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/25faith.htm>

Shiur #25: End of Days, part II

**1. Introduction**

In the last *shiur* we investigated the Rambam's vision of the end of days and juxtaposed it to his conception of *Olam ha-Ba*. It will come as no surprise to my loyal readers that this week I plan to offer a competing vision and that will be the one articulated by the Ramban. In *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, the concluding chapter to his *Torat ha-Adam,* the Ramban weaves together a vast number of statements of *Chazal* in describing his eschatological vision. He combines these with Kabbalistic sources to create a detailed picture of life after death and the end of days. He also has a point by point critique of the Rambam, convincingly showing the extent to which the Rambam ignores (or disregards) the main stream of Rabbinic thought on *Olam ha-Ba* and *Yemot ha-mashiach*. Given the very large scope of the Ramban's discussion, I can only summarize and discuss the main points here. Anyone interested in a fuller version of the Ramban's eschatology should study *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*.

**2. The Miraculous Nature of the Messianic Redemption and *Olam ha-Ba***

The Rambam emphasized how after the coming of the Messiah, the world fundamentally remains the same and there is no basic change either in human nature or in natural processes (with the exception of *techiyat ha-meitim*, which the Rambam struggles to fit into his system). Not so according to the Ramban. The end of days involves miraculous changes to the very nature of existence. Once the Messiah comes, God will “circumcise our hearts” and people will "naturally desire to do good and will have no desire at all for what is unsuitable." [[1]](#footnote-1)The culmination of the days of the Messiah will involve God reviving the righteous dead of previous generations who will live forever in bliss as *physical beings*. That period is *Olam ha-Ba*, literally the World to come, which is a temporal physical world that is miraculously different from the present. The days of the Messiah are the closing period of *Olam ha-zeh*, this world, during which God performs the miracles promised in the prophets. Raising the dead initiates the next world, about which we can know very little.

All of this might be unsettling to those of us used to thinking of *Olam ha-Ba* as heaven but it is nonetheless a much closer reading of Talmudic and midrashic sources. In the Ramban's vision, redemption involves the miraculous *intervention* of God. It is not a natural process or a political achievement (not to deny that it could be brought about by mass repentance). God intervenes and ends history as we know it and initiates a totally different world with totally different rules. It is truly the end of days.

This focus on miraculous intervention should come as no surprise to us. The Ramban teaches that God continuously interacts with the world by means of hidden miracles. The miraculous nature of the end of days is a situation where God's intervention becomes explicit and dramatic, as befits “the end of days." However, this is not the only important difference between the Ramban's eschatology and that of the Rambam.

**3. *Olam ha-Ba*, *Gan Eden* and Reward and Punishment**

The Ramban's understanding of the end of days brings out the way in which he is in radical disagreement with the Rambam about providence, reward and punishment. Recall that for the Rambam, the true reward for the righteous intellectual is *Olam ha-Ba*, a spiritual existence in which one is occupied exclusively with knowing God. This reward is not granted so much as achieved – whatever level one achieves in one's life continues into a spiritual existence afterwards.[[2]](#footnote-2) Punishment is not active suffering so much as the absence of reward, with the ultimate punishment being *karet*, which the Rambam understands to be simple annihilation – a person who receives *karet* does not have any continuation in *Olam ha-Ba*. There is no Hell, according to the Rambam, where the wicked are punished for their evil ways. Their punishment is that they cease to exist when they die. Rabbinic statements which indicate otherwise are either to be disregarded as minority opinions or interpreted metaphorically.

The Ramban found this vision both morally offensive and in conflict with the Talmud. Particularly, the notion that there is no active divine punishment flies in the face of many statements of *Chazal* and undermines the belief in divine justice. God both rewards and punishes, say the Ramban, both in this life (recall the discussion of *hashgacha*) and after one is dead. *Gan Eden* is the spiritual place in which the righteous souls wait until they receive their final reward at *techiyat ha-meitim* and *Olam ha-Ba*. Its parallel is *Gehinnom* where the wicked are punished. The existence of *Gehinnom* ensures divine justice; every good or evil action has a consequence and is rewarded of punished, either during one's lifetime or afterwards. It is worth noting that though he asserts that *Gehinnom* is a place of fire, the Ramban does not offer up much in terms of elaborate explication of the suffering experienced there. For the most part, that suffering is temporary:

Those who deserve this punishment (*karet*) are condemned in *Gehinnom* for 12 months in accordance with what they deserve. After the conclusion of their punishment their souls are "burnt and made into ash" – that is to say, their nature is changed from what it was, like something burnt that has returned to ash, and the spirit of God, may He be blessed, takes it (it is a spirit of acceptance and condolence) and scatters it under the feet of the righteous ones – so to speak, on a level that is beneath that of the bliss and rest of the righteous but that is a level that has neither suffering nor punishment like before… "Those who float up" that our Rabbis mentioned [i.e., the people who were neither righteous nor sinners] rise after their punishment to a level which has rest and bliss, just not at the level of the righteous.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Ramban insists that reward and punishment are meted out by God in precise accordance with each person's actions. God judges us, during our lives (*Rosh Hashana* is the Day of Judgment) and upon our deaths, and ultimately everything is accounted for.

The Ramban (following *Chazal*) uses the idea that there is reward and punishment in the afterlife as part of the explanation for the apparent worldly success and happiness of many sinners and suffering of good people (*tzaddik ve-ra lo, rasha ve-tov lo*). Suffering during one's life can be a blessing – by its means one "pays" for one's sins now and the merits the World to Come. Likewise, the success of the sinner may likely be his reward for his good deeds, given during this life since he is not deserving of *Olam ha-Ba*. Whatever one makes of all this (and it is really much more complicated), the important point is essentially one we made in our discussion of *hashgacha*. God *responds* to human behavior both by rewarding and punishing. These are active responses of God and not just natural results. The afterlife exists in order to ensure that everyone gets his or her just deserts.

**4. The Relationship between the Physical and the Spiritual**

We saw how the Rambam emphasized the superiority of the spiritual existence of (his version of) *Olam ha-Ba*. As far as the Rambam is concerned, physical existence is nothing but an obstacle to the achievement of the real human purpose which is to know God. This purpose is also the reward, as *Olam ha-Ba* is the full-time spiritual engagement in knowing God. The Ramban, again, drawing on sources in *Chazal*, strikingly reverses the hierarchy. The soul which is preserved after death is a sort of spiritual substance. But the true reward for the righteous is not the mere continued, blissful existence of the soul but its reunion with the body at *techiyat ha-meitim*. Physical existence is *superior* to spiritual existence. To be sure, in order to ensure that the righteous after *techiyat ha-meitim* know no suffering, their physical existence is of a radically different nature than ours. They do not suffer sickness, death or injury. But the essential point remains that the higher form of human existence is not vague or ethereal but is manifest in having a body as a physical person. How could this be?

I will return to this issue in the next *shiur*, which will be about the relationship between mind and body, but I want to introduce some ideas here. The Rambam, in his profound commitment to the permanence and stability of nature, and in parallel, to divine transcendence, is forced, in a sense, to give less respect to real, physical, human beings. Since God is the source of all value, and God is "outside" the world, thus valuable human activity, as embodied in the eschatological ideal, must involve *escaping* the world. Given his philosophical/ theological commitments, the Rambam could not but reach this conclusion. But this is the Rambam, not merely a great intellectual who lives in an ivory tower, but one of the greatest halakhists of all the generations, who is preoccupied with the nitty-gritty detail of Halakha as it applies to real people (*osek be-shefir ve-shilya*). This same Rambam is a famous doctor and a great communal leader who spends the lion's share of his time (as he himself testifies in a famous letter) dealing with other people's problems. There is something tragic in the Rambam's rejection of the ultimate value of the physical world, but it is important to emphasize that we cannot derive from a philosophical position a full-blown value system. The Rambam does not advocate becoming a hermit in the desert in order to focus on knowing God. He is a model for all generations of involvement, commitment and *chesed*. In reading the Rambam's philosophical writings one is struck by the profound dissonance between the life he led, and advocates that others lead, and the ideal he proposes.

In contrast the Ramban's insistence on divine immanence, on God's involvement in everything that happens, means that God Himself is "this worldly". The religious goal is not to escape, but to enable God to reside in this world.[[4]](#footnote-4) His eschatological vision matches and proposes an ideal of human fulfillment which involves fully embodied human beings. This is not merely because the bliss of *Olam ha-Ba* is only possible for creatures with bodies. It is because the human relationship with God cannot be disconnected from our being bodily creatures. This position is that advocated by the Ramban, the famous kabbalist and mystic.

**5. Yemot ha-Mashiach as a Source of Meaning**

Before concluding, I want to consider for a moment the source of the human fascination with both the end of days in the sense of the end of history, and the end of days on the personal level, namely the afterlife. In one sense, the notions of the final redemption on the one hand and the afterlife on the other are different, even opposing, spiritual/existential movements. The aspiration for an "end of days" as the conclusion to historical progression to some final, complete, but fundamentally static state is a desire for closure. History comes to an end and in doing so it becomes possible for us, as finite beings, to understand it, to give it purpose and meaning. The thought that the world just continues on and on, leading nowhere, is a terrifying one. If that were the case how could human affairs be significant?

There are other ways of giving the sweep of time meaning, most prominently the ancient notion of 'cyclical time' articulated most famously by Mircea Eliade[[5]](#footnote-5). The Jewish yearly cycle of the *chagim* is a good example of this, especially given its linkage to the agricultural cycle. But Judaism never limited itself to conceiving of human experience only in terms of a stable time cycle that repeats over and over. Judaism has always insisted on integrating a conception of linear time into the cyclical. It has been argued that this conception of time as progressing forward linearly, to an ultimate redemption, is one of ancient Judaism's seminal contributions.[[6]](#footnote-6) Be that as it may, the notion of time or history progressing to an end creates a very important shift in consciousness. It is tied to the idea of there being a covenant, a *berit*, between the Jewish people and God. The *berit* can then be said to be "the charter" of a project in which people are God's partners in making a better world. In this light, the promise of the end of days is the promise that the project has an end, that ultimately the goal will be achieved and thus that human striving is meaningful.

There are two related dangers that are inherent in this conception. The first is hubris. Being a partner of God in the cosmic project is a heady role and one constantly runs the risk of losing sight of who is the manager of the project and who is the worker. Understanding oneself as bringing about the fulfillment of the divine promise can lead to tunnel vision in which some of the values embodied in that promise get lost in the service of pursuit of others.

The other danger is despair. One's enthusiasm for the project can turn instantly to despair in the face of a setback. It is for this reason that we are taught:

R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end. For they would say, since the predetermined time has arrived, and yet he has not come, he will never come.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Living with the expectation of redemption demands a fine balance between these extremes, in which participation in God's plan is a source of encouragement and solace rather than of either arrogance or hopelessness.

**6. *Olam ha-Ba* as a Source of Meaning**

*Olam ha-Ba*, as a personal reward (spiritual or physical), affects one's conception of life in a very different way. Instead of creating closure, of viewing things as having an end, *Olam ha-Ba* offers the endless openness of eternal life. This too serves to make life meaningful. In confronting Job's problem of how good people suffer and the evil prosper, the fact of an afterlife in which justice is served is very significant. One can say that the belief in the afterlife is supported by the consciousness of how unjust human life often is. We expect justice from God; even if we are aware that our perception of reality is very partial, we expect that justice to fit our own understanding and the possibility of the afterlife is an important part of how we can accommodate the fact that life as we see it often seems unjust.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is this expectation of justice that makes *Olam ha-Ba* into such a powerful motivator. Life after death is not merely the locus of justice but of its expression as reward and punishment. When put to the test, when facing temptation, the promise of divine punishment is often the most successful way to deter sin. Likewise, the promise of eternal joy and fulfillment can be very helpful in gathering one's resources to do good.

The Rambam was very aware of the danger inherent particularly in the promise of reward. The risk lies in the degradation of the actions performed. Something is lost when the performance of good becomes an instrumental means to reward:

A person should not say: "I will fulfill the *mitzvot* of the Torah and occupy myself in its wisdom in order to receive all the blessings which are contained within it or in order to merit the life of the world to come."

[Similarly, he should not say,] “I will separate myself from all the sins which the Torah warned against so that I will be saved from all the curses contained in the Torah or so that [my soul] will not be cut off from the life of the world to come."

It is not fitting to serve God in this manner. A person whose service is motivated by these factors is considered one who serves out of fear. He is not on the level of the prophets or of the wise.

The only ones who serve, God in this manner are common people, women, and minors. They are trained to serve God out of fear until their knowledge increases and they serve out of love.[[9]](#footnote-9)

That is not to say, as the Rambam himself emphasizes, that doing the right thing out of expectation for reward or fear of punishment is empty. For many people at many different times, the hope for reward in *Olam ha-Ba* has been a source of enormous strength. Yet especially today, in which explicit self-serving motivation is something that many people are not even embarrassed about, the Rambam's message is essential. Ultimately we must serve God out of love, out of our conviction that it is the thing to do and that is its own reward.

1. Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, *Devarim* 30: 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I will discuss the degree that this continued existence is *personal* in the next *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* 122, my translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the Ramban's commentary to *Shemot* 25:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Romanian philosopher and historian of religion (1907-1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishna*, Macmillan, 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Sanhedrin* 97b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I am not claiming that the afterlife offers a pat answer to the problem of unjust suffering. Rather it is part of what makes the presence of suffering bearable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:1. Translation courtesy of chabad.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)