YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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**Shiur 25: Excessive "*Chesed*" in *Am Yisrael***

In this *shiur*, we will take the discussion another step forward. We have seen that Manitou traces a characteristic that exists in Avraham – the attribute of boundless *chesed* – throughout the history of *Am Yisrael*. The issue of excessive *chesed* comes up in different forms in his writings. In a certain sense, this emphasis seems rather surprising. The general impression arising from our *shiurim* thus far has been that according to Manitou, *chesed* stands at the center of Creation; the entire world rests on the principle of making room for the other. This is the most primal and fundamental Divine movement in the creation of the world, and it is the ultimate purpose needs to attain. Nevertheless, Manitou emphasizes that excessive *chesed* is problematic. This makes sense in light of another principle that we have seen in his teachings: the unification of attributes. *Am Yisrael* is not meant to adhere to and practice *chesed* exclusively, but rather to achieve a balance between it and other attributes. Therefore, *Am Yisrael*, which is naturally imbued with *chesed*, must be taught the necessary boundaries and limits of this attribute, which has in fact led to many downfalls over the generations.

A well-known *midrash* teaches that God originally wanted to create the world with the attribute of justice, but when He saw that the world would not survive, He included the attribute of mercy. Manitou describes a similar idea, but in the opposite direction: *Am Yisrael* develops with the attribute of *chesed*, but it is impossible to exist with this attribute alone, and therefore the attribute of justice needs to be added to it. Indeed, there is a *midrash* that presents both directions simultaneously: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy, it will be greatly sinful; [if I create it] with the attribute of justice, how can it survive? So I will create it with the attribute of justice as well as the attribute of mercy. May it survive!" (*Bereishit Rabba* 12:15)

This principle explains not only the servitude in Egypt, but also a long list of statements and phenomena that Manitou mentions, viewing them all as resulting from an excess of *chesed*. The expression that appears both in *Shmuel II* and in *Tehillim*, "*im chasid titchased*" ("With the righteous You show Yourself to be righteous") is to be understood as meaning, “specifically with the righteous,” but not with the wicked.  *Bnei Yisrael* are "merciful people, the descendants of merciful people," but one who has mercy on wicked people is ultimately being cruel towards the merciful – as we see in the case of Shaul’s handling of Amalek.

Radical "Abrahamism" may exist as an option for singular individuals, but the prescribed path for the collective, and for deciding Halakha, is built on the unification of the attributes of *chesed* and justice, just as a fully functioning sense of hearing requires input from both ears.

**Excessive *Chesed* Towards the Other Nations**

Manitou devotes extensive discussion to one of the expressions of this excess in history: the emergence of Christianity. He views Christianity as an extremist form of *chesed*, in which every sin is forgiven and "turning the other check" is the proper response to any attack.  This extremism leads to the situation that *Chazal* warn about: "Anyone who is merciful towards the cruel will ultimately be cruel towards merciful ones" (*Tanchuma*, *Metzora* 1 and elsewhere). The great foe of a person who is merciful towards the cruel is one who is merciful in limited, careful measure, and therefore the former will oppose the latter fiercely, to the point of cruelty. This explains why Christianity fought against Judaism and spilled huge quantities of Jewish blood.

Manitou points out that it is not by chance that the foundational mythos of Christianity is a man who comes to save the world at the cost of his life. In contrast to Judaism, which aims to perfect the world, the climax and ideal of Christianity is absolute self-obliteration. It maintains that morality teaches us to make absolute room for the other – to the point that the "room-maker" is erased, having no room for himself. Manitou discusses the mistake inherent in this view at length.

Similarly, he disagrees with another French Jewish thinker who was his contemporary – Emanuel Levinas, whose philosophy Manitou likewise regards as an excessive form of *chesed*. He understands Levinas's moral philosophy as a call to justify the other for no reason except that he is the other. To Manitou's view, this will encourage criminal and immoral behavior. What the nations of the world learn from Levinas is not to make room for the Jews, but rather the opposite; they heap additional demands on the Jews to make room for themselves:

There are many people today in Israel who hold “Abrahamic” views. The danger lies in this tendency being taken to an extreme and being severed from other attributes. When someone comes and says that the other is right just because he's the other, that's the beginning of a problem. It opens the door to justifying any despicable act, any murder. On the collective level, we dare not accept such views or such positions. It is a genuine position for an individual, but Halakha demands the unification of attributes. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 100)

In his commentary on Avraham's life, Manitou explains inter alia Avraham's statement that Sara is his sister. If Sara is Avraham's wife, the Egyptians and Pelishtim are completely and hermetically separated from her. If Sara is Avraham's sister, then Avraham has a way of influencing the whole world; everyone has the possibility of connecting with him. The result of this strategy is quite different from what Avraham intended; both Pharaoh and Avimelekh take Sara for themselves. This problem has accompanied *Am Yisrael* throughout the generations. When *Am Yisrael* seeks to give, to extend its influence outward, the nations of the world exploit this desire, taking but not giving. *Am Yisrael* yields – and the other nations dominate. *Am Yisrael* seeks to share Torah with the world – and Christianity appropriates the Bible as its own. *Am Yisrael* makes room for the other in Eretz Yisrael – and Islam exploits this, claiming the land as its own.

Over the course of its exiles, *Am Yisrael* has taken Torah to every corner of the globe. The Torah has a universal message for all of humanity, and a special message that is meant especially and specifically for *Am Yisrael*. The nations of the world ask Israel: Is the Torah universalistic or particularistic? Is it your sister or your wife? When *Am Yisrael* answers that Torah is its sister, that it is universalistic, the nations conclude that they can take it and forget about *Am Yisrael*.

That is what happened to us during the exile. Those nations adopted the *Tanakh* and killed the Jews. We have to remember that for two thousand years Western culture tried to blur the connection between the Jews and the Bible. In the eyes of the Christians, the Church is the real Israel. Today they claim that “Palestine” doesn't belong to the Jews; it belongs to everyone – except for the Jews, of course. When we finally dare to respond, they say, “But you said she was your sister." (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 110)

None of this comes to negate the attribute of *chesed* in *Am Yisrael*. It is important that *Am Yisrael* display superb *chesed*; *chesed* is our great message. But at the same time, there is something no less important that must be manifest in the world: the unification of attributes.

In our previous *shiurim*, we reviewed Manitou's interpretation of the story of Kayin and Hevel. We saw how, to his view, each side is at fault: Kayin was forbidden to kill, and Hevel was forbidden to give in and allow himself to become a victim. To some extent, these power relations continue to characterize the relationship between the nations of the world and Israel, and indeed, there have been Christian theologians who identified Israel with Hevel, who brings a moral message but loses his life and existence. Manitou explains that, in fact, *Am Yisrael* should be identified with Shet. Shet represents a sort of combination of Kayin and Hevel; he (like Kayin) is presented as a "son" (not a "brother"), but he is capable of fraternity. He builds a city, like Kayin, but is a shepherd, like Hevel. Hevel is transient; Shet is firmly established and stable, and *Am Yisrael*, who will emerge from him, will be indestructible. *Am Yisrael* will ultimately be chosen to take on the role of educator for mankind and will fulfill this mission throughout history. *Am Yisrael* is eternal and is destined to display the unification of attributes and caution against excessive *chesed*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish