YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #22: The Reason for the Subjugation in Egypt**

Having gained a deeper understanding of the nature and role of the Torah in Manitou's teachings, and especially the great importance of the "Torah of the father," the national foundation that characterizes Judaism is now clear. Other religions have no such dimension; they are defined exclusively by their religious basis. The Jewish national identity is the basis upon which the religious layer is built.

This centrality of the national dimension and the importance of the processes of its development lead us to address the historical axis along which the nation's life and growth take place. We have already discussed the forefathers and the Divine attributes to which they gave collective expression. We will now broaden our view to include their descendants – the Jewish nation – which is born through the processes of the subjugation in Egypt and the Exodus. The first issue we will address is the reason for this subjugation.

**Manitou and Maharal**

Manitou's lengthy explanation of the reason for the subjugation in Egypt (set forth in the second volume of *Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot*) is based mainly on the teachings of Maharal (*Gevurot Hashem*, chapter 9). This is a good example of the significant place that Manitou awards to the Maharal.

What does Manitou understand as the overall importance of Maharal's approach? In one of his *shiurim*, Manitou discusses two different types of Jewish responses to the surrounding culture, calling them "Alexandria" and "Babylon.” "Alexandria" is the Greek style – i.e., adoption of the way of thinking and the intellectual tools provided by Greek philosophy. The substance is still Jewish, but the discussion is conducted using the tools and concepts of Greek philosophy – a trend that began with Philo of Alexandria and continued into the Middle Ages. "Babylon" is the approach of the Babylonian Talmud – the ongoing development of the internal Jewish language, without embracing the substance, style, or tools of the outside culture.

Maharal presented a third approach: addressing the surrounding culture and the questions that it raises, offering an authentic response in Jewish language. This possibility establishes a principle of critical importance: The Torah, as a broad worldview, has a message for humanity and the great questions that this world raises. Maharal discusses the issues and questions raised by the philosophers, but answers them using the language and tools of Torah. He presents a broad worldview that offers answers to the universal questions that occupy human intelligence. Manitou characterizes the approach of his own teacher, Jacob Gordin, in the same way.

**Explanation of the *Rishonim* for the Exile in Egypt**

As we shall see, Maharal's understanding of the exile in Egypt sheds light on one of the central themes of Manitou's teachings – the issue of identity.

The descent of Yaakov's entire family to Egypt is an unexpected twist in the biblical plot. At first it had seemed that *Am Yisrael* was supposed to develop in the land of Cana'an. This itself is not self-evident; Avraham had not started off in Cana'an, but rather was commanded by God to leave his birthplace and head for Cana'an, where he was to establish a nation. Nevertheless, once he settles there, our assumption is that the nation will come into existence in the land destined for it, just as any normal nation develops in its land. It therefore comes as a surprise when, after Avraham's children and grandchildren have already grown up and established themselves in the land, they are told to leave, in order to return again later on. Ultimately, *Am Yisrael* is formed in Egypt, over the course of their long and difficult slavery, and they face a struggle to leave Egypt in order to realize God's original plan. The reason for and role of this period of exile are therefore a great question, and many commentators have addressed it.

Maharal cites some of the opinions offered before his time (without mentioning the commentators by name). First he brings the view – which we find in the commentary of Abravanel – that the Egyptian exile was a punishment for the sale of Yosef. The logic leading to this conclusion seems clear: If we examine the chain of events that led to Yaakov's family going down to Egypt and look for an improper act that is a link in this chain, we can identify this act as the cause of the exile. The sale of Yosef is the most prominent problematic link, and it is also the trigger that brings the entire story in its wake.

Maharal rejects this explanation, pointing out that chronologically speaking, the picture is actually reversed. The Divine decree of subjugation precedes the sale of Yosef. It is not the sale of Yosef that leads to the descent to Egypt; rather, since the sons of Yaakov had to go down to Egypt, the sale of Yosef happened. Of course, this leads to a different question: Does this mean that the sale of Yosef was a necessary, predestined event, such that the brothers were not really responsible for it? The bottom line, for the purposes of the argument, is that *Bnei Yisrael* had to go down to Egypt, as borne out by God's words at the Covenant between the Parts, when He tells Avraham explicitly that his descendants will be exiled in a different land. The only questions, then, are how this will come about and where they will be exiled to. Perhaps *Am Yisrael* could have ended up in Egypt without the sale of Yosef. In any event, Maharal tells us, the whole story of the descent to Egypt cannot be traced to one single sin. It was part of a broader, predestined Divine plan.

A different possibility is proposed by Ramban. Commenting on the journey of Avraham and Sara to Egypt in the wake of the famine in Eretz Cana'an, Ramban presents numerous and impressive parallels between Avraham's descent and that of his descendants. These parallels illustrate the principle that "what happens to the fathers is a sign for the children" – i.e., the events of the lives of the forefathers represent a foreshadowing of what will happen later on in history. Avraham himself experiences something of the Divine decree "your descendants will be strangers…" even before this prophetic vision is revealed to him explicitly in the Covenant between the Parts.

Ramban's explanation here presents the descent to Egypt as part of a Divine plan that is hinted to in Avraham's experience, the purpose of which is still unknown. But later on, Ramban takes a different view, presenting Avraham's journey to Egypt in a negative light. He proposes that the famine in Cana'an was a test for Avraham and that he was meant to remain in the land despite the difficulty. Since he failed this test and went to Egypt, placing Sarah in danger, exile was decreed on his descendants.

It is not clear what the relationship is between these two parts of Ramban's commentary – the descent to Egypt as an allusion to God's plan for Avraham's descendants and the descent as a failure on Avraham's part – but ultimately the conclusion from his commentary is also that the exile in Egypt came as a punishment. Maharal rejects this view too, pointing out that if endangering Sarah at the hands of Pharaoh by claiming that she was his sister had been a sin, Avraham would not have repeated this strategy in Gerar, where Sarah was seized by Avimelekh (*Bereishit* 20).

A different possibility that Maharal cites is the idea of "afflictions of love.” Sometimes God brings suffering on a person in order to reward him afterwards. In principle, Maharal is willing to accept this idea, but he declares it inapplicable in the case of the Egyptian exile. "Afflictions of love" can be a possible explanation when the person who suffers is the same one who receives reward afterwards. But it cannot explain servitude lasting hundreds of years, when only the descendants of those who suffered reap the reward and return to their land.

**Servitude is Not a Punishment for Some Primordial Sin**

After questioning the previous views, Maharal introduces his own interpretation in characteristic fashion – by referring to *Chazal*. Aside from the specific difficulties that he identifies in each of the other explanations, he emphasizes that *Chazal* also raised the question and offered various responses. Therefore, answers need not and should not be sought elsewhere.

R. Abahu said in the name of R. Elazar: Why was Avraham punished with having his descendants subjugated in Egypt for two hundred and ten years? Because he drafted Torah scholars to fight, as it is written, “He led forth his trained men, born to his house.”

Shmuel said: Because he questioned the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, "By what shall I know….”

And R. Yochanan said: Because he prevented people from entering under the wings of the Divine Presence, as it is written: "[And the king of Sedom said to Avram,] Give me the souls, and the spoils take for yourself." (*Nedarim* 32a)

Three different answers are given for what misdeed on Avraham's part made it necessary for his descendants to undergo the servitude in Egypt. The question alone is enough to show that the Egyptian exile was not absolutely necessary; had it not been for some unseemly act of Avraham, it could have been avoided.

Once again, as with the concept of "afflictions of love," it is not clear why Avraham lives to old age with great riches, while his descendants pay the price. Maharal raises this question, finding it especially problematic in light of an issue that occupies him extensively – Judaism vs. Christianity. The Christian view is that all of humanity is punished for a primordial sin. While *Chazal* do not state explicitly that Avraham's act (whatever it was) was a primordial sin that cannot be repaired, the very perception set forth in the *gemara* sounds warning bells for Manitou, and we shall see below how he addresses it. First, however, let us note that we see here two central principles in the teachings of Maharal that Manitou adopts: first, a rejection of the concept of primordial sin, and second, the attempt to find answers in the teachings of *Chazal*:

Maharal rejects three different explanations proposed by previous commentators, for two main reasons. The first is that their explanations might lead the reader to the understanding that there was some primordial sin on the part of Avraham, as a result of which *Bnei Yisrael* suffer the affliction of exile – because of this sin – for generations …

The second reason for his rejection of the other proposed explanations is that they are built on ideas that do not appear in *Chazal*'s teachings, neither in the Gemara nor in Midrash. It is not for nothing that *Chazal* took the trouble to explain, in the Gemara or Midrash, all the issues relating to the root of our identity as the Jewish People and to our history. According to Maharal, there is no room to add additional explanations beyond those given by *Chazal*.… The issues pertaining to the root of our faith are not open to some or other interpretation, because the commentator tends to project his own private worldview and experience onto the text, and he thereby abandons the rabbinic tradition – the tradition of the *Perushim*. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, pp. 143-146)

Now we encounter a problem, for it would seem at first glance that adopting the latter principle (adhering to the interpretations offered by *Chazal*) leads us into trouble regarding the former (the rejection of the idea of primordial sin), since *Chazal* seem to be suggesting that a misdeed on Avraham's part brought the punishment of Egyptian servitude upon his descendants, a conclusion that Manitou rejects out of hand. Manitou finds the solution to this seeming contradiction in the words of Maharal.

**Repairing the Root of the Israelite Identity**

Maharal indeed offers an alternative understanding to that of primordial sin. He expresses the crux of this approach as follows:

There are three opinions in this regard, all of which point to sin [as the reason for the exile], and specifically a sin on the part of Avraham, for we have already explained: Everything develops from the root and the essence. Thus, if there is some deficiency in the root, the deficiency will be perpetuated in that which develops from it. (*Gevurot Hashem* 5:9)

The subjugation of *Bnei Yisrael* is not the result of some specific sin of Avraham. Rather, an inherent deficiency in the Israelite identity was revealed in Avraham, and this required a process of the subjugation of *Bnei Yisrael*, in order to fix this deficiency. Avraham was establishing a nation, and his qualities are the essence of the national qualities of *Am Yisrael*. Thus, if there are imperfections in these qualities, they will appear first in Avraham himself, and afterwards in his descendants. The stage of Avraham himself is the stage in which it is possible to identify the imperfection and correct it.

In Maharal's explanation of *Chazal*'s words, Manitou finds a new paradigm – the paradigm of identity, which replaces the paradigm of children being punished for the sins of earlier generations. *"*[Maharal's] enormous contribution is the idea that the forefathers are the root of the national identity" (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 144). “The identity of the forefathers in general, and of Avraham in particular, molds the identity of the nation. What is carried over to the later generation is not a deed performed by someone of a previous generation, but rather the result of some tendency of that identity – which is also the identity of the descendants" (ibid., p. 97). Included in the identity of *Am Yisrael* are the signs or tendencies that require repair and perfection. So long as *Am Yisrael* has not dealt with and overcome these tendencies, the Israelite identity cannot reach its perfection, nor can history achieve its ultimate purpose (ibid., p. 107). Manitou adds that the word “sin” is used to express this idea (ibid., p. 221), but the term is actually meant in the sense of a "deficiency," requiring growth and perfection.

Manitou is greatly enamored with the paradigm proposed by Maharal, including the way he builds up the concept of the identity of *Am Yisrael*. However, it should be noted that the understanding of Maharal's explanation as pertaining to the issue of identity is attributable mainly to Manitou, who highlights and clarifies this aspect of it.

Now we must understand what the imperfections detected in Avraham were, how they are at the same time a manifestation of his virtues, and how the Egyptian exile repairs them. Our discussion will also lead to an understanding of the ramifications of these imperfections for the major challenges facing *Am Yisrael* today.

Translated by Kaeren Fish