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 20: The Confrontation with Philosophy (4)**

As we continue to explore the Maharal's confrontation with philosophical thought, this *shiur* will consider his attitude toward the material world. The most prominent place where the Maharal presents a systematic position regarding this issue is in *Netivot Olam*, in the first section of the book – *Netiv* *ha-Torah* – which is followed by all the sections dealing with the various moral qualities (*middot*). In the first chapter of *Netiv ha-Torah*, the Maharal explains what the Torah is, and goes on from there to engage in a detailed clarification of the central principles by which a person can acquire the Torah. One of the central emphases of this series of chapters is the proper relationship to the material. This emphasis is evident from the openings to these chapters; as usual, the Maharal introduces each chapter with a statement of *Chazal*, but here he adds a kind of opening statement in his own words before each Rabbinic quotation. Examining these statements, chapter by chapter, sheds light on his position.

**Torah vs. Materiality**

In his opening to chapter 2, the Maharal explains why the acquisition of Torah requires a long process:

For the Torah is the supreme intellect and it is difficult to acquire the Torah, which is the supreme intellect; therefore, a person must prepare himself to receive the Torah, and if not, he will not receive it. The preparation that is necessary for the Torah involves many things until the person is worthy of the Torah, for man has a body and the Torah is Divine intellect, and **therefore a person must distance himself from those qualities that are corporeal** and adhere to the quality that is intellectual. (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv* *ha-Torah*, 2)

Preparation is necessary in order to acquire Torah because man has a body while the Torah is Divine intellect, and there is a conflict between the material and the spiritual. On the face of it, one could conclude from this premise that the body and the Torah are completely antithetical, and therefore man cannot attain the Torah at all. But this is not the Maharal's position; instead, he teaches how the Divine Torah can be acquired despite the initial chasm. The first task on the road to acquiring the Torah is working on one's *middot*, adhering to the moral qualities that are far removed from corporeality. Foremost among them is the quality of humility, which the Maharal discusses in chapter 2. We already discussed humility in the context of *middot* (see *shiur* 12); here we will only mention that humility, according to the Maharal, is not merely a pattern of behavior (which would seem to occasionally deviate from truth, since a person is called upon to perceive himself as lower than he really is), but a true and essential quality that emulates the infinite simplicity of God. Since according to a profound understanding, humility is an intellectual quality (as we explained in previous *shiurim* at length), achieving this *midda* is a step in a person's progress from materiality to the Torah.

Another condition for the acquisition of Torah is freedom from materialistic desires. Freedom from materialism stands out in the opening statements of the next several chapters. Thus, for example, the Maharal opens chapter 4:

It has already been explained above that night is the withdrawal of this corporeal world. The essence of the corporeal world is during the day, whereas **night is considered as if the corporeal world is nullified, and therefore the night is especially suited to the Torah**. (Ibid., 4)

Night is a time when the earthly world is at rest. In the modern world, the night is illuminated almost as brightly as the day, but essentially and fundamentally, night is a time when man disengages from the material world. For this reason, it is the most suitable time for Torah study.

Freedom from materialism is also the reason the Maharal offers, in his opening of chapter 6, for the importance of learning in a group:

Inasmuch as the Torah is the supreme intellect, which is separate from man, and **man's intellect is set in his body, which is corporeal; therefore, man needs preparation in order to acquire the separate intellect**. This is why the Torah should be acquired by way of a group, for by way of a group, one acquires the separate intellect, which is not like the wisdom that one acquires by himself, for that intellect is in the body and is not a separate intellect, but the intellect that is acquired by way of a group is entirely separate from the body. (Ibid., 6)

Every person is limited to his own personal human thinking; listening to other voices begins to free him from the straitjacket of his own mind and broadens his vision. When a person is freed from his own thinking, he is able to transcend the material boundaries by which his intellect is constrained.

The most forceful expression of the contrast between materiality and Torah is in studying Torah not for its own sake, as the Maharal writes in the opening to chapter 7:

After it has been clarified in the preceding chapters that the Torah is the separate Divine intellect, and that **it is impossible to acquire the Torah without removing oneself from the corporeal**, all the more so should Torah study itself not be for one's own pleasure. For all his pleasure is that which he does for his honor or for one of the corporeal things, and the Torah is separate from the corporeal, and if a man intends these things in his Torah [study], this is the absence of the Torah, for the Torah is not joined to these things that are corporeal, and therefore this is the absence of the Torah, as has been made clear. (Ibid., 7)

Action taken out of self-interest is the diametrical opposite of the Torah. For this reason, one who studies Torah not for its own sake cannot attain Torah; not because of any external "punishment," but because such study truly prevents the person from adhering to the Torah, since he is absorbed in his own material motives.

To sum up, we see that the Maharal emphasizes a consistent attitude toward matter in the openings of these chapters – and this is also his position in the chapters themselves. Let us look at the body of chapter 3, to see how the Maharal explains an idea of *Chazal* using this approach:

"Rav Huna said: …If a man makes himself like an animal that treads upon its prey and eats it, his learning will endure, but if not, his learning will not endure. And there are those who say: like an animal that drags its food, his learning will endure, and if not, his learning will not endure" (*Eiruvin* 54a). That is to say, the intellect is remote and separate from the body, and therefore, if a man is like an animal, which does not arrange its food but only treads upon it and rushes to eat it without any preparation, and so is not particular about its food – it is evident in this that this person is not inclined towards his bodily appetite, and therefore he receives the intellect completely, and his Torah will endure, **for when a person is not bodily, the intellect endures within him**. But if not, his learning will not endure, for it is evident that he has a material body with no relationship to the intellect at all. And likewise, according to the one who says like an animal that drags its food and eats it, that he is not particular about his eating, that it should be done properly – this man is ready for the intellectual. (Ibid., 3)

The Gemara brings two similar perspectives related to eating. Rashi interprets the words, "that treads upon its prey and eats it," as alluding to a person who takes no pains to enhance the taste of his food, and the words, "that drags its food," as alluding to a person who makes no effort to ensure that his food is fully cooked. Both statements instruct the Torah scholar not to invest in his meals, but to eat on the run – like in the *aggada* (which appears in several *midrashim*)about Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanos, who in his early days of studying Torah had no place to eat and would eat dirt until his mouth gave off a foul odor.

The Maharal explains the fundamental principle underlying this passage: one who rushes his eating and is not particular about its order is evidently not drawn to physical appetites. When a person is immersed in his food, his mind is directed toward the material world; it is precisely the hasty and disordered manner of eating that allows one to transcend to the spiritual realm.

**The Torah View on Materiality**

On the face of it, the Maharal describes a sharp dichotomy between the Torah and materiality, and it seems we could ascribe his approach to a general outlook that views materiality as the enemy of the intellect – a view that "the more the body is strengthened, the more the intellect is weakened" (*Chovot ha-Levavot*, gate of *Perishut*, 7). However, if we consider the Maharal's words from a broader perspective, we will see that this is only one aspect of his teachings.

A *mishna* in *Pirkei Avot* states: "Morning sleep, midday wine, children's talk, and sitting in the assemblies of the ignorant remove a person from the world" (*Avot* 3:10), and the Maharal explains:

For all these things are a pursuit of bodily matters and are a departure from the Torah, and therefore they remove the person from the world…

For when a person is drawn after morning sleep, he is then inclined and greatly drawn after the body, for when a person sleeps he is completely a body, for all his spiritual powers are cancelled, and there remains with the person only the body, and therefore with morning sleep, which is wholly sweet, and all his faculties are completely cancelled, he becomes wholly corporeal. (*Derekh Chaim*, *Avot* 3:10)

When a person sleeps, the body seems to triumph over the mind. The mind is at rest, and only the body's systems are active. There is, of course, a need for rest, but the morning presents a test: it is then that the mind must prevail, with all it has gained over the course of the night, and reassert its leadership over the person's faculties. If the body's dominion over the mind continues even in the morning, this “removes the person from the world.”

So far, the Maharal continues his line of contrast between the Torah and materiality. However, in his commentary on the next *mishna*, he clarifies another aspect. The *mishna* states:

Rabbi Elazar Ha-Moda’i said: One who profanes the sacred [meat of sacrifices], and one who slights the festivals, and one who causes his fellow's face to blanch in public, and one who nullifies the covenant of our father Avraham, peace be upon him, and one who exhibits impudence towards the Torah – even though he has to his credit Torah [study] and good deeds, he has no share in the life of the world to come." (*Avot* 3:11)

At first glance, we might suggest understanding this *mishna* as saying that sacred things, the festivals, and circumcision are spiritual concepts, and one who slights them is a person given over to materialism. Surprisingly, the Maharal goes in the opposite direction:

And all those mentioned by Rabbi Elazar Ha-Moda’i are the opposite of the first. For the first one, who puts all his thought and purpose in this corporeal world, his punishment therefore is that he is lost from this corporeal world. But those mentioned by Rabbi Elazar are the opposite of this, for they think that they should turn to nothing but the intellect, and they despise anything that has any corporeal aspect. Therefore, he mentions one who profanes the sacred [offerings], saying that there is no eating and drinking before Him, and therefore these things should not be offered to Him, because anything of eating is contemptible in His eyes. And similarly, one who slights the festivals, saying they are a physical joy to a person through eating and drinking, and there will be no Divine success in that which is solely physical eating and drinking. And similarly, one who nullifies the covenant of our father Avraham, saying that it is a disgrace to enter into a covenant with God with this organ which is of shame and disgrace – for his sole interest is to pursue the intellectual and to distance the things that are of the body. And similarly, one who causes his fellow's face to blanch, saying that man is material and his status is worth nothing, as the people who pursue the intellectual say, and they degrade corporeal man in every way. And one who exhibits impudence towards the Torah – this is when he finds corporeal commandments in the Torah, he interprets them improperly, and all this is because of his pursuit of the intellect and distancing of the physical. And about this [Rabbi Elazar] said that this man, whose full intention is the world of the incorporeal – this is the opposite of this world, which is corporeal – and he said that even though he has to his credit Torah and good deeds, he has no share in the world to come.

For the Holy One, blessed be He, repays the sinner with the opposite of what he desires and what he wishes, and therefore, regarding one who makes this world his primary concern and pushes aside the intellectual in favor of the worldly, which are those mentioned before, who are lovers of pleasure, he said that their punishment is that they do not attain their desire and are removed from this world that they pursue. And likewise, those who are the opposite of this, and attach no importance to this physical world, or to physical acts, even if they are good deeds, and say that the whole idea of man is only the acquisition of knowledge, through which he will attain the world to come, which is entirely intellectual, have no share in the world to come, the opposite of what they thought. Rather, it is fitting that a person distance himself from the affairs of this world, the affairs that have no substance; these things should definitely be distanced. But the affairs of this world which are the affairs which are desired, even though they are corporeal actions, they are actions that are desired by God, and through them one acquires the success of the world to come, for this world is a vestibule to the world to come. (*Derekh Chaim*, ad loc.)

According to the Maharal, Rabbi Elazar Ha-Moda’i is not arguing with those who disparage the holy, but rather with those who are against the material. One who profanes sacred things claims that God does not desire sacrifices because there is no eating before Him. He is not a materialistic person, but just the opposite, a philosopher who negates the service of God through the material. One who slights the festivals does not eat and drink on the festivals – that is, he is a philosopher who scorns all material pursuits. One who nullifies the covenant of Avraham – i.e., circumcision – this is also a philosophical argument, opposing the covenant we make with God precisely through the organ that represents the most lowly place. To these he adds one who publicly shames his fellow man – since the philosophers debase mankind and claim that man in himself is worthless, and that he can attain *deveikut* (adhesion) to God only if he severs himself from himself and clings to the active intellect, and even then, God has no interest in him. The last in the *mishna*’s list is one who exhibits impudence towards the Torah, essentially coming out against all the practical commandments. Such a person studies Torah, but not properly; rather, he interprets all the practical commandments as allegories of theoretical spiritual ideas. Since such a person despises this world and wants only the next one, he will receive “the opposite of what he thought" and will not attain life in the world to come.

It turns out that the Maharal wages war not only against the pursuit of materialism, but also against those who disconnect materialism from holiness. The Torah teaches that holiness is found precisely in the practical *mitzvot*, which are performed by the body and over which we recite the blessing: "Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us." On the one hand, subjugation to materialism alienates us from the spiritual realm, as the Maharal poignantly explains, but on the other hand, the entire world – both the material and the spiritual – has a Divine root. If we conduct ourselves in the material world according to Torah, we can reveal the spiritual root of every physical detail. This is the overall thrust of the Maharal. The Torah negates enslavement to matter, but it does not stand on the side of philosophy; the philosophers despise matter, while the Torah strives for the revelation of the holiness at its foundation.

**"The Sense that is a Disgrace to Us" – The Maharal Versus the Rambam**

On this point, the Maharal disagrees with the Rambam. The Rambam's approach to matter is closer to that of the philosophers. For example, in the chapters dealing with the reasons for the commandments in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, after discussing the reasons for the prohibitions in the realm of illicit unions, he writes:

This precept is not valid only from the point of view of the Torah, for the philosophers consider the matter in the same way. I have already made known to you the text of Aristotle's saying, “this sense, which is a disgrace to us” – he means the sense of touch, which leads us to choose eating and sexual intercourse. (*Guide for the Perplexed* III, 49)

The Rambam quotes Aristotle, who defines the sense of touch as a "disgrace" because it leads to eating and to sexual intercourse. This is the approach the Maharal opposed, and this is how he understood the criticism of Rabbi Elazar Ha-Moda’i. The Rambam quotes Aristotle’s perspective openly, indicating that he finds it close to the Torah position. Elsewhere, the Maharal comes out explicitly against these words of Aristotle:

For many of the wise, and they are those who examine the existents with their intellect, man's conjunction with his wife is his disgrace, shame, and reproach, to the point that they said unanimously that the sense of touch is a disgrace to us. And the Sages came to distance this matter, for the mind cannot tolerate this matter – that the foundation of everything, which sustains the world, namely, procreation, would be built upon a matter of shame and disgrace. And moreover, it is not an honor to God that that which is the foundation of the world would be based upon something that is a shame and disgrace, and when the foundation is weak, all that is built upon it falls. Therefore, it is fitting to distance this opinion, for there is no degradation at all in the conjunction of a man with his wife. And this is certainly the Torah view, as it is written: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (*Bereishit* 2:25). This thing was not a disgrace at all, and if it were a disgrace, why would they not be ashamed? And if [this is] because they had no knowledge, the mind cannot bear such a thing, that the man who named all the creatures (*Bereishit* 2:20), which indicates the extensive scope of his wisdom, would not have the knowledge that this is a degradation to man… But it is as we said, that there is no degradation at all in this matter in itself, but only because the person is intending for his lust and his desire, and because of this, the matter is a disgrace. And therefore, before he sinned and turned to his lust and his [evil] inclination, there was no disgrace in it. Only when the [evil] inclination entered him, and was clothed in material desire, then it was a disgrace, because of the lust… (*Be'er ha-Gola*, *be'er* 5, 4)

The Maharal vehemently rejects the possibility that the physical faculty upon which all future generations depend, and through which the mitzva of procreation is fulfilled, is a disgrace at its essence. If God created the world in this way, He must surely be interested in the conjunction of man and woman. The Maharal goes back to the ideal root behind the prohibition of illicit unions, and determines that it is great and a blessing, except that the evil inclination takes it in the direction of lust and materialism. In that situation, after the shift towards materialism, we are no longer talking about the conjunction of a man and his wife, but with the egoistic pleasure of the individual.

From this extreme statement of Aristotle and the Maharal's response to it, we can infer the Maharal's attitude to the material world in general: it is not materiality per se that is negative, but materialism. The material is a Divine creation, capable of serving as a basis for the holy, and only its misuse distances one from Torah and from *deveikut* to God.

**The Dispute About the Will**

At the periphery of this discussion, we will touch upon another dispute between the Maharal and the philosophers, on the subject of will. The creation of the world is described as the result of Divine will: God wanted to create the world, and He created it in accordance with His will. The philosophers, in contrast, refuse to attribute will to God.

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi explains the philosophical objection to ascribing will to God: "There is no will or dislike in the nature of God, because He is above all desires and all intentions. For intent intimates a lack in the person who feels it, and that satisfying the intent is his completion, while as long as it remains unfulfilled, he is lacking" (*Kuzari* I, 1). Will arises from a lack of something. If there is a will, that indicates that behind the scenes, there is a lack that gives rise to the will to fill it. Since God is complete, He should not have any will at all.

The Maharal discusses the issue in *Be'er ha-Gola*, in his commentary on a difficult *aggada* in tractate *Berakhot*:

Hence [we learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays. What does He pray? Rabbi Zutra bar Toviya said in the name of Rav: “May it be My will that My mercy will suppress My anger, and that My mercy will prevail over My [other] attributes, so I will deal with My children with the attribute of mercy, and enter before them beyond the letter of the law. (*Berakhot* 7a)

This sharp *aggada* requires elucidation: Does God actually pray? To whom does He pray? Apparently, he is addressing himself, that His mercy should suppress his anger, but why would He need to speak to Himself? The philosophers indeed scoffed at this *aggada*, but the Maharal exhorts us to understand the language of *Chazal*. The principles that the philosophers expressed in an abstract manner, *Chazal* expressed in a concrete manner, such as by describing God as praying. The Maharal explains the principle that is expressed by way of this description:

And in this matter, they came to reveal that we should reject the opinion of the philosophers, who said that all things come from Him by necessity, without His intending and willing to do; they come only by necessity. And our Sages rejected these words, saying that they come from Him by intention and will. And therefore they said that He prays, for if one desires and asks for something, that thing is not necessary. For if that thing were necessary, it would not be necessary to ask that that thing will be, since it is necessary. And therefore they said that He prays, meaning that he asks that there be a thing that is not necessary, like this, that He may enter before them beyond the letter of the law. And according to the philosophers, it is impossible that there could be anything in the world but law, since they say everything is by necessity. And it is known that that which is beyond the letter of the law is not necessary. And according to their opinion, there is nothing in the world from Him but law. And this the Sages came to refute, that it is not so, but rather He does kindness, and enters beyond the letter of the law, and this is because He desires and requests the good. (*Be'er ha-Gola*, *be'er* 4, 2)

The Maharal asks what the term "prayer" means; what essence did *Chazal* wish to encapsulate in this concrete expression? His answer is that the term "prayer" expresses the articulation of will. There are two possible ways of acting: by necessity or by will. The attribute of justice acts according to what is necessary, and cannot go beyond that. According to the Maharal, the terms "prayer" and "the strict letter of the law" parallel the concepts of will and necessity in philosophy. *Chazal* came to teach that God does not operate only in accordance with what is necessary, but also in a free manner. He is not bound by the strict letter of the law. The will of God does not, heaven forbid, arise from any deficiency; on the contrary, He is complete, and from His completeness, He has the free will to give and to bestow beyond the strict letter of the law.

This is another point in the Maharal's dispute with the philosophers, as well as with the opinions of the sages of Israel who adopted too much of the philosophers' thinking. The philosophers claim that they exalt and elevate God by denying Him any connection to matter and will, but in truth, argues the Maharal, they diminish Him. According to their way of thinking, He is limited to the realm of law and necessity, whereas according to Torah, He is infinite, transcending all bounds, and thus He can be the source of free will and also be freely associated with matter.

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