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/32faith.htm>

Shiur #32: Concluding Shiur:   
On Immanence and Transcendence

# Introduction

As this series comes to an end, I want to take the opportunity to consider an issue that has been in the background of a great deal of the discussion throughout. Very often, in fact nearly in every shiur, my discussion of a topic ended inconclusively, without a firm resolution or a conclusive argument about what we should consider the true beliefs of Judaism. I believe that this reflects a very important aspect of the whole endeavor of philosophical reflection of this sort, which I will try to explain below. In this shiur I will argue that the point of reflection of this sort cannot be to reach some sort of ultimate resolution. The reflection must justify itself in other ways, as we will see.

# On Immanence and Transcendence

The basic tension that has recurred over and over in our attempts to grasp how God relates to the world is between immanence and transcendence. An immanent God is part of the world and a character in history. He is apprehended by prophets, He reveals Himself to human beings, is enraged and by their betrayals and satisfied and joyous when they successfully conform to His will. He punishes the wicked, rewards the faithful and responds to prayers. All of these, however, are aspects of a theological imagination that conceives of God as a person, who as such must be limited in His knowledge and power, bound by time and space, part of the universe rather than the Author or source of it. The alternative is a transcendent God who is quite frankly beyond our imagination, beyond our capacities to describe or understand, utterly mysterious and utterly inaccessible. At best, and even this is debatable, we can describe Him with vague abstractions, as if we are, so to speak, reading His CV rather than meeting him.

Besides its theological importance, the transcendent conception of God is significant because it makes room for other sorts of explanation of events in the world. If God is intimately involved in human affairs, such that He is exquisitely responsive to all that we do, as a strongly immanent conception would have it, then there is little room for scientific explanation and even human initiative is called into question. So if the laws of nature are more than just illusions, and human beings are the authors of their own lives, then God must be removed, at least to some extent, from the world. A transcendent conception of God allows for this.

The tension between immanence and transcendence can express itself in different ways. One way is for us to choose, based upon some external considerations, to resolve the tension by preferring one conception to the other. However the cost of such a choice is very high: if we choose to engage unequivocally in God's immanence, to the exclusion of His transcendence, we allow for at least the potential for a vibrant religious life, of prayer and practice that relate to a living God. In doing so, however we embrace a God who is largely a creature of own imagination, who is largely a projection of our own hopes, fears and desires. The monotheism of unqualified immanence is very close to a sort of monist paganism, and the religion it engenders lacks a kind of intellectual rigor, since we know that God is not merely a supernatural person. Yet if we choose the alternative, and exclusively conceive of God as removed from the world, the cost might even be greater. Avoiding any whiff of a paganistic God who is limited by what we can imagine, may result in religious emptiness. Though rituals and *mitzvot* might be maintained, they would lack any meaning or significance beyond being brute normative obligations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The classical Jewish philosophers did not choose between the options as I have presented them here. They did, however, incline in one direction or another, while attempting to soften the implications of that preference as much as possible. The Rambam, as we have seen extensively, pursued his transcendent conception of God, insisting that all the powerful imagery of the Bible that suggests divine personhood should be read metaphorically, and most of the *mitzvot* understood in anthropological terms. Yet the Rambam, as a deeply religious individual, could not, or would not, fully embrace the implications of a completely transcendent God. He insists on the reality of prophecy, on the possibility of a human being reaching a state of connection with God. This connection, to be sure, is fundamentally intellectual rather than emotional, but nonetheless succeeded in furnishing a channel for the Rambam's religious passion.

At the other extreme, stands perhaps the figure of Rav Yehuda Halevi, who is willing to give up on transcendence, at least at one point in time, in order to emphasize the immanence of God as it is expressed in revelation. The revelation at Sinai, claims Rav Yehuda Halevi, was a real appearance of God before all of Israel. It was direct experience of God and it is on the grounds of that experience that we should reject, he claims, the philosophical conception of God. Yet even Rav Yehuda Halevi cannot do so wholeheartedly. A great portion of *Sefer ha-Kuzari* involves the struggle to recover those elements of philosophical religion that he deems necessary.

A most interesting way in which the tension between transcendent and immanence was negotiated can be found in the Kabbalistic tradition. The Kabbalists did not explicitly choose one over the other but rather developed a system in which God's relationship with the world is understood hierarchically. At the very top lies the *Ein Sof*, the ineffable essence of God. Yet God relates to the world through the *Sefirot*, such that an extremely robust immanence is found on the levels of the lower *Sefirot*. Every aspect of the world, in this system, is intimately involved with the divine. It is not merely the product of divine creation but continuously interacts, through the mediation of the *Sefirot* with divinity. This approach, though recognizing the fundamental tension, does not essentially allow the fact of transcendence to impact religious consciousness. This gives rise to a tendency in Kabbalistic and Chasidic thought for the spiritual to overwhelm the physical and mundane which gives rise to a worldview that is uncomfortable for many (including myself).

# The Cynical Option

The great heroes of Jewish thought, the Rambam, Ramban, Rav Yehuda Halevi and others, had no difficulty in confidently asserting a particular theological position and polemicizing against their rivals. However, some historical distance and perspective tend to undermine one's ability to embrace a single perspective. The tradition embraces the whole range, despite the explicit and implicit contradictions between them. What are we to make of this?

One way to respond to the vast range of ways in which our understanding of God and His relationship to the world has been articulated is to conclude that the whole discourse is not very significant. One could read Jewish tradition as looking at the activity of reflection about how to understand God and His relationship to the world with something of an ironic eye: there is a human need to attempt to understand these matters, but ultimately no way of resolving or clarifying them, so we will tolerate a whole range of positions. So long as none of the positions undermines something essential – like the basic belief in God or the need to be fully committed to the Halakha – there is not much need to choose between the various nuances.

Such a cynical take on Jewish philosophy is, I fear, not uncommon in Orthodox circles today. Its great weakness lies in its lack of respect for the passion and commitment with which great thinkers of the past engaged these issues. It is part of a general shallowness and unwillingness to engage with complexity that sadly pervades our culture. Yet the discomfort that engenders the cynicism is well founded. If such questions are fundamentally unresolvable, as they seem to be, why spend time engaging them?

# Living the Tension

Inspired by Rav Soloveitchik and to an extent by Rav Kook as well,[[2]](#footnote-2) I have tried to suggest an alternative approach to, on the one hand, the traditional compromise between immanence and transcendence and on the other hand a cynical disrespect for the whole endeavor. I have tried to present competing positions as part of an unresolved dialectic – as approaches to the truth which do not cohere yet together point to a reality that is greater than that described by either one.

Each approach or position is the attempt of a great mind's attempt to grapple with the most basic questions: who is God? How does He interact with the world? How can we interact with Him? What makes human beings special? What is the role of the Jewish people? What is the nature of the Torah? All of these questions and the many others discussed in this series have been given a wide variety of answers. We can and should engage critically with all of them. We will almost certainly find some that resonate more favorably than others. Some we will even find impossible or offensive. But ultimately, I believe we are better served by sacrificing systematic consistency in favor of the attempt to embrace both sides of the dialectic without attempting to resolve it. Reality is bigger than our understanding and thus sometimes our understanding is best served in conceding its own limitations.

# Rationality and Mysticism

There is no small sacrifice involved in this position. Unresolved dialectic, or at least its ultimate expression as a contradiction, is something of a cardinal sin in philosophical writing. As any first year student of logic can tell you, one you establish a contradiction, then any and every assertion can be logically justified. Once every possible assertion is true, then of course nothing is true. Another way of making this point is psychological: it is psychologically impossible to believe an explicit contradiction – such a belief will simply be incoherent.

I am not advocating incoherence (is that even possible?) but what I like to think of as a kind of humility. If we do not take it upon ourselves to resolve all the contradictions, to come up with a systematic final answer to all of these questions, we can gain the ability to inhabit different perspectives at different times. We can accept, with the Rambam, that God is inaccessible to us except in brief flashes of insight. We can also accept, with Rav Yehuda Halevi, that God spoke to all of *Am Yisrael* at Sinai. That is not to deny that these two claims are in conflict but to assert that the mysterious relationship between God and human beings is better described by asserting both opinions than by one or the other. We cannot make them cohere but perhaps we can allow them to co-exist in our minds.

One might argue that if rational, philosophical discourse leads to such an impasse, perhaps the right response is to give up on rationality as a source of religious meaning. Perhaps we should embrace a kind of mystical understanding that is resistant to rational criticism and untroubled by contradictions.

The problem with this response is the following. A mystical approach which eschews rationality may indeed be able to provide insights of significance. The problem is that it will lack the resources to distinguish between real insights and projective hallucinations. It is precisely the critical tools provided by rationality, with its embrace of logic, which grounds any ability we might have to distinguish between the subjective and the objective. In a sense, this leads us back to another unresolved dialectic: mysticism (at least construed as religious experience that is innocent of rationality) includes too much, and a religion where everything goes quickly deteriorates to paganism. Rationalistic religion, in insisting on consistency as its highest value, ultimately turns on itself and excludes almost everything. What we need is to somehow hold on to both of these. Classically, this has been done through some sort of compromise between the two, as I have already mentioned. I am suggesting an alternative to compromise, in which we try to let conflicting ideas co-exist.

# Theory and Practice

Part of what makes this possible is the centrality of practice in Judaism. That is not to say that doctrine is irrelevant, as the cynical position would have it, for practice is informed by doctrine and vice versa. Rather, the necessary unity of religious life, our identity as religious Jews and servants of God can be focused around action, while maintaining broad and even inconsistent justifications for those actions and explanations of their significance. For example, if prayer is to be meaningful, it requires some sort of at least implicit commitments regarding the nature of God's providence, His presence in time and space and involvement in human affairs. Yet though the form and content of Jewish prayer has been strikingly stable for at least the last 1200 years, the accounts of what prayer is, and of what it implies about these questions have been strikingly divergent. As described in the *shiurim* about prayer, traditional prayer has been interpreted to fit with an exceptionally wide range of theological possibilities: for some, prayer is to a transcendent God whose involvement in human affairs is fundamentally that of a First Cause while for others it is addressed to an immanent God who is literally responsive to pleas for mercy. As religious people, we must pray, but the meaning and significance we give to the act need not always be the same. At times we will pray to our divine Father, who mercifully hears and responds to heartfelt prayer. At other times our prayer may be an act of character building self-effacement, in which we take the time to reflect on our own weakness and dependence in relation to a distant Almighty. These are surely incompatible ways of praying, reflecting philosophically incompatible worldviews, yet there is no barrier to one person inhabiting each one of them at different times. To make philosophical consistency the ultimate value is to deny the ultimate ineffability of reality and to presume that one can understand the mind of God.

# Unresolved Dialectic and Religious Passion and Commitment

There is no denying that the complex perspective I am suggesting involves a certain schizophrenic element. We strive to be integrated personalities, at peace with ourselves and at home in the universe and we ought to do so. The drive to integration and consistency is not merely human nature but at the very center of being created in the image of God, who is One. Nonetheless, only God is truly integrated, in a manner that we do not understand. The problem with the lack of integration that I am suggesting as a religious position is more psychological than theological. Given awareness of the complexity and tension inherent in the attempt to understand God and His relationship to the world, how does one maintain commitment and enthusiasm? There is no doubt that it is easier to be passionately committed to a monistic, internally consistent worldview. The internal pluralism that I am recommending is almost necessarily a damper on passion: the alternative way of looking at things is always lurking in the background, creating skepticism and undermining focus. I do not know the answer to this question and in fact struggle with it myself. I also know that despite my struggles, it is possible to embrace complexity and maintain passionate commitment – I have seen it in my teachers and in the writings of those who inspire me. For myself, and I think many others, abandoning complexity in search of a deeper commitment is not really an option. I do not know how to conceive of the world and of God's relationship to it in some single all-encompassing way. Nor do I know how to give up on the desire to understand. So we must struggle to understand and at the same time struggle to not let the awareness of ultimate mystery undermine our commitment.

So I bring this series to a close. I want to take this opportunity to thank my editor, Rabbi Dov Karoll, for his careful reading and many helpful suggestions throughout. I would also like to thank my old and dear friend Rabbi Reuven Ziegler for his encouragement to write this series and his aid along the way. For those of you who do not know, it was Rabbi Ziegler who had the vision of the VBM more than 20 years ago and he is one of those most responsible for making that vision a reality. I pray that this series has enriched the lives of my readers and contributed to their relationship with *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* as much as it has to mine.

1. The religious vision propounded by Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz is perhaps the clearest modern expression of this tendency. Beyond the nearly inhuman aridity of this vision, I very much doubt that a coherent conception of divine command can be maintained once we strip religion of all of its mythic elements. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is somewhat ironic to represent Rav Kook as a complement to Rav Soloveitchik on this point. Throughout his writings Rav Soloveitchik emphasized competing models of religious thought without much attempt to resolve the tensions between them. Rav Kook, on the other hand, emphasized the ultimate mystical unity of opposites. There is surely a difference in spirit here, but also a similarity in that both thinkers refused to give up on the value inherent in a way of thought even if they also accept a competing, even contradictory, way of thinking. For both thinkers, the response to such tension is not resolution through compromise or preference but rather to require the individual to expand his consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)