YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #24: The Forefathers' Tendencies as Reflected in their Descendants**

In the previous *shiur*, we saw how Manitou interprets each of the reasons raised by the *Amora’im* for the subjugation in Egypt as leading back to the same principle: an excessive tendency towards *chesed* on the part of Avraham. This explanation in turn relates to the concept of identity that Manitou develops on the basis of the Maharal. The impact of the forefathers' actions on the lives of their descendants is a product of the identity that is molded by the forefathers and bequeathed to all future generations.

Following from Maharal's teaching, Manitou emphasizes that it is specifically because the issue at stake is the essential national identity that any imbalance in the root (i.e., in Avraham himself) would produce a most significant result in the genealogical tree that emerges from it, this result being referred to by the terms "sin" and “punishment,” which are not meant in the usual sense. He formulates this idea as follows: "At the level of the forefathers, even the slightest thing – which one might regard as trivial – has a tremendous impact" (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 221).

In the previous *shiur*, we dealt with the problems that arise when the attribute of *chesed* stands alone. In practice, the problems become manifest not in Avraham himself, but rather in his progeny. As an individual, Avraham was in fact supposed to represent the epitome of *chesed*. When it comes to his descendants, however – as we saw in our discussion of the unification of attributes – the ideal is a combination of the essential qualities of all three forefathers. It becomes a problem if *Am Yisrael* follows the path of Avraham exclusively, adopting *chesed* in extreme and disproportionate measure.

The problem arises because *Am Yisrael* has an innate tendency specifically towards *chesed*. The nation has to overcome this excess and balance it. Failure to do so – i.e., conducting themselves in a way that reflects excessive, unbalanced *chesed* – is considered a fault, a transgression.

In fact, Avraham himself faced this challenge. The ten tests that God subjected him to were stations on the road to balancing his attribute of *chesed* so that he could produce Yitzchak – the epitome of the attribute of *din*. Avram undergoes a long journey to become the full, complete Avraham; only then can Yitzchak emerge from him. This journey includes the story of the overthrow of Sedom, where Avraham has to place a boundary on his *chesed* towards the people of the city and understand that if there are not even ten righteous people in it, Sedom is deserving of its fate. Of course, the climax of the process that Avraham undergoes is the binding of Yitzchak – the greatest and most difficult challenge to his attribute of *chesed*.

The manifestation of *chesed* in its most concentrated form is an essential stage in the building of *Am Yisrael*. Thus, the pure and undiluted *chesed* of Avraham himself is not a violation of God's truth. However, as explained, a tendency at the level of the root has far-reaching ramifications for the trunk and branches that sprout from it. The question, "How shall I know that I shall inherit it?" is a faithful and accurate expression of Avraham's inner attribute. The problem arises when *Bnei Yisrael* continue to adhere to this way of thinking, failing to recognize their right.

**The "Identity" Interpretation and Current Events**

At this point, we must elaborate on another central principle in Manitou's teachings – the understanding of Torah as relevant to *Am Yisrael* at all times and in all situations. Since the Torah's intention is not merely to tell the stories of individual people, but rather to tell us about our national identity, whatever is recounted the Torah is relevant to whatever is happening to the Jewish People in our times as well. The same stories are happening to us. Therefore, in many places Manitou goes on to connect his interpretation with current events. Let us see how he identifies in our contemporary reality the problems noted by *Chazal* and Maharal.

Manitou regards the historiosophic-identity exegetical approach that he identifies in the writings of Maharal as the key to analyzing *Am Yisrael*'s problems today. This connection also works in the opposite direction: Today's events help us to understand the significance of the events recounted in the Torah. This focus occupies a central place in Manitou's teachings, although we have not addressed it thus far.

The main thing that we have to understand and internalize is that the root of the problems, questions, and challenges of today is to be found in those stories that the Torah tells us, especially in *Sefer Bereishit*. The proper approach to these subjects entails, on one hand, the principle that "the actions of the fathers are a sign for their descendants." In other words, the identity and the history of the forefathers serve to explain what happens to their descendants. On the other hand, we need to understand that the history of the descendants also explains what happened to the forefathers. In other words, we are the ones who are living out what the Torah tells us about the forefathers. The Torah doesn't discuss some virtual or theoretical nation; it is talking about us and to us. It is, in and of itself, our identity card. The problem is that we don't learn enough from experience, from history, and we keep making the same mistakes. We don't learn the lessons of history. (Ibid. p. 221)

**Excessive *Chesed* in the Contemporary Context**

Manitou applies this principle to the three answers proposed by the *Amora’im* as possible reasons for the Egyptian servitude. We have seen that according to one opinion, Avraham's "fault" was expressed in the question, "By what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" As a man defined by *chesed*, he cannot fathom the idea that *Eretz Yisrael* is given to him outright, as an inheritance. Manitou suggests that this same problem is reflected in the *aliya* figures in our times. Jews living in the Diaspora are hesitant to come to Israel; even Jews living in Israel are unsure about the Jewish right to the land. Despite all our longing for *Eretz Yisrael* throughout the generations, when we finally have the opportunity to realize our right to the land, we display weakness. This weakness is not necessarily limited to Jews who have lost the connection to their national identity; it is manifest even – and perhaps especially – among those who feel very strongly Jewish:

Today this weakness is manifest when a Jew [in the Diaspora] asks himself whether *Eretz Yisrael* belongs to us, or whether it is better to remain outside of Israel. Should I remain in exile or live in *Eretz Yisrael*?

The problem goes deeper than meets the eye. I think that all Jews living in the Diaspora who have not assimilated, honestly believe that *Eretz Yisrael* is truly theirs, but their conduct in their everyday life indicates the opposite. Once, in Canada, I visited a community of Moroccan Jews who had moved to Montreal. They sang, "*Le-Shana ha-ba'ah* *bi-Yerushalayim*" (next year in Jerusalem) with great feeling, and I saw real tears in their eyes. But when I asked who among them was intending to make *aliya*, they looked at me in astonishment. We have to understand that their faith in "*Le-Shana* *ha-ba'ah bi-Yerushalayim*" is real, and the refusal to move to Israel is just as real. How can this be? The problem is at the level of identity. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, 120-122)

Manitou argues that the weakness arises not from a lack of seriousness or faith, but rather from a profound place of difficulty in internalizing our right to the land. If after maintaining a connection of longing for the land for so long we display this weakness, the problem goes very deep and arises from a deficiency in our national identity. Manitou experienced this phenomenon personally and underwent a lengthy process before making *aliya*.

The deficiency that expressed itself in not bringing the people of Sedom under the wings of the Divine Presence is likewise relevant today. Manitou agrees that it is not possible to blindly accept anyone who is interested in converting, and we should certainly not be too lenient when it comes to the conversion process. Nevertheless, conversion is a task that we face. Manitou argues that the souls that Avraham failed to bring within the fold are the roots of the main forces that have been hostile towards *Am Yisrael* throughout history. For example, he cites the sects from the late Second Temple period, which were not accepted as Jews and which eventually gave rise to Christianity. This is admittedly a most complex issue, but complexity is not a reason to neglect the task altogether.

As to the third opinion – "that [Avraham] mobilized Torah scholars to fight" – Manitou suffices with a hint at the contemporary parallel. He follows in the footsteps of Maharal, insisting that true (!) Torah scholars are and must be spiritually free; they must be exempt from engaging in matters of the material world so that they can devote themselves entirely to Torah. He does not apply this principle specifically to the issue of army service for yeshiva students in our times, but he seems to hint to it. Perhaps his view would be that a Torah scholar who lives his life in a manner that is truly free from engagement in any of the concerns of this world is worthy of devoting himself to spiritual pursuit on behalf of all of Israel (in the spirit of the Rambam's teaching about the tribe of Levi), while other sectors of the nation are responsible for national security.

Translated by Kaeren Fish