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 #16: The Torah and the Soul**

We will continue in this *shiur* to discuss the essence of the Torah and its relationship to the human soul. So far, we have seen in the introduction to *Derekh Chaim* and in *Netiv Ha-Torah* that according to the Maharal, the Torah is an emanation of God, and constitutes the Divine order of the world – this world as well as the world to come. The Torah is meant to elevate man from the material world and bring him to the Divine level.

It is important to note that this understanding of the Maharal – that the Torah is not concerned with matters relating to life in this world, but comes entirely to connect man to the supernal world – stands in opposition to a prevalent view among his predecessors, who saw in the Torah, and especially in the *mitzvot* governing interpersonal relations, a program for the proper ordering of man's life in this world, a program that enables the building of a spiritual world on top of it. A clear example of this is found in the Rambam’s *Guide for the Perplexed*, where the Rambam explains at length that while the purpose of the Torah is to bring man to know God, in order to achieve this, there must be a system of commandments that will properly regulate the social life of this world – for as long as man is occupied with cares and quarrels, he will not be free to know God.

As stated, the Maharal’s alternative view is that the purpose of the Torah is not to properly manage the individual in this world, as it might seem at first glance from a *parasha* like *Parashat Mishpatim*, but to take the individual beyond this world to a life of *deveikut*,cleaving to God.

**The Nature of the Soul**

We saw in the previous *shiur* that the Maharal’s conception of the Torah as an emanation of God gives rise to the following question: How can man cleave to a supernal Torah?

In the opening chapters of *Tiferet Yisrael*, in which the Maharal addresses the essence of Torah, he discusses not only the question of what the Torah is, but also the question of what man is. According to him, Torah is suited to the human *soul*, and its *mitzvot* are the actions that express that aspect of human nature.

To understand the relationship between the Torah and the soul, one must comprehend the Maharal's conception of the soul. This is a question that was addressed by many Jewish thinkers before the Maharal, and the Maharal has his own unique position on it. We will see that he engages in a dialogue with the earlier thinkers, as well as with the philosophical-scientific views that were prevalent in his day.

Before the Maharal, we find two major conceptions of the soul. One of them finds expression in the position of the Rambam – that the soul in its initial state in man is purely potential, and as it realizes itself, it comes into actuality. Only through this realization does it turn from potentiality into actuality. According to this approach, since the essence of the soul is intellectual apprehension, the way to actualize itself is primarily by studying and learning. It must first study the basic sciences of nature and logic; on top of them, it must study Divine knowledge; and from all this, it must come to know God. So long as man does not do this, his soul exists only in potential. It does not exist in actuality; it is like a seed that is not yet a tree.

According to the second conception, the soul is a supernal spiritual entity imprinted within man. This seems to be the plain meaning of the verse: "Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (*Bereishit* 2:7); just as God created a body for man from the earth, so too did He create a spiritual entity and place it within man. A prominent proponent of this view is Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra.

A parallel dispute had already appeared among the ancient Greek philosophers: the Aristotelian conception is closer to the idea of the soul as potential, and the Neo-Platonic conception is closer to the idea of the soul as a spiritual entity that exists from the outset within a human being.

What is the practical difference between the two positions? A sharp, poignant example can be found in the tragic case of a baby who dies. According to the first position, since the child did not have time to develop his soul in his short lifetime, his soul did not come into expression but remained in its raw state; it would seem, then, that there is no *real* part of it that can merit immortality. According to the second position, however, the soul of the infant was complete from the outset and was merely placed in a limited body; once there, it remained perfectly intact, since the person who died prematurely did not have time to corrupt it.

The Maharal's position seems complex. We will examine, for example, the source where he mentions our test case – a person who died as an infant:

Do not, however, be misled by these words to deny perfection from one for whom it is impossible to bring his perfection to actuality, who passed away before bringing his perfection to actuality. We do not deny the world to come to him at all, if he had a disposition for perfection and died, for it was not in his control to bring his perfection to actuality. As *Chazal* said (*Berakhot* 6a), that if one thought to perform a mitzva but [did not do so because he was prevented by circumstances] beyond his control, he has reward for this as if he had performed the mitzva. This is because the future reward is for the soul, and when it is beyond his control, the obstacle is not because of the soul, but because of the body. Therefore, the soul receives reward as if it had done the mitzva*.* Only if he willfully did not do so, in his mind and in his intellect, and this was because of the soul. The reference is only to one for whom actualizing his potential was possible but he did not do so. This matter will be explained further, in a broad explanation and in clear words. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 3)

On the one hand, the Maharal speaks at the end of this passage in terms of actualization, like the Rambam; on the other hand, when he presents the test case in which the difference between the two approaches is manifested, he decides in favor of the second approach and says that a person's soul exists and is rewarded even if he dies at a tender age. If we listen carefully to the Maharal, we will see that he adopts an approach different from both earlier approaches.

**The Divine Soul**

The Maharal writes in several places that the soul is intellectual-Divine (*sikhlit*-*Elokit*). In the Maharal's terminology, "intellectual" means spiritual – belonging to the dimension above the material. But in what sense is the soul Divine? At first glance, we might think this can be explained in accordance with the Ibn Ezra’s view of the soul as a spiritual entity: while it is a created entity, and not the Creator, it is a created entity whose spiritual stature is so high that it can be called "Divine." It seems, however, that the Maharal uses the term "Divine" in a more exacting manner. Toward the end of chapter 3, he writes:

And in the *midrash*: "‘All the labor of man is for his mouth [and yet the *nefesh* (soul) is not filled]’ (*Kohelet* 6:7)… Because the soul knows that all the exertion that it expends, it expends for itself; therefore, it is never satiated of *mitzvot* and good deeds. Rabbi Levi said: This is analogous to a villager who was married to the daughter of a king; even if he feeds her all the delicacies in the world, he does not fulfill his obligation. Why? It is because she is the daughter of a king. Similarly, however much a man does with his soul, he does not fulfill his obligation. Why? Because it is from above” (*Vayikra Rabba* 4:2). And the meaning of this is that this soul, which is from above but is standing in the lower world, is always yearning for the Torah and the *mitzvot*, since it is in the lower world. And this is considered a deficiency of rank for it, that it is the Divine soul itself from above, standing in the lower world. (Ibid.)

The Maharal uses here a more pointed term for the soul, "the Divine soul itself." Moreover, the soul is represented in the parable as "a daughter of the king." A daughter is not an external creation that a father forms with his hands (which could be analogous to the Ibn Ezra's view), but a direct continuation and manifestation of the father. A more explicit expression of the nature of the soul appears in chapter 7, and reveals the source of the Maharal’s approach:

And thus it is that *Chazal*, wherever they wished to speak of the reward for the *mitzvot*, said: "These are the things that a man eats their fruits in this world and the principal remains for the world to come." For through the commandments, man comes to the actualization of perfection, as the soul is an emanation from above, just as a tree comes to the actualization of its perfection, to the point that he acquires the highest level and cleaves to the Creator. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 7).

Here too, the Maharal speaks of actualization, as does the Rambam, but he includes three important terms: emanation, tree, and cleaving. The definition of the soul as an "emanation" reveals once again how the Maharal draws on the world of Kabbala, and it reminds us of his conception of the essence of the Torah. "Emanated" means it is derived and drawn from God, as a tree draws from its roots below the surface of the ground. Kabbalists often use the metaphor of a tree to describe the vital and intimate relationship between God and the emanations that flow from Him. In the introduction to *Derekh Chaim*, the Maharal compares the Torah to a tree that draws its sustenance from the Creator and says it is an emanation from Him. Here, the Maharal uses the same imagery in reference to the soul.

These formulations of the Maharal, which point to the Divinity of the soul, are reminiscent of a concept that has become common parlance but comes originally from the writings of the kabbalists: "The soul is a part of God from above." This expression first appears in the writings of the Maharal's contemporaries: in the book *Pardes Rimonim* of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the great kabbalist of Tzefat before the Ari, and in the book *Reishit Chokhma* of his student Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas. The Maharal, in his *Derush al ha-Torah*,uses a similar expression in reference to the Torah, saying that it is "a Divine part from above."

From here we arrive at an answer to the question of how man can connect to the Divine Torah: It is true that the Torah is Divine and transcendent, but there is a soul within man that is also Divine and transcendent by its very essence. This soul, which is of Divine origin, has the power to enable *deveikut* to the Divine, through the Divine Torah.

In this light, we can also explain a unique statement of the Maharal in *Netiv ha-Avoda* (2): "Two things were given to man from God: the Torah and the soul." Based on what we have seen, this is not mere rhetoric, but a statement of depth: God gave man two things of His very own, namely, the Torah and the soul. Both are Divine in their essence, and both were given to man.

**The Service of Man Versus the Perfection of the Soul**

We still need to understand: If the soul emanates from above, why does the Maharal use terminology employed by the Rambam in asserting his view that the soul is in a state of potentiality rather than actuality?

It turns out that the Maharal's intent is quite different from the Rambam's use of these terms. The soul is not merely raw potential that needs to be actualized, such that until this happens, it has no reality. Rather, it is a fully actualized spiritual reality that emanates from God, except that in this world, it is contained within matter and so its manifestation is limited. To appear and be actualized in *this* world, it must come to fruition here – but in and of itself, it is already complete. With regard to the process of actualization, the Maharal adds an important qualification: since the soul is Divine, it will never complete the process; there will always be more that it can bring to fruition. This point is elucidated by the Maharal throughout the third chapter of *Tiferet Yisrael*. He warns the individual not to delude himself into thinking that he himself is already complete and perfected because he has a Divine soul. He must actualize the perfection of his soul in this world, and until then, he will not be complete as a person even if his soul is complete. In other words, one can say that the soul itself is already in actuality, but the person is not in actuality, and must uncover the soul within reality.

Thus, we can find many expressions in the writings of the Maharal that are similar to those of the Rambam. The linguistic similarity, however, does not indicate that their positions are identical. The Maharal is very precise in his formulations, and he uses these expressions only in places where they accord with his position. He describes the soul as being emanated from above, and attributes actualization to human endeavors.

In the course of his discussion of the *mitzvot* and the soul, the Maharal lays out the fundamental opposition between his own approach and that of the philosophers:

And with this, their question is removed entirely – [namely,] how can a person acquire spiritual rank by means of material actions? For our thoughts are not like their thoughts. For we say that the soul is an emanation from God, and it is like the daughter of a king who married a villager. And because she is dwelling in matter, she needs to be returned to the king, her father, and she needs no other completion. And she returns to the house of her father by way of the *mitzvot*, this being the only thing she lacks, since she is the daughter of the king herself. For the *mitzvot*, which are the intellectual order, bring her to fruition, until she is detached from the material and returns to the house of her father, who is the supreme King, as we said. For the soul is from above and is Divine and separate. And when a person performs a mitzva, which is an act of the intellect, he thereby approaches the transcendent level, and refines his soul from the material nature, both his body and his soul. For the act of the mitzva is a Divine act that he performs by means of his body. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 9)

The philosophers had questioned how performance of *mitzvot* could transform the soul into something Divine. But according to the Maharal, the soul is Divine in and of itself; the person does not have to make it so. The soul already exists, and needs only to be connected to the Creator and thereby return to Him. Fulfilling the *mitzvot* does not make the soul spiritual; rather, it reveals the spiritual soul that already exists, and helps it return to living in accordance with its Divine nature. The Maharal does not interpret the verse cited above, "And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," as describing the creation of a spiritual entity that would be integrated into the human being, as did the Ibn Ezra, but as the implanting into man of a Divine part that already draws from the Divine, as the Zohar says: "Whoever breathes – breathes from within."

**Observance of the Torah Based on Truth and Based on Suitability**

This perspective yields another dimension of the root of our obligation in Torah and *mitzvot*. Generally speaking, we understand on a basic level that the value of Torah is due to its absolute truth, and that it is binding because it is true. As we have already seen, it is clear that Torah, being true, contains absolute and binding content.

However, according to the angle that the Maharal develops throughout the first chapters of *Tiferet Yisrael*, the Torah obligates man because it suits the inner nature of his soul. A date palm produces dates, an apple tree produces apples, and man must actualize the Divine soul within him. The apple tree does not bear apples because they are better and more appropriate fruits than the date, but because that is its nature. Everything in the world is meant to act its part first and foremost out of loyalty to its inherent nature. A human, as well, fulfills *mitzvot* because they are the realization of his deep spiritual nature. The *mitzvot* would have been our natural movements, were it not for the material world's influence upon us.

We can now explain another principle as well: If the root of the obligation to keep the Torah were its objective truth, the gentiles would also be obligated to observe it. Instead, the source of the obligation is the fact that these *mitzvot* suit the Divine soul – and gentiles don’t have this type of Divine soul, but rather a soul whose concern is with life in this world. This is why they are obligated only in the seven Noachide commandments, which are designed to fashion proper life in this world. The Divine Torah is not matched to them, and therefore it only obligates Israel.

The Torah contains a dimension of absolute Divine truth, and for this reason, the Maharal strives to interpret every part of it in a specific manner and show how it must be so. But it also contains an additional dimension – the dimension of its suitability for the soul. A Jew is supposed to observe the Torah by his very nature; the reason it feels unnatural to us stems from the fact that our soul is enmeshed in matter, because we also have an evil inclination that makes it difficult to actualize our Divine soul. The soul itself is suited for the Torah, and man is called upon to fulfill it not only because of the truth of its content, but also because of its suitability for his soul.

**The Purpose of the Intellectual Commandments**

According to the perspective that the Torah is a guide to teach man how to live properly in this world, we can easily comprehend why it contains *mitzvot* whose reasons are understandable. As we have seen, these commandments are primarily aimed at creating order in society, and therefore they have rational, understandable logic, as the Rambam emphasized in his *Guide for the Perplexed*.

But according to the Maharal, who maintains that the *mitzvot* extricate man from the mundane and connect him to the Divine, it would seem that there should be no *mitzvot* that relate so clearly to the needs of this world. If we ordinarily ask why the Torah contains *mitzvot shimiyot*, that we cannot understand (as defined by Rabbi Saadya Gaon, and others in his wake), the question that must be posed to the Maharal is the opposite: If the *mitzvot* are meant to cause man to live according to the Divine dimension, why is it that *mitzvot* governing the relationships between man and his fellow remain, for the most part, on the plane of human rationality, with a clear earthly purpose?

What can the Maharal say to this? Will he give other reasons for the rational *mitzvot*? Will he claim they have no reasons at all? We will have to look carefully at the Maharal's words about *mitzvot* and their reasons, and see how he answers this question.

And it is not far from man that one can acquire spiritual success through good deeds, such as prayer and supplication, and having mercy on the poor with charity, and executing justice, and loving one's neighbor, and not worshipping other gods, and not blaspheming the name of God, and not stealing, robbing, or shedding blood, and not taking bribes or engaging in forbidden sexual relationships. For a commandment that is to serve God, like prayer and supplication, and refraining from worshipping foreign gods – they are all tools of the soul to purify it and to cleanse it of the baseness of matter. And it is necessary to return the soul in actuality, and to make it spiritual by purifying the soul, and to cleave to Him by serving Him. For this is the ultimate success, as the text attests: "And the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bond of life with the Lord your God" (I *Shmuel* 25:29). And the opposite of this – the abyss – is severance and separation from Him, as it is said everywhere of the abyss: "That soul shall utterly be cut off [*hikaret tikaret*]" (*Bamidbar* 15:31), and the Sages interpreted: "‘*tikaret*’" – in the world to come” (*Shevu'ot* 13a). It turns out that the reward is cleaving to Him, and the punishment is severance and separation from Him.

And this is undoubtedly clear to anyone of sound mind, that this soul, which is from the Creator, must be returned to the Creator who gave it. As it is stated: "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (*Kohelet* 12:7). And this is only in purity from material baseness, when he refines and purifies his soul from the material. And this is by the actions that God arranged for man in the intellectual order, and they refine his soul, and bring him close to God, until the person is cleaving to Him. (Ibid.)

The Maharal mentions here the most distinctive rational commandments that govern the relationships between man and his fellow and between man and God: "such as prayer and supplication, and having mercy on the poor with charity, and executing justice, and loving one's neighbor, and not worshipping other gods, and not blaspheming the name of God, and not stealing, robbing, or shedding blood, and not taking bribes or engaging in forbidden sexual relationships."

But the Maharal's explanation differs from those of his predecessors, even if at first glance it sounds similar. The Maharal immediately links his answer to the main principle he established with regard to the function of the *mitzvot*: "They are all tools of the soul to purify it and to cleanse it of the baseness of matter. And it is necessary to return the soul in actuality, and to make it spiritual by purifying the soul, and to cleave to Him."

Jewish philosophers had understood the obligation of intellectual *mitzvot* to be based on their intrinsic rational and moral logic, which is understood by the human mind, and based on their benefit for the improvement of society. According to the Maharal, the purpose of these commandments is not about society, but about liberating the soul from its bondage to the body and to materiality, in order to restore it to the Divine; to restore the king's daughter from the house of the villager to the king.

As we saw in the previous *shiurim*, the Maharal explained the role of morality in a similar fashion. The special power of rational human morality lies not in its obliging logic, but in its ability to liberate man from the dominion of matter. The Torah comes on top of this and elevates man to the Divine dimension. In similar fashion, but going one step further, the Maharal explains the *mitzvot* that seem to have a human dimension. They may include deeper, more Divine dimensions as well, but their intellectual dimension exists – and it is meant to purify the soul from the material, so that it can manifest again in its spirituality. The *mitzvot* that are not understood by human intellect are those that most distinctively elevate the soul to *deveikut*, and through which it returns to the Creator.

Thus, fundamentally, the *mitzvot* are acts that stem from the Divine wisdom that transcends human intellect, whose purpose is to reveal the super-rational Divine soul and thereby liberate man from matter and bring his soul to cleave to God. Thus, Torah connects man not only to truth, but also to the revelation of the human soul itself.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)