YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Torah LishmaH –* A new Horizon**

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**Lecture 19:**

***TOrah Lishmah* and psychological wholeness**

### The power of thought

Let us return to the passage from Rav Kook's *Orot ha-Torah* discussed at the end of the last *shiur*. This passage describes the repair of the emotional distress due to distance "from the light of Torah":

…And when he begins to exert himself and diligently occupy himself in Torah – the practical and the spiritual – he will feel the purity of his reason, the depth of his feeling, the serenity of his soul, and the flash of his imagination, joined together with all the coveted personality traits, which are part of the divine blessing that comes with the light of the Torah.

After shaking himself free from his previous situation, this person now approaches the Torah with exertion and diligence and acquires emotional fullness. We asked, how are we to understand this marvelous deliverance, and by virtue of what does this person merit such illumination, described here as almost immediate ("when he begins")?

We can explain this attainment if we once again recall how Rav Kook defines this "light" which is the essence of the Torah – the objective of perfection and ascent. From this we may conclude that meriting "the light of the Torah" is conditioned upon a commitment to the process of repentance, rather than the achievement of a certain level in actual practice. Following in the path of repair – a process that strives for greatness, but is slow and measured in practice - gives perfect expression to the Torah as "the life of life," much more so than setting and achieving a clearly defined goal.

Rav Kook formulates this idea in a different way in his *Orot ha-Teshuva*:

The natural remorse that burns in the heart as an attribute of repentance stems from the soul's distress over standing in one place, when it should have risen at all times from one level to the next, and all the more so if it feels that it has descended; only that if it had really descended all the way, it would also have lost the sense of spiritual pain[[1]](#footnote-1)… And the searing pain of standing in one place, which is the very opposite of its nature and the purpose of its existence, burns within it like a blazing fire, that will turn into a flame of great love full of supernal delight, when it strengthens itself in returning to its upward orientation, constantly holding on to its character of ascent… (*Orot ha-Teshuva* 15:3)

 Were redemption from the "Gehinom"of *bittul Torah* conditioned on the achievement of some high level, it would presumably drag out over an extended period of time. But despite the Torah's penetrating demand to achieve lofty and difficult objectives, cleaving to "its light" is achieved as soon as a person, at whatever level he may be, seizes the process of ascent and devotes himself to repair and advancement. The opposite is also true: If a person is not striving for self-correction, his very standing in place exposes him to "the burning pain" of *bittul Torah*, regardless of his level.

 This understanding is part of the principle adopted by Rav Kook in many places – the power of thought to generate a great change in a person's life, even before it finds expression in practice. In his *Orot ha-Teshuva*, Rav Kook heaps praise on "thoughts of repentance." Here is a typical example of this idea:

It is hard to measure and assess the great happiness that a person should sense in himself, with great satisfaction, as a result of that delicate pain that one feels when the spirit of sanctity and purity of repentance rests upon him when with all his heart and all his soul he wishes, with the depth of tremendous desire, to become one who walks in wholeness and uprightness, to be a righteous man performing acts of righteousness, to be upright and walk in the path of honesty. Despite his great doubt over how he will extricate his feet from the mire of sin, even though it is not at all clear to him how he can correct the past, even though the practical paths are not yet paved before him, and they are full of obstacles – but the desire itself is the breath of God's garden of Eden, that stirs in the soul and fills it with boundless happiness, to the point that even the fire of the Gehinom of deep pain turns into a stream of pleasures. (*Orot ha-Teshuva* 16:3)

 This idea is similar to what we saw in *Orot ha-Torah –* a person's very desire to cling to the path of change is an exit from "Gehinom."[[2]](#footnote-2)

 You may have sensed that there is a strong connection between Rav Kook's *Orot ha-Teshuva* and his *Orot ha-Torah*; there are even passages that are common to both books. The ability to study *Torah* *lishmah* is a moral and emotional ability, and one of the ways to acquire this ability is by studying and applying *mussar* literature. We won’t dwell on this further at this point, except to mention that the books cited in these *shiurim* – *Orot ha-Teshuva*, *Alei Shur*, and also an earlier work of Rav Kook, *Mussar Avikha* *–* are good sources that continue to develop the ideas that we have discussed.

### Studying Torah with emotional unity

In recent *shiurim* we have learned about the emotional and moral foundations of *Torah lishmah*. Now we are ready to get back to the act of study itself. How does all that we have learned become realized in the cognitive act? In light of what we have seen, what is the role of this act, and how does it serve as an anchor and focus?

Many passages in *Orot ha-Torah* deal with this issue. As a rule, an atmosphere of inner harmony and organic wholeness hovers over these statements. This distinguishes Rav Kook's outlook from the dialectic and tension that are so characteristic of the *Nefesh ha-Chayim*. As may be recalled, the *Nefesh ha-Chayim* drew us to a discussion of man's capability of embracing internal contradictions (e.g., the contradiction between intellect and experience) and expressing two extremes almost simultaneously. In contrast, most of Rav Kook's remarks leave us with the sense that embracing the various existential layers of *Torah lishmah* builds an integrated unity, in which the components sustain and strengthen each other reciprocally. For example:

When studying Torah *lishmah,* the will draws out the sublime ideal of the Torah. This then spreads to every particular matter, and supernal bounty envelops the student himself and the entire world. But when a person studies Torah not *lishmah*, specific revelations manifest themselves on the particulars in and of themselves, and the intellect within them is constricted, and in accordance with the measure of the intellect, the will is short, and full of vexation and ill temper, and one feels that it would have been better for him had he not come into the world. (*Orot ha-Torah* 3:5)

 The idea that a single spirit and a single objective pervades the entire Torah and all its particular elements is no longer foreign to us. A person who studies Torah *lishmah* turns this idea into tangible experience. His motives for learning are the great ideals of the Torah, from which all the detailed *halakhot* receive their vitality. This vitality is present in his study so that the study is a phenomenon of broad dimensions – the intellect is expansive, the entire personality is integrated within itself, and the person is also connected to the outside world with a bond of grace. In other words, the connection takes place on two planes – between the person and the world, and within the person himself. Let us first consider the first point.

 There is a built-in problem with the idea of "the soul of the Torah" or "the essence of the Torah," namely, the danger of detachment. Are we dealing with something real and meaningful that plays a significant role in a person's life and Torah study, or is this nothing more than a slogan? This question is exceedingly important according to Rav Kook's approach, for the whole idea of *Torah lishmah* depends upon it. This question must be dealt with in a twofold manner. It is clear that in order for a person to "understand" the meaning of this idea, he must be attentive and committed in every aspect of his life to the goal of moral perfection. But actual Torah study is undoubtedly a critical focus. Study constitutes intellectual contact and dialogue with the objective of the Torah through the language of speech, logic and analysis:[[3]](#footnote-3)

The sublime ideal of the Torah spreads to every particular matter.

 The desire to realize this good grows within a person through the very act of study. This is a variation on the teaching of Rav Chayim of Volozhin, that when a person studies Torah he is spiritually connected to the supernal worlds. Rav Kook translates this idea in a way that gives it a moral coloring, based on the assumption that moral improvement is the foundational idea of the universe.

 The second point is that the wholeness directed outwards leads to the inner wholeness that a person attains when he studies Torah *lishmah*. In contrast, when a person studies Torah not *lishmah*, his faculties are fragmented – everything that he learns is a separate issue. Single-mindedness in learning exists in two senses: focusing on the manifest goal of clarifying the law in question, and distancing all the associative links and conduits that could connect to the meanings of the material but are not "written on the page." The result of this effort of excessive intellectual focusing, is that the person becomes filled with "vexation and ill temper."

 Rav Kook offers a new explanation of Rava's teaching in *Berakhot* (17a) that we have previously mentioned. In the course of his explanation of the idea of "learning in order to do," Rava said that someone who learns not *lishmah -* "it would have been better for him had he not been created." According to the plain sense, the statement is a stern moral critique of a person who learns not *lishmah*. But as we have seen in the past, Rav Kook here uses an interpretive mode that removes Rava's statement from the realm of reward and punishment, and gives it an existential explanation. Rava is speaking about the difficult experience undergone by a person who learns not *lishmah.* The diminution of knowledge and disregard of life forces create within him a torn reality, and because of his great "vexation" and bitterness, he is liable to feel that "it would have been better for him had he not been created."

 These words bring to mind the previous remark of Rav Kook that study that darkens "the light of Torah" is the source of "the pain of *bittul Torah*" and "Gehinom itself." There we learned that "the pain of *bittul Torah*" is detachment from the spirit of the Torah, which is the source of vitality; this is painful ontological detachment. Now we see this idea complemented from a psychological perspective: *Torah lishmah* is healthy for the soul, because it makes use of all of a person's faculties. Someone who learns not *lishmah* activates his intellect, but locks his essence outside (perhaps so as not to "disturb" it), and therefore he is destined to disappointment.

### Naturalness and spontaneity in Torah study

We see, then, that studying Torah *lishmah* is characterized by harmony, and from this stems another of its traits. Ideal study should be natural and spontaneous, and not a calculated and "heavy" effort that makes it necessary for the student to exert himself so that he can hold together several inner experiences that do not naturally coexist. The integration of deep motivations and the striving for qualitative understanding and conceptual profundity allows for a combination of forces that leads to smooth, efficient and vigorous action. The love for Torah issues from it, as from a flowing spring:

Observance of the Torah must come from a mighty spiritual force deep in the sanctity of the soul that inundates the life of the individual and the entire collective with a sudden torrent, not a slow gradation or step-by-step assembly of components. Thus, the remote topic comes alive in its own way, as does the familiar one, and the fundamental principles of the Torah along with the minutiae, the rabbinic “fences” and the ordinances, the customs and the upright instructions, the good beliefs and their ramifications, beat as one heart. This is not true of faith that is small-minded, resulting from narrow thinking. Then the mind needs to work hard to find a connection between the principle that it understands and its remote, specific practical application, and this as a rule fails. (*Orot ha-Torah* 11:3)

 The deep-rooted belief in and fundamental commitment to the word of God invigorates the entire ramified system of the Torah, and therefore we do not need a detailed philosophical explanation that connects each *mitzva* and each *halakha* to a religious principle. Rav Kook is arguing with anyone who makes his interest in Torah and Divine service dependent on his ability to uncover a “meaningful” understanding of every law. According to him, such conditioning attests to "narrow thinking," that is to say, an over-emphasis of rational thought that dilutes basic belief and constricts its limits.[[4]](#footnote-4)

 The following two passages speak of the naturalness of love for the Torah in all its specific practical teachings and its dialectics, when this love is based on the firm foundations of belief and experience:

Just as the healthy person desires life and does not seek reasons and proofs for it, whereas the person suffering emotional illness and suicidal tendencies is mired in doubts concerning the purpose of life, similarly one with a healthy soul loves the Torah and its study with heart and soul, and a single word of Torah – even involving the minutiae of the scribes - is more precious to him than any fortune; and only when the spiritual foundation takes ill will he come to say, "This passage suits me, and this one does not." (*Orot ha-Torah* 6:10)[[5]](#footnote-5)

When a healthy heart expands, under the force of pressure, blood streams through all the tiny and distant blood vessels. And when the intellect has the strength to understand the Torah's foundation and principles, and how its many particulars follow from its principles, one's outlook becomes clarified and embracing, and great love, feelings of respect, and the splendor of holiness come to every word and minute manner in the Torah. (ibid. 3:4)

### Love that is Built in increasing circles: the *Akeda* and *Shir ha-Shirim*

Here Rav Kook expresses a psychological approach that strives for an emotional harmony, in which conscious outward activity is rooted in more basic strata of the personality. This approach is very relevant to the issues that we have been discussing, and therefore I wish to note two fascinating examples of this principle in Rav Kook's writings.

The first illustration relates to *Akeidat Yitzchak.* What conceptual messages arise from this story? The common understanding focuses primarily on the trial. Avraham passes here the tenth[[6]](#footnote-6) and most difficult trial, and is found whole. According to Rav Kook (*Olat Re'iya* I, pp. 92-93), however, this story offers a critical lesson that goes beyond Avraham's sacrifice and devotion. The dramatic denouement is a revelation that is designed to erase the erroneous impression created by the first half of the story: that there is some contradiction between love of God and a father’s love for his son.

This lesson is contained in the verse which is the climax of the story: "Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him" (*Bereishit* 22:12). What the angel is saying to Avraham is that his natural love for his son, and also the natural justice that forbids him to lay his hand upon him or harm him in any way, remain in full force, and they are not impaired at all by his great love and dedication to God's command:

"Lay not your hand upon the lad" – with the full severity of the simple and straightforward prohibition regarding the matter. And do not think that there is some contradiction between your pure paternal love for your precious son and the noble love of God… For in the pure soul, paternal compassion and love is the flame of a holy fire, going straight from God's pure love and compassion for all His creatures, the appearance of which in the world magnifies His splendor and majesty… which raises life and the universe to their highest level. (*Olat Re'iya* I, pp. 92-93)

According to Rav Kook, Avraham's great virtue at the climax of the story of the *Akeida* is that "you reached the highest level where your love for your son is a direct and tightly connected outgrowth of your love for the Rock of the worlds, who gives life to life." The simple and natural love between father and son is rooted in God's love for His creation. And at the same time, a father's love for his son becomes stronger and deeper the more he experiences his love for his son as part of his love for God. This natural and instinctual emotion turns into "the flame of a holy fire." The human existential ideal does not pose tension or contradiction between the various circles of his relationships (as one might have understood from the first part of the *Akeida* story). Everything comes from and goes backs to man's connection to God.

A second place where Rav Kook describes a human personality as a complete existential stature of this sort, is in his famous introduction to *Shir ha-Shirim*. The traditional understanding is that the book speaks of the relationship between God and the people of Israel. Rav Kook's disciple, Rav Binyamin Menasheh Levin, *z"l*, asked him to relate to the critics who rejected this view. These critics cited Rabbi Akiva's remark that "*Shir ha-Shirim* is the Holy of Holies," and explained his partiality toward the book in light of the story of his great love for his wife Rachel, the daughter of Kalba Savu'a*.* According to them, Rabbi Akiva cherished *Shir ha-Shirim* as a song of the love between husband and wife.

In his remarkable answer (*Olat Re'iya* II, pp. 3-4), Rav Kook does not condemn the critics' admiration of Rabbi Akiva's love for his wife. On the contrary – he adopts it and identifies with it. But Rav Kook goes on to explain that the critics' deficiency lies in their inability to understand the depth of Rabbi Akiva's spirit and his greatness. The Tanna's soul embraces love that is personal, national, and godly, in graduated order and in organic unity. The critics evaluate Rabbi Akiva in accordance with the limited dimensions of their own mundane experience. It is worthwhile to invest effort in understanding the following lines:

Like a drop in the sea, like a spark from a flame rising up to heaven, like a letter in a grand and massive book, the man whose soul was so exalted knew how to appreciate personal, natural love according to its true value. For him, natural love, enlightened national love and sacred and splendid Divine love were arranged in one structure, “like the tower of David, magnificently built”… But how low are these bleary-eyed midgets,[[7]](#footnote-7) crawling around the bottom-most row of stones of the tower, and record its height, which reaches the clouds, only according to their own small arms-reach and their impaired visual capacity. And if from the top of the tower someone would say to them that one can see the star full of splendor and light, they would automatically conclude – “How low hangs the beautiful star!” Minds such as these, who could not see in Rabbi Akiva anything more than a shepherd with a sensitive heart, who loved the daughter of Kalba Savu'a, could never find another basis for the extraordinary assertion that “*Shir ha-Shirim* is the Holy of Holies” in comparison to the rest of Scripture, other than the grounds of simple personal love, which is all they are capable of seeing. But the pure of heart can see Rabbi Akiva in his grandeur…

 The last two passages that we have seen – regarding the *Akeida* and *Shir ha-Shirim* – tell us much about Rav Kook's general moral-psychological outlook. Natural personal love, like the love for one's child or the love for one's spouse, would seem to stand apart from a person's relationship with God, and there could even be a contradiction and opposition between them. But a person can lead his life with a more profound understanding, according to which all is one.

 A similar idea flashed through the mind of Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, a preeminent disciple of Rav Israel Salanter, and he recorded it as follows:

Man is comprised of two opposites, body and soul. His faculties are opposites. Observing the Torah involves two opposites, thinking opposite thoughts, for example, "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God," and "Receive every man in a congenial manner"… The entire Torah is built on opposites… But the truth is that there is something that mediates between them, i.e., the intellect… The intellect which is part of God, blessed be He, and mediates between them so that they be different but not opposites… When the all-embracing wisdom of the intellect expands, the particular intellect will extend from it to all of the opposites and join them together… And this is all of man. (*Chokhma u-Mussar*, II, p. 223)

"The particular intellect" refers to the individual relationship that a person has with each circle of life independently. The experience of contradiction between the particulars disappears by way of the "all-embracing intellect" – the insight that all the positive connections have a common source in the realm of the sacred.

This approach also explains the profound understanding that joins the apparently separate worlds of religious experience and cognitive Torah study. From here man derives the ability to bring together faith, moral striving, repentance and intellectual study, in order to build the natural totality of occupation in Torah *lishmah*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Here Rav Kook is describing those who are found in "the straits of Gehinom," as we learned in the previous *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This approach appears to be a development of the teachings of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the Besht, which include many statements that attribute moral force to man's thoughts. For example, he famously asserts that "a person is found in the place of his thoughts." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As we shall see later, Rabbi Soloveitchik also sees Torah study as a kind of code that brings man's existential realm to expression through the language of cognitive speech. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This comment relates to a discussion concerning new methods of Torah study, an issue that was discussed in *shiur* no. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This passage was already cited in *shiur* no. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Following the mishna in *Avot* (5:2) that states that "Avraham was tested with ten trials," and the accepted interpretation according to which the *Akeida* was Avraham's tenth trial. In any event, the *Akeida* is the only case about which it is stated that God "tested/tried" (*nisa*) Avraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is the way Rav Kook relates to the critics. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)