, and therefore Halakha includes many measurements of time and quantity. They are positive, but they belong to the concepts of this world. The infinite God, however, is free of all limitation, and therefore of all measure, and therefore He is connected to everything.

According to this definition, humility is a manifestation of the Infinite. This is why humility is the greatest of all greatnesses: it breaches all bounds and limits, thereby revealing the Divine Infinity.

Thus, the Maharal defines humility in a way that explains *Chazal's* statements about it in an essential way. He shows how humility is truly the greatest of all greatnesses – more than just a moralistic saying meant to praise humility by way of hyperbole. The Maharal unravels how humility can describe God, and by extension, how it can describe any person; it is impossible for all to be smaller than everyone else, but each and every person can follow God's example and free himself of the notions of "greater" and "lesser" and of measuring himself against others. When one is liberated from these limitations, one can be, as it were, infinite.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)