YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/24faith.htm>

**Shiur #24: Ends of Days, Individual and Communal, part I**

**1. Introduction**

The last two of the Rambam's principles are eschatological – they present to us the basic principles of the end of days, with the twelfth principle being the promise of redemption through the coming of the Messiah and the thirteenth principle being the promise of the resurrection of the dead. While Judaism has been less preoccupied with these topics than Christianity has been, there is nevertheless a vast Jewish eschatological literature. Note that there is a fundamental problem with any attempt to lay out a detailed picture of what the end of days will be like or, for that matter, what happens after one dies: the end of days has not yet happened and no one (that we know of, at least) has come back from the dead and reported what it is like.[[1]](#footnote-1) The prophetic accounts (or those in the book of Daniel) of such things are not very useful to the attempt to achieve a clear picture. These often use vivid imagery and metaphor and as such are subject to multiple interpretations. The various discussions of the Rabbis likewise abound with metaphor, not to mention profound disagreement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Because no knows firsthand what the end of days or the afterlife is like, the best way to think about the various attempts to describe them is as *projections*. That is to say, given what he knows about the God's relationship to history, how He interacts with the world, the nature of the human soul, etc., a given thinker *projects* how he imagines the end of days or the afterlife must be like. This projection will not be into thin air – he will have to take into account both *Chazal's* statements and the Biblical accounts, but given how unclear and contradictory these appear, he ultimately will be guided by how he thinks things must be. As such, studying someone's eschatology has the added value of revealing that thinker's basic assumptions about the fundamental nature of God's relationship to the world.

In this *shiur* I am going to focus on the Rambam's understanding of three different concepts associated with redemption: the messiah - *mashiach*, the resurrection of the dead – *techiyat ha-meitim*, and the afterlife – *Olam ha-Ba.* According to the Rambam these three ideas are all distinct and to some extent independent of one another. It is a sign of the Rambam's dominance of Jewish theology that most people take the distinctiveness of these three concepts for granted. There are many sources that reflect a far more interconnected understanding of these things, as we will see in a later *shiur*.

**2. Mashiach**

For the Rambam the coming of the Messiah is not a supernatural event. He adopts the position of the *Amora* Shemuel that "there is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah besides [the absence of] political servitude."[[3]](#footnote-3) For the Rambam this does not mean politics in the modern sense but the renewal of a Jewish commonwealth under the kingship of a descendant of David, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the renewal of all the *mitzvot*:

In the future, the Messianic king will arise and renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty. He will build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel.

Then, in his days, the observance of all the statutes will return to their previous state. We will offer sacrifices, observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years according to all their particulars as described by the Torah…

One should not presume that the Messianic king must work miracles and wonders, bring about new phenomena in the world, resurrect the dead, or perform other similar deeds. This is definitely not true…[[4]](#footnote-4)

Do not presume that in the Messianic age any facet of the world's nature will change or there will be innovations in the work of creation. Rather, the world will continue according to its pattern.

Although Isaiah (11:6) states: “The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat,” these words are a metaphor and a parable. The interpretation of the prophecy is as follows: Israel will dwell securely together with the wicked gentiles who are likened to a wolf and a leopard, as in the prophecy (Jeremiah 5:6):”A wolf from the wilderness shall spoil them and a leopard will stalk their cities.” They will all return to the true faith and no longer steal or destroy. Rather, they will eat permitted food at peace with Israel as Isaiah (11:7) states: “The lion will eat straw like an ox.”

Similarly, other Messianic prophecies of this nature are metaphors. In the Messianic era, everyone will realize which matters were implied by these metaphors and which allusions they contained.

Our Sages taught: "There will be no difference between the current age and the Messianic era except the emancipation from our subjugation to the gentile kingdoms."[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Rambam insists that the coming of the Messiah is not a break in the natural order. The world continues on in its usual way, except that the ideal political and religious order has been achieved. Any scriptural indications that the coming of the Messiah is associated with miraculous changes in the natural order should be interpreted as metaphor. The point of all this is the following:

The Sages and the prophets did not yearn for the Messianic era in order to have dominion over the entire world, to rule over the gentiles, to be exalted by the nations, or to eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, they desired to be free to involve themselves in Torah and wisdom without any pressures or disturbances, so that they would merit the world to come, as explained in *Hilkhot Teshuva*.

In that era, there will be no famine or war, envy or competition, for good will flow in abundance and all the delights will be freely available as dust. The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God.

Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and know the hidden matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential, as Isaiah (11:9) states: “The world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the ocean bed."[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the Rambam's vision, the desire for redemption is the desire for the end of the distractions and disturbances that preoccupy us and prevent us from the higher purpose of knowing God. National redemption, however glorious, is at most a means to an end, and that end is not national – it does not involve the Jews in particular but rather "the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God."

**3.  *Olam ha-Ba***

In pointing us to *Hilkhot Teshuva*, the Rambam reminds us of what he considers the true fulfillment of human potential:

The good that is hidden for the righteous is the life of the world to come… The reward of the righteous is that they will merit this pleasure and take part in this good. The retribution of the wicked is that they will not merit this life. Rather, they will be cut off and die….

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like….they will comprehend the truth of Godliness which they cannot grasp while in a dark and humble body.

The Sages did not use the expression "the world to come" with the intention of implying that [this realm] does not exist at present or that the present realm will be destroyed and then, that realm will come into being.

The matter is not so. Rather, [the world to come] exists and is present as implied by [Psalms 31:20: "How great is the good] that You have hidden... which You have made...." It is only called the world to come because that life comes to a man after life in this world in which we exist, as souls [enclothed] in bodies. This [realm of existence] is presented to all men at first.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Olam ha-Ba*, according to the Rambam, is spiritual life after death. It is not a historical period, like the days of the Messiah, but rather the ahistorical state of the soul of the deserving after that soul has been separated from the body. In *Olam ha-Ba* there are no physical needs – the soul is wholly occupied with the intellectual apprehension of God, which is the highest good. There is a great deal more of interest here, which I will return to in a future *shiur*.

**4. *Techiyat ha-Meitim* – the Resurrection of the Dead**

The 13th principle is the resurrection of the dead but the Rambam does not elaborate beyond simply stating that there is such a principle:

The thirteenth principle is the resurrection of the dead and we have already explained it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When we look for the explanation, we do not find much: earlier in the introduction to *perek chelek* (where the 13 principles appear) the Rambam does make reference to *techiyat ha-meitim*, but mostly only to disparage those who consider it to be the ultimate reward. He then goes on to explain that *Olam ha-Ba* is the real reward and that the descriptions of *techiyat ha-metim* and of *gan eden* serve mostly an educational program. A small child does not appreciate the intrinsic value of knowledge and thus must be encouraged to study with external motivators (the Rambam's examples are nuts and figs). As education progresses the motivators will change – monetary reward or social recognition come to replace sweets, but the ultimate goal is that a person should seek knowledge for its own sake. The strong implication is that *techiyat ha-meitim* functions as no more than part of this process to motivate people to desire knowledge of God for its own sake.

Given that this is the whole treatment of *techiyat ha-meitim*, it is not surprising that the Rambam was accused of not believing in it, despite its inclusion in the 13 principles. Much later in life, the Rambam replied to this accusation and wrote *Ma'amar Techiyat ha-Meitim* in which he elaborated and defended his understanding of this idea. He claims in that essay that there will indeed be a miraculous *techiyat ha-meitim* after the coming of the *Mashiach* and as part of the blessings of that period. The righteous will be resurrected and will live natural lives (though extended and healthier) and subsequently die (again), upon which they will be fully rewarded in *Olam ha-Ba*. It is difficult to understand how this conception of *techiyat ha-meitim* fits into the Rambam's larger vision of preferring the spiritual over the physical and the natural over the supernatural. It seems like the Rambam is almost forced by the explicit texts of the tradition (the Mishna *Sanhedrin* 10:1 and of course the text of the *Amida* prayer in which we bless God who revives the dead) to somehow accommodate *techiyat ha-meitim* into his system. Nonetheless, *techiyat ha-meitim* remains a relatively minor detail in the Rambam's vision of both the national end of days (the coming of the Messiah) and the personal reward to the righteous (*Olam ha-Ba*).

**5. What does the Rambam's Eschatology Teach Us?**

The Rambam distinguishes sharply between the communal (or even universal) end of days and the personal afterlife. The coming of the Messiah is the national redemption that affects the whole world. The Temple will be rebuilt, Jewish sovereignty restored, there will be world peace and economic prosperity will be available to all. All of this, the Rambam insists, does not require miracles! More importantly, such a state is not an end in itself but the means to the higher end that 'the world will be filled with the knowledge of God'. If we return to the claim that eschatology is projection, the Rambam's vision of the coming of the Messiah is very revealing. First of all, the insistence on the maintenance of the natural order, given what we know about the Rambam, makes a lot of sense. God created and designed the natural world and the Rambam consistently maintains that the world proceeding on its natural course is the expression of the will of God. As we learned in a previous *shiur*, that is the essence of *hashgacha* according to the Rambam. Thus, it does not make a lot of sense for the final redemption to be an abrupt breach in the natural order. The final redemption is the realization of God's plan in history but that history exists within nature. The description of the days of the Messiah is a description of the ideal human society, but for it to be a human society, it must be one that is populated by physical human beings who are born and die.

Ultimately, this ideal society is not an end in itself. It is a way for human beings to realize their purpose, which is to occupy themselves with the knowledge of God. Yet in order for them to remain human, they must live in the natural, physical, world.

The natural physical world is not, however, the end of the story. In sharp contrast to the days of the Messiah, *Olam ha-Ba* is an entirely miraculous state in which existence is entirely spiritual, without bodies or any bodily needs. Those who merit *Olam ha-Ba* are fully occupied there with perceiving God. It is clear that for the Rambam, the ultimate redemption is *personal*, and not national, and is reserved for those who merit *Olam ha-Ba*!

Our society generally takes the individual to be the primary unit of value with the value of community, nation and any other collective being derived from the value of the individual. In this context the Rambam's focus on personal redemption and emphasis on a personal connection with God as the ultimate goal, is a comfortable one for many modern people. Yet belief in *Olam ha-Ba* is not even listed as one of the thirteen principles!

**6. The Expectation of Redemption**

There is no doubt that the Rambam's inclusion of the belief in the coming of the Messiah and in the Resurrection in the 13 principles is partly influenced by the Mishna in *Sanhedrin's* claim that one who denies *techiyat ha-meitim* has no part in the world to come.[[9]](#footnote-9) Since *techiyat ha-meitim* is merely a detail (and an awkward one at that) of the coming of the Messiah, the Rambam included both in his principles. It is also true that if one reads the principles in context (they are part of an extended discourse that introduces that Mishna)[[10]](#footnote-10) then the Rambam makes very clear how *Olam ha-Ba* is a far more important and central concept than the *Mashiach* and especially *techiyat ha-meitim*. Nonetheless, he chose to leave it out of the principles and I think the reason for this has to with the point of having principles of faith in the first place.

The last two principles are simply beliefs about what the future holds. Like all of the principles, they are meant to impact the present and affect how we live our lives. On this level, the expectation of redemption is what is important, whether or not redemption is realized in one's lifetime. According to the *Amora* Rava, that expectation is one of the essential values of living a good life (*Shabbat* 31a):

Rava said, When man is led for Judgment he is asked, Did you deal faithfully [i.e., with integrity], did you fix times for learning, did you engage in procreation, *did you expect salvation*, did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, did you understand one thing from another. Yet even so, if "the fear of the Lord is his treasure," it is well: if not, [it is] not [well].

For Rava, fear of God, *yirat shamayim*, is the most basic value, but alongside it a fulfilled life includes basic honesty, a commitment to Torah, wisdom and parenthood. Rava adds to this list the expectation of salvation as an action, as a way that one lives one's life, rather than merely a remote hope or promise.

The Rambam, who was of course fully aware of Rava's statement, makes the physical redemption a principle of faith because the principles of faith are for living human beings. The nature of life after death (beyond the fact of reward and punishment) does not impact how we live our lives now. Life after death is not in our hands. The picture of the ideal society, as something to aspire to and work for, does have that impact. We may not be capable of realizing it fully in our lifetimes, but having the ideal is an important guide to what we strive for, both on a personal and on a communal level. Though for the Rambam, the point of society is to enable individuals to know God, individuals are never absolved of responsibility for building a just and good society which is a prerequisite for “The world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the ocean bed." In order to do so they need to have a vision of what that is like and thus must believe in *Yemot ha-Mashiach*.

1. I am ignoring the ever-growing literature on so-called 'near-death' experiences, despite its cinematic popularity. Whatever one makes of such reports (and I am not inclined to make much of them at all), they do not provide us with a great deal of critical insight into how God has structured *Olam ha-Ba*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To the extent that the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98b) records the scandalous opinion of R. Hillel: "there will be no Messiah for Israel, since they have already enjoyed him during the reign of Hezekiah." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Sanhedrin* 99a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim*, chapter 11. Translation courtesy of chabad.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. chapter 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, chapter 8. Translation courtesy of Chabad.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rambam, Commentary on the *Mishna, Sanhedrin* 10:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Technically speaking it is "one who denies that *techiyat ha-meitim* is from the Torah." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Introduction to *Perek Chelek*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)