YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Thought of the Maharal of Prague**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 15: The Torah and its Essence (2)**

**The Torah – The Order of the World**

In the previous *shiur*, we transitioned from the topic of moral qualities (*middot*) and instruction (*mussar*) to exploring how the Maharal relates to the Torah itself. We returned to his introduction to *Derekh Chaim*, where the relationship between morality and Torah is discussed – this time, with our focus on how the Maharal defines the Torah. We saw that the Torah leads to *deveikut*,cleaving to God, and that by necessity it is Divine; a human creation would not be able to bring man to cleave to God, who transcends the bounds of this world. We addressed the depth of the definition of the Torah in light of its being described as an "emanation." This term is taken from the mystical tradition and indicates the Torah is not an external matter that God created and prepared for us, but rather, as it were, a direct manifestation of God Himself.

Another fundamental dimension of the Torah is discussed in the opening chapter of *Netiv Ha-Torah.* As we find with every “path” throughout the book of *Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Torah* opens with a verse from the book of *Mishlei*:

"And He taught me and said to me: Let your heart hold fast My words [or: My words shall hold fast your heart], keep My commandments, and live" (*Mishlei* 4:4). King Shlomo wanted to exhort man about the Torah, and he said: When the Torah was given to man, God said to him: "My words shall hold fast your heart," that is to say, the Torah, which consists of the words of God, shall hold fast your heart. For life is found in the heart of man, and the Torah will strengthen your heart and give you life, and you shall keep My commandments and live. For the words of Torah support and confirm the entire world, so how could they not support and confirm man himself, who is engaged in the Torah, and it is with him?

As for the fact that words of Torah support the entire world, this is learned from the words of the Sages who said (*Shabbat* 88a) that it is for this reason that the [prefix] *heh* ("the") was added to the word "sixth" [in the verse, "And there was evening and there was morning, *the* sixth day" [*Bereishit* 1:31]), to teach us that all the works of creation were hanging in the balance until the sixth of Sivan, when Israel would accept the Torah or not, and if not, the world would return to emptiness and formlessness. Thus, the words of the Torah strengthen and support everything, so that the world has existence, and all this is because the Torah is the order of man, [teaching him] in what action he should be engaged, and how he should be engaged in it, and how he should be organized in his actions, and this is the matter of the Torah. And just as the Torah is the order of man, so it is the order of the world, so that the Torah is the order of everything. The order of man is revealed and explicit in the Torah, for it is impossible otherwise, for it is incumbent upon man to maintain the proper order for himself, and therefore this is revealed explicitly to man. But the order of the entire world is also in the Torah, for the Torah is not only the order of the existence of the world as a whole. This is what is stated in the *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 1), that God looked into the Torah and created His world; that is to say, the Torah itself is the order of everything, and therefore when God wanted to create the world and arrange it, He looked into the Torah, which is the order of everything, and created His world. And since the Torah is the order of the whole world, everything that is ordered is one thing connected, just as the Torah is one order, for the Torah is one. (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Torah*, chap. 1)

The Maharal cites the words of *Chazal* that "all the works of creation were hanging in the balance until the sixth of Sivan," and in his customary manner, he approaches the statement with an eye towards the fundamental, and expands the perspective on the issue. At first glance, creation was completed at the end of the six days described in *Bereishit*, God rested at the end of creation, and from that point on, the world runs on its own. But the *midrash* comes to teach that upon deeper examination, it can be said that creation was not yet complete at that point, that something essential was still missing from the world. We might have thought that the world was already complete, and that God later added the Torah to it, but in truth, without the Torah, something fundamental was lacking in the very structure of the world and it remained on the brink of emptiness and formlessness. This was a central element in the plan for creation from its inception.

The Maharal then coins a term: the Torah is "the order (*seder*)of man" and "the order of the world." At first glance, the term "order" does not seem to refer to a substantive concept but rather a technical matter of organization and conducting oneself with careful attention. What is the meaning of the term "order" according to the Maharal, and why is that what defines the Torah?

The Maharal derives the principle of "the order of the world" from another fundamental *midrash*, according to which God “looked into the Torah and created the world.” The Torah is not merely an additional entity in the world, nor even merely a central component of the world; it is the blueprint of the world as a whole. According to the more superficial picture, for more than two millennia the world existed in a stable situation, and under particular historical circumstances, God decided to give a certain people the Torah. The *midrash* teaches a deeper perspective: the Torah preceded the world, and it is the conceptual world from which all creation flows. The fact that the Torah first appears in the world after all of creation does not mean it is a specific component within a broad cycle of events; rather, this delay teaches that the world had to progress through long processes, through two thousand years of formlessness, to get to the point where it would be able to become acquainted with the Divine Torah, which stood as the basis of the world even before it was created.

What is the meaning of the term "order"? The Maharal formulates a short sentence which contains the key to understanding the concept of order: "Everything that is ordered is one thing connected." What is a "thing connected"? A connection can only be said to exist if there are at least *two* things that the connection connects, so how can there be "*one* thing connected"? Is this not an internal contradiction?

Here we come to the meaning of the word "order." When several things are arranged in a certain order, they are connected by the order and become one thing. The order that creates the connection also creates unity. For example, if a person enters a room and sees chairs and tables strewn about, he cannot know what the room is used for. On the other hand, if the tables are arranged in rows, and there are chairs behind each table, the person entering the room will recognize it as a classroom. The order of the room attests to its essence and purpose, to the one idea that organizes it. The purpose of the room dictates how it will be arranged.

In its revealed dimension, our world is one of multiplicity. It contains many different forces, which sometimes even oppose and fight each other. The assertion that there is order in the world teaches that there is a connection between its many parts, that it can have a purpose to which each of its diverse parts contributes, and which all of them together bring to fruition.

The statement that the Torah is the order of the world means that behind the multiplicity of created beings, each of which can be perceived as standing alone, sundered from its fellows and engaged in its own affairs, there is one idea which is the purpose and goal according to which the entire world is determined and arranged.

Let us consider, for example, a verse that appears at first to express chaos: "Now the earth was emptiness and formlessness, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" (*Bereishit* 1:2). At first glance, this verse reveals the multiplicity and disunity of the world. But *Chazal* explain that within all the chaos, there is one spirit of God that weaves the events together: this verse hints at the four kingdoms ("emptiness is Babylon... and formlessness is Media" [*Bereishit Rabba* 2:4]), and the "spirit" is the "spirit of the Messiah." That is to say, all the forces that appear to be in disarray are in fact part of a single historical process that has a purpose. The individual, too, is full of disparate forces, but the Torah teaches that he is actually a single entity, with a Divine purpose.

The Torah's role as the order of the world is not only expressed through specific verses in which it indicates the purpose of creation (such as the verse, "and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" [*Bereishit* 12:3], for example). The successive units that discuss the commandments also express this principle. When the Torah tells a person how to conduct his life by way of all the practical commandments, it arranges his life in the proper practical order that is derived from the general purpose that it designates.

The *mitzvot* could have been understood as a collection of discrete particulars: in every situation in which a person finds himself, the Torah tells him what he should do. According to the Maharal, however, the *mitzvot* are not a multitude of particular directives but a single system. They connect all the branches of a person’s life into a single spine. Without the Torah, man finds himself composed of many forces – spiritual and material, high and low – that have no connection. The Torah gives man the one direction that will lead him and the entire world to their mission – that God will be one and His name one [*Zecharya* 14:9].

To live a unified life, one must observe the commandments. When a person merely understands that there is a purpose, it remains in his mind alone; only when a person performs practical commandments does this purpose animate his entire life. In that way, every aspect of a person's life takes part in advancement toward the goal.

Toward the end of the chapter, the Maharal writes:

Therefore, [the above verse in *Mishlei*] says: "And He taught me and said to me: My words shall hold fast your heart." God taught man the ultimate goal, how to bring man to the world to come: When My words shall hold fast your heart, then man cleaves to the Torah, which brings him to his goal, which is the world to come. For just as the Torah is the order of this world, so is the Torah the order of the world to come, for everything was created by way of the Torah – both this world and the world to come. And therefore, God said: "My words shall hold fast your heart"; with this, man cleaves to the world to come to attain his ultimate goal.

Here the Maharal arrives at the point we saw in the previous *shiur*, that the Torah brings man beyond this world. The order is meant not only to organize the existing world, but primarily to bring this world to the world to come. This relates to the historical axis of the world, which is an axis of progress and is also organized according to the Torah. As with the *mitzvot*, so also with respect to historical events – there is one order that governs them all. The Torah does not detail for us the order of events and generations as it details the *mitzvot*, but even with regard to them, it is the order; it is the one axis along which all events are arranged. This axis, though not prominent in the *parashot* of the *mitzvot*, is nevertheless evident from the events that develop alongside the commandments throughout the five books of the Torah, and also from the course of the Scriptures as a whole. This axis is elucidated by the Maharal at length in *Netzach Yisrael* and in *Ner Mitzva*. He deals with the affairs of all four kingdoms, especially the kingdom of Greece (*Ner Mitzva*) and the kingdom of Edom-Rome (*Netzach Yisrael*). (To a certain extent, the Maharal's book *Or Chadash* explains the second kingdom, Persia.) The Maharal devoted entire books to the explication of the historical process, based on the understanding that it is arranged in one order and in view of its great importance for the revelation of God's unity.

The Maharal does not content himself with saying Torah is the order that *leads* *to* the world to come, but rather that it is "the order of the world to come" itself. The Torah is Divine wisdom, and the Divine existence of the world to come is conducted in accordance with it. In this world, there is a gap between man and the Divine reality, and therefore the Torah instructs him how to extricate himself from the material sphere and advance beyond it to cleave to the world to come, whereas in the world to come, man will be a citizen within the Divine realm, which is conducted entirely in accordance with the Torah.

One might have thought the Torah came to solve the problems of mankind in this world. This is implied, at first glance, when the revelation at Sinai is immediately followed by *Parashat Mishpatim*, which deals with the regulation of social conflicts. But then comes *Parashat Teruma*, with the commandment to build the *Mishkan*, and it becomes clear that the Torah has a higher purpose. It does not suffice with the existence of a well-ordered society but soars to the level of "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8). This is also evident before the giving of the Torah, when Yitro wonders why Moshe devotes his entire day to settling disputes between the members of Israel. Moshe replies that the people come to him "to inquire of God" (*Shemot* 18:15); the purpose is not to settle personal disputes but to elevate man to the Divine realm, and to organize his social life as well according to the norms of the Divine realm. *Parashat Mishpatim* is not a way to solve earthly problems, but a way to direct earthly life in accordance with the Divine will.

**The Divine Torah – and Man**

So far, we have seen how the Maharal elevates and exalts the Torah. He explains that the Torah is Divine, transcending human concepts and earthly goals. In light of this, the question arises: Why, then, is the Torah not the exclusive possession of God? How is it possible for man to have contact with something so lofty?

The Maharal does not explicitly raise this question, but anyone who examines the book *Tiferet Yisrael* in its entirety will discover that this is the central subject of the book. The entire book is devoted to the topics of Torah and the revelation at Sinai; however, in the first chapters, the central theme is not the Torah itself but the relationship of the human soul to the Torah. Let us consider, for example, chapter one:

The things God created in His world are all active in the world in which they were created, and the greatness of the actions of each is in accordance with its rank and importance. Behold, the heavens and all the host of heaven, all of them are active; they revolve the firmament, and they act upon the lower world as God created them and arranged them. And similarly, all the lower beings are active; the earth acts and produces its vegetation, and all that is produced from the earth is active. And the water as well is active, quenching the earth and causing it to sprout plants. And the wind also causes everything to grow, as is known. And similarly, fire, like the sun, heats and causes everything to grow. And so too all the animals and all the species in the world, "He did not create it a waste" (*Yeshayahu* 45:18), but rather it is stated about them: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (*Bereishit* 1:28). None of them is idle, and all are active in the world in which they were created. And every action is related to the doer; for heat, which is the action of fire, is related to it, and coldness is related to water, which brings about the coldness. And so too regarding all things, the action is related to the doer of the action.

And hence man, who is distinguished from all other animals by his soul – in that his soul is not a bestial soul, but rather a rational soul, not like the souls of other natural animals, whose souls are only natural – it must be that he has actions that relate to his rational Divine soul, and that he has actions that are rational and Divine. (*Tiferet Israel*, chap. 1)

Every entity in the natural world performs its function, each according to its nature and qualities. The sun warms, the earth sprouts plants, water quenches. In light of this, it is to be expected that man, too, should have actions that he performs in accordance with his unique qualities. Since man has a Divine rational soul, he should act accordingly. What, then, are the actions appropriate for a rational soul? While there are aspects in which man is the same as animals, due to which he must have existential functions such as nutrition and procreation, there must also be functions that characterize his unique rational soul. Therefore, the labors that man engages in, such as building or baking and cooking, are not what single him out, for they are only intended to ensure his survival. They are meant to deal with the weaknesses and problems that man encounters in reality – the human needs for a home, clothing, and food in order to survive.

The actions that pertain to the Divine soul in man are the *mitzvot*. These are the actions that man performs not to sustain himself and solve his earthly problems, but to actualize his spiritual nature. They express the level of life that transcends this world. More specifically, we may say that the seven Noachide laws lead to complete existence in this world, whereas the 613 commandments lead a person to the higher realm.

**Why are the *mitzvot* not natural to man?**

In light of this, one might expect that just as animals perform their functions naturally, man would perform the Divine functions naturally. Why do we not perform them of our own accord, and instead needed to be commanded about them? The Maharal addresses this question:

You may ask and say: If so, all of the unique actions of each and every one of the created beings – the actions are necessitated from it itself, and it does not change its actions. Why then are the Divine actions – i.e., the *mitzvot* – not found in man himself? This is not a question, for though it is proper that these actions should come from man, the evil inclination that [God] created in man brings him to the evil actions that come from the evil inclination in him. It is about this that Moshe our teacher rebuked Israel, saying: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth" (*Devarim* 32:1), as will be explained in the following chapters, to inform [us] that this is not in accordance with the order at all. For according to the rational order, the actions of each created being should be necessitated in accordance with what is fitting. And for man, whose soul is a rational soul, it is fitting that he would have special actions, namely, the *mitzvot* of the Torah, only that the evil inclination hinders. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, ibid.)

The Maharal explains that while man has a Divine side, he also has an evil inclination that pulls him in the opposite direction. The tension between these two sides places man in a complex situation. On the one hand, the *mitzvot* are appropriate for his inner soul and belong to him; on the other hand, he also has lowly inclinations and desires, and he conducts a dialogue with them. Consequently, he does not feel the *mitzvot* as natural and appropriate behavior, which flows from him naturally without any inhibition.

We may add in brief that subsequently, the Maharal addresses the difference between Israel and the nations based on the same principle. Since every person has a rational soul, the potential for the realization of Divine perfection is latent in every person. But the tension between the two sides, the Divine and the material, has engendered two cultures in the world: the culture of the nations of the world, who have chosen to be citizens of this world and to center their lives on the dimensions of this world, and the culture of the Jewish people, who focus on the Divine and center their lives on that. Therefore, although the Divine potential is inherent in the nations of the world as well, they observe only the seven Noachide commandments and remain within the confines of this world, whereas Israel observes the 613 commandments that actualize the Divine soul. It goes without saying that the issue of the relationship between Israel and the nations is vast and deep, and we will not address all of its aspects here; rather, we will continue to delve into the Torah and its essence, according to *Tiferet Yisrael*, in our next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)