YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Introduction to the Thought of the Ramban

By Rav Ezra Bick

Shiur #05: The Human Soul

Our main text for today's reading is the Commentary of the Ramban to Bereishit 2,7: ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים – He breathed into his nostrils a soul of life.

This verse hints for us the value, foundation, and inner meaning (""סוד) of the soul ("נפש"), for the verse used the full Name ("ה' אלוקים"). And it says that He breathed into his nostrils a soul of life, to tell us that it does not contain anything of the elements, *unlike* that which is hinted by the animal soul, nor does it derive from the immaterial intelligences, **but it is the spirit of the Great Name, from whose mouth knowledge and intelligence (דעת ותבונה), for one who breathes out into another's nostrils, from his own soul he gives.** And this is what is written, "the soul of God gives them intelligence" (Iyov 32,8), **for it is from the root (יסוד) of intelligence (בינה) through truth and faith.** And that *is the meaning of* the statement of the *Sifre* that vows (*nedarim*) are like one who swears on the life of the king, and oaths (*shevuot*) are like one who swears on the king himself, as is hinted at in the verse, "By the life of God and the life of your soul, etc." (II Kings 4,30). And in the *Midrash R. Nechunia ben HaKaneh* (*Sefer Habahir*) is written, "What does it mean *'Vayinafesh'*? It teaches us that the Shabbat day grants existence to all souls (*nefesh - נפש)*, as is written *vayinafesh* (וינפש)… and the wise will understand.

This section clearly contains numerous kabbalistic references, although the Ramban does not introduce it with his customary kabbalistic introduction, "in the way of truth" (על דרך האמת). The last line, though, "and the wise will understand," is another way the Ramban has of basically warning us that only those who are privy to the secret traditions of the kabbala will understand what he has written. Normally I would not tackle the "secrets" of the Ramban, but today we are going to make an exception; firstly, because of the importance of this section, and secondly, because the fact that the Ramban does not offer any "*pshat*" explanation of this verse indicates that even we common folk are meant to at least partially understand what he has to say.

The basic point is clear. The human soul is not a created object, like the rest of creation, but is, in some sense, directly derived from the essence of God himself. The soul, the Ramban tells us, does not contain anything of the elements - earth, water, air, and fire - of which everything else consists. The soul is not of the same sort as the immaterial intelligences, which for the Ramban is a category which includes angels. Rather, it is "the spirit of the Great Name." The Ramban is commenting on the use of the verb "to breathe" - if God breathed a soul into man, then it implies that the soul comes to man from within God, "for one who breathes out into another's nostrils, from his own soul he gives." In other words, in breathing, we breathe out from our inner essence.

The immediate consequence of this statement is not that man is better, more intelligent, or more powerful than other creatures. The Ramban explicitly distinguishes between the soul of man and the non-material intelligences, which are **pure** intelligences, far above man in the level of intelligence. The angels are examples of immaterial intelligences. Nonetheless, the angels are created by God, whereas the soul of man is not created at all, but *breathed out* from God's essence. The difference is one of **essence**, of status, and, as we shall see, of potential.

To understand this better, we have to examine the kabbalistic references of the Ramban in this section. The Ramban has a habit of using terms in a manner that to the uninitiated will appear as regular Hebrew, while to one who is familiar with the technical dictionary of the kabbala, another meaning is evident. The Ramban says here that the mouth of God, from which the breath of the soul derives, is the source of "daat and tevuna," for the soul is "from the root (יסוד) of intelligence (בינה) through truth and faith (אמת ואמונה)." To understand this, we need to understand the basic structure of the *sefirot*, the Divine emanations from which the world derives.

The structure of the *sefirot* is as follows.

*Keter*

*Chochma*

*Bina*

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*Gevura Chesed*

*Tiferet*

*Hod Netzach*

*Yesod*

*Malchut*

The line between *Bina* and *Chesed and Gevura* is the line that divides the world that we can understand and the world that is beyond. The lower seven *sefirot* define the body of the world, while the upper three *sefirot* are more within the autonomous and transcendental life of God. The Ramban is saying that the root of the human soul is in *Bina* (intelligence), through *"emet ve-emuna,*" which is synonymous with *Tiferet.* In other words, the soul is not properly speaking part of **this world**; it belongs in essence to the Divine world. The soul is found **in** the world, but the **root** of the soul is in the *sefira* of *bina*, which is above the world, and the root expresses itself in the actual soul through the medium of the *sefira* of *tiferet*. It is not important for us to understand the exact details of which *sefira* does what - the important thing is that at its root, the soul is connected to a sphere of existence that transcends the world.

The Ramban proceeds to connect this idea to an explanation of a statement in the Sifre concerning vows and oaths. We know that this explanation is very important to the Ramban, because it is the only kabbalistic comment to appear in the *Chiddushei HaRamban*, the Ramban's commentary to the Talmud. In order to understand it, we have to first see the Talmudic law it comes to explain.

The Talmud states that if one who takes an oath (*shevua*) that involves transgressing a Torah law, the oath does not take effect. However, if one takes a vow (*neder*), it takes effect even if it contradicts a Torah law. The *Sifre* states that an oath is like one who swears on the king himself, whereas a vow is like one who swears on the life of the king. One is tempted to think that the "king himself" is a higher level than the "life of the king," but the point of the Talmudic statement is that vows are **more** effective than oaths. In fact, the Ramban's point is the opposite - the life of the king is the inner essence that animates the body of the king. In the *sefira* structure, the body of the king is the seven lower *sefirot*; the life of the king is *bina*, which is conceived as being the inner life of the body of all existence. So what the Ramban is saying, in terms of the *Sifre*, is that oaths are parallel to the lower *sefirot*, whereas a vow is parallel to the *sefira* of *bina*. Elsewhere, the Ramban writes that the Torah as a whole is associated with the *sefira* of *tiferet* (*emet ve-emuna*), so by placing the root of vows in *bina*, he explains why the vow can overcome the opposition of a Torah law.

What does this have to do with the soul of man? The Ramban is illustrating the same relationship he has described for man - man is found in the lower realm, but the soul of man - the life of the king - is rooted in a higher realm. Taking an oath involves a linkage to the name of God. There are two levels - one connected to God in a lower sense, and one to the soul, to the life of God. The Ramban concludes that this explains the oath found in the verse, "By the life of God and the life of your soul." This is, in fact, an extremely radical explanation, for what the Ramban is saying is that an oath "by the life of your soul" is an oath by the name of God, and, apparently, even higher than "by the life of God." An oath "by the life of your soul" is valid, for it is, in the deepest sense, linked to God. In short, the Ramban is saying that the human soul is divine in its essence, and rooted in the highest levels of divinity.

That is, more or less, the meaning of the last quote in the Ramban, from the Sefer Ha-Bahir. Everything in creation is nurtured by the power of the six days of creation, but the souls are nurtured by the Shabbat. Souls are not, properly speaking, part of regular creation.

This Ramban is basically the source for all the later expressions of the divine nature of the soul. The exact meaning of the kabbalistic terms is less important, for our purposes. The important point is the distinction between all regular reality and the soul.

There are important ramifications of this doctrine, on which I can only speculate. One has to do with the relationship between the soul and Torah. Torah, as I pointed out above, is rooted in the *sefira* of *tiferet.* The soul is rooted in the *sefira* of *bina*, which is not only *higher*, but is the "life" of the lower *sefirot*. (In general, each *sefira* generates and animates the *sefira* below it*.*) Clearly, Torah is divine, the word of God, but the Ramban is saying that the soul (and, in the continuation of this section, he explicitly identifies the divine soul with the intellect) can comprehend Torah because its root is even higher in the divine structure. As we saw in the earlier shiur on Torah, Torah is the source of human knowledge. Man can apprehend Torah; it is not a mystery beyond comprehension, even though it contains multiple levels of divine meaning. In fact - and I am hesitant to draw this conclusion - it would appear that the soul's relationship to Torah is parallel to the relationship of the life of the king to the king; in other words, it animates it. The life of Torah comes from the soul of those learning it.

The most important ramification, I think, concerns the relationship of Man and God. Man is not, at least as concerns his soul, a creation of God, but what can only be described as a part of Him. This does not mean that man should aspire to a union with God that would annul his own personality, an idea that as far as I know is not found anywhere in the Ramban. It means that our relationship with God is not only external, but internal as well, as a part relates to the whole. There is an inner connection with God in the recesses of the soul that is natural, which is based on a continuum of existence. It is important to remember that the kabbala of the Ramban implies that everything is, in some way, an emanation from God. But the relative difference of being rooted in *sefirat bina*, the life of the world, rather than in the lower *sefirot*, is an important one, for in the world as we see it there is an absolute difference between belonging to what the Ramban calls "the lower world" or belonging to "the upper world." Man's soul belongs to the upper world, in a sense that is not true even of the angels, or of any other created being. I think that this is what gives us the ability to acquire Torah, to achieve prophecy, and to commune with God on a **personal** level, goals that appear again and again in the Ramban.

In today's shiur, we entered more into the world of the kabbala than we would normally do. This may have been somewhat frustrating, as I did not explain the kabbala very well. This was not because I did not want to, but rather that the Ramban's kabbala is not very clear, as he predicted. In any event, our goal was not to get a clear picture of the system of *sefirot*, but to try and understand the philosophic idea that lies behind it as it relates to the soul of man. I hope I have clarified that idea, which can be understood independently of the *particulars* of the kabbalistic system of the Ramban.