YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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***Shiur* #16: The Unification of Values and Attributes – continued**

We have seen that although Avraham embodied the value of *chesed* and the concept of making room for the other, which is the foundational value of the world, *Am Yisrael* could not be built on this principle alone. The balancing attributes of Yitzchak and Yaakov were also necessary. Only when “*din*” and “*rachamim*” are added to “*chesed*” can an entire edifice be built.

As mentioned previously, all this applies not only to the attribute of *chesed*, but also to any value. No value should be realized absolutely and exclusively. There is always a need for balance. This principle is one of the foundations of Lurianic Kabbala: At the beginning of Creation, there was the world of chaos, in which all the Divine *Sefirot*/attributes were manifest, and each tried to assert its dominance. The world of “*tikkun*” – repair – is built on order and balance among the attributes, each occupying its proper place as part of a harmonic whole. Manitou connects this idea with the quest to overcome the pagan mindset: Each pagan god represents a spiritual force in the world, and idolatry entails awarding unlimited power to a single entity. However, the same problem has plagued religions that arose later on in history – Christianity and Islam – and is also conspicuous among movements of recent generations, such as socialism and communism. The absolute sanctification of a single value is ultimately destructive.

**Movement of Unification: From the Tower of Bavel to the Forefathers**

The phenomenon of detachment of values from each other began with the generation that built the Tower of Bavel. In the story of Kayin and Hevel we observed man’s failure to make room for the other; in the generation of the Tower of Bavel, man failed to recognize other values. Mankind was transformed from a single cohesive society into a multitude of different forces, each standing on its own. Mankind lost its familial functioning, the ability to contain different types and to find the correct balance between them, and it broke apart in every direction.

Following that disintegration, two solutions to the crisis made their appearance – one in the form of Nimrod and the other in the form of Avraham. Nimrod sought to make everyone the same, under his totalitarian rule, with no room for differences. Avraham, in contrast, sought to create a unifying society in which people make room for each other. His aim was that a sense of unity would spread throughout all of humanity, with every nation maintaining its unique character, while harmony would prevail among the nations.

Humanity might be compared to an arrangement of flowers: Each flower has its place and its importance, and if a particular flower is missing, the arrangement is incomplete. The “kingdom project” arrangement, as originally represented by Nimrod, was uniform; it awarded a place to only one kind of flower. The “messianism project” arrangement, embodied in *Am Yisrael*, is diverse, consisting of seventy different types of flowers, all of which collectively form a vibrant and colorful arrangement. The role of *Am Yisrael* is to be the unifying factor. The nation’s task is two-fold: first, to achieve internal unity, and then to proceed with this internal unity to unify all of mankind, such that there is room for each of the families of the earth and for its unique genius to find full and authentic expression. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* IV, pp. 185-190)

**From Avram to Avraham – The Process of Building Identity**

The challenge facing humanity comprises different layers, which continue the process of Creation (i.e., making room for the world’s existence). The first layer is making room for the other, which is the most fundamental moral obligation; its development leads to the level of fraternity. This is the layer of *chesed*. The next layer is the unification of attributes. Here the various attributes are arranged together to form a harmonious “face” that gives appropriate expression to each (like God, Who joined His attribute of justice to His attribute of *chesed*). The objective is to unify the attributes, but everything starts with *chesed*.

Just as Manitou perceives the history of the world as a continuous process that gradually brings us closer to realization of the thought behind Creation, Avraham’s life is similarly a process of growth that gradually builds him up to his full stature. The ten tests that Avraham overcomes are not proof that he was fully perfect from the outset. Rather, with each test, he develops another layer of his personality until he is ready and fit to establish the nation that will encompass all the attributes.

The most conspicuous sign that Avraham undergoes a process is the fact that he is not given the name “Avraham” at birth. He starts his life with the name “Avram,” and is only named “Avraham” at an advanced age. He undergoes a process of growth over the two stages described above – from the embodiment of *chesed* to the unification of attributes. His identity as “Avram” is an identity of *chesed* as an exclusive value. His identity as “Avraham” is an identity that makes room for the attribute of justice as well – or, more generally, an identity reflecting the unity of attributes.

If we look at the course of Avraham’s life, we can point to the major stations in this process. One example is Avraham’s prayer for the inhabitants of Sedom. Motivated by his extreme *chesed*, he prayed that these wicked people would not die, but he also knew when to stop praying. If the city lacks even a minimal number of decent, righteous people, then justice requires that it be destroyed. In his prayer for Sedom, Avraham learned that *chesed* has its limits.

Avraham undergoes nine tests relating to the attribute of *chesed*. The tenth test, the *akeida*, has a different orientation – it tests Avraham’s ability to be connected to the attribute of justice. The *akeida* tests his ability to place a boundary on his love, to act in a manner that runs directly counter to his most central and essential quality, and to terminate the existence of the other – his own son. In a sense, the *akeida* was easier for Yitzchak than it was for Avraham; the ability to accede to God’s command and to bind his son required realizing the attribute of *din*. By the end of the episode, it becomes clear “that you are God-fearing” – in other words, that Avraham possesses not only love of God, but also the fear of God; not only *chesed*, but also din.

Throughout *Sefer Bereishit*, there is tension between brothers. At the end of the *sefer*, we find a unifying encounter between Yosef and Yehuda. Only the totality of Yaakov’s sons, embodying all the attributes and understanding the need for each one of them, can make up the whole picture. This is the meaning of the *midrash* describing the exchange between Yaakov and his sons as he is on his deathbed:

R. Shimon ben Lakish said: “And Yaakov called to his sons and he said, ‘Gather and I shall tell you…’”: Yaakov wished to reveal to his sons what would happen at the end of days, but the Divine Presence departed from him. He said: Perhaps, heaven forfend, I have someone unworthy among my children – like Avraham, who fathered Yishmael, or like my father, Yitzchak, who fathered Esav? His sons answered him: “Hear O Yisrael – the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” They said, “Just as there is only One ]God] in your heart, so there is only One in our heart.” Then Yaakov declared, “Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingdom forever and ever.” (*Pesachim* 56)

Over the years, a question mark had hung over the family: Would there eventually be a united edifice, or would one or more of the sons be rejected? At the end of Yaakov’s life, it turns out that despite all the differences among the sons, all subjugate themselves to One God. This represents the full realization and embodiment of the unification of values and attributes: Although they are different people, each with its own character (as symbolized in the flags that the tribes display later on in the wilderness), the totality of the values that they represent reveals that “the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” This remains the purpose of *Am Yisrael* to this day: The forefathers bequeathed us their attributes and our task is to unify them.

**Unification of Attributes – The Message of the Torah**

Manitou explains that whenever a movement works to advance some value, it is prompted by the lack of that value. For example, Islam is characterized by “*din*,” might, and cruelty, specifically because the characteristic of *chesed* is already ingrained in it. There are no boundaries to its *chesed* – neither in its positive aspects, such as the practice of hospitality, nor in its perception of family and intimacy. Islam inherited Avraham’s characteristic of *chesed* via Yishmael, and it lacks the trait of “*gevura*.” Conversely, Christianity fights for *chesed*, because it inherited the “*gevura*” of Yitzchak via Esav.

How is this principle implemented in Avraham’s family? We find three characters – Yishmael, Esav, and Yaakov – each of whom is the archetype of a different nation and culture: Yishmael represents the Arab nations, Esav represents the Christian nations, whose roots go back to the Roman Empire, and Yaakov represents *Am Yisrael*. The main motto of Arab society is “*din*,” while the main teaching of Christian societies is *chesed*.

We find, then, that each archetype adopts a different ideal, depending on what it lacks in reality. The reality of Esav is that he is bloodthirsty: “… and by the sword shall you live.” It is the Christian nations who have been responsible for the most horrific wars in world history. When Christianity promulgates its ideal, it speaks of *chesed* – because *chesed* is what it lacks. The main religion in these nations is based entirely on this value. The Arab world embraces a religion that based entirely on the value of *din*, because it senses that this value is what it lacks. No one needs to teach an Arab about hospitality, about *chesed*. He knows. But this *chesed* is not balanced by the opposite value – *din*. This deficient value therefore becomes the ideal. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* IV, ibid.)

The Torah has no message for these movements. In order to wave one single banner and to promote just one value, there is no need for Torah. Every action can be evaluated in terms of whether it serves that value. The need for Torah arises first and foremost when what is required is to unify and balance all attributes and values. The other nations can suffice with those *mitzvot* needed to facilitate the fraternity equation – i.e., to allow them to live alongside each other. Their aim is to make room for the other on the most elementary level. The other remains “other”; the forces are still divided. The Torah aspires to more – not just making room for the other, but unification with the other. This overarching perspective can be achieved only through Divine revelation. This is manifest in the multiplicity of *mitzvot* representing different values, including some that even in and of themselves reflect a balance between values.

The Oral Torah develops this trend, exploring the Halakha in relation to each and every different situation. We find that in a certain situation a certain prohibition applies, but the moment the reality changes and there is a great need, the Halakha identifies the boundaries of the prohibition and under certain conditions gives license. This shift introduces a different consideration or value, which takes precedence in that situation. The Halakha takes all the various considerations into account – indeed, this is the substance of the Oral Law. The *Gemara* sometimes proposes an “*ukimta*” (the designation of a specific, limited case as the scope of a general rule) to resolve seemingly contradictory *mishnayot* and *beraitot*. In other words, it distills each principle to its purest form, with no other factors coming into play. But the main work of the *Gemara* (and the *poskim* of all later generations) is in the opposite direction: to take all the relevant principles into account, to evaluate all the considerations, and to arrive at a ruling. The literature of the *poskim* gives the impression that the Halakha is clear-cut, but responsa literature shows how rulings are in fact complex and balanced.

Thus, the transition from the Seven Noahide Laws to the 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah is not merely a quantitative jump; it is also a qualitative shift – from a body of laws intended merely to allow human beings to coexist to a teaching directed towards the unification of all attributes.

**Ahavat Yisrael**

The stage of the forefathers was essential. The ideal of unifying the attributes could not have been introduced before each attribute was permitted to manifest itself in full. Had we been commanded at the outset to combine *chesed*, *din*, and *rachamim*, we would live these three values in a partial, half-hearted way. We would not internalize or appreciate any of them properly and completely, and the result would be that we would apply each of them from the outset only to a limited extent, so as not to interfere with the others. For this reason, we needed figureheads at this initial stage of our history, each epitomizing one of the attributes in the fullest and most powerful form. The forefathers were the first stage on the path to unification of the attributes. The second stage was the giving of the Torah, which teaches the proper way to bring about that ideal.

There is also a third element: *ahavat Yisrael*. *Am Yisrael* is made up of different types of people, expressing all the attributes. Throughout history, this diversity has created tension and friction. Over the generations many different – sometimes mutually contradictory – movements have appeared: the more philosophically-inclined vs. the more kabbalistically-inclined; *Chassidim* vs. *Mitnagdim*, etc. This tension is ultimately good, since each movement left to itself could bring great harm if it exceeded the proper boundaries, and the opposing movement serves to balance it. However, exposing the essential unity of all these different aspects requires an attitude of love. The differences between different groups also find expression in the ingathering of the exiles: *Am Yisrael* was dispersed throughout the world and is now in the process of returning to its home, bringing with it all the different cultures of the world. Israel represents a laboratory for the unification of cultures unparalleled anywhere or at any time in human history:

The meeting of two Jews who move to Israel is actually a meeting of two different peoples, two different cultures, two ways of being: Ashekenazi meets Sefardi; Sefardi meets Yemenite; Romanian meets Iraqi; American meets Tunisian, etc. All this happens after a hiatus of almost two thousand years, and it happens simultaneously within countless frameworks: on the bus, in apartment buildings, at school, and so on. There is nothing remotely similar anywhere in the world. Only in *Eretz Yisrael* is a society being built that unifies all the values of “man.” It is a difficult task, and we have to elevate the positive sparks, to embrace the good elements, to bring them together in accordance with the guidance of the Torah, and to throw the negative elements into the dustbin of history.

“Tzion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return to her through righteousness” (*Yeshayahu* 1:26-27). The challenge we face is simple: Will we succeed in building a society in which all values are implemented in the proper measure and balance; a society in which each individual knows his place and is able to realize his full potential? This is the *tikkun* that is expected of our generation.” (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* IV, pp. 81-28).

Our challenge, according to Manitou, is to unify all the attributes in accordance with the Torah, to build a model society, and to turn humanity into a beautiful, colorful, balanced bouquet.

Translated by Kaeren Fish