YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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In memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #01:**

**The Different Dimensions of Manitou’s Teachings**

In the previous *shiur* we focused on the events of Manitou’s life and his description of them. Before addressing his teachings in depth, an overview of some of the different dimensions of his writing is in order. To illustrate, let us start with a review of the life story of a different personality, Avraham Avinu, as Manitou presents it.

**Travelogue**

The beginning of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* is, essentially, a travelogue. Avraham (then called Avram) is commanded to undertake a journey, and on the simplest and most literal level he sets off and travels until he reaches Eretz Kena’an, his destination.

However, Manitou draws our attention to the fact that when we read the verses in *Bereishit* 12, our impression is that Avraham never ceases travelling. He roams from one place to the next, journeying on and on, meandering through Shekhem, Beit El, the Negev and even Egypt. This is God’s command (ibid. v. 1): “*Lekh lekha*,” “Go for yourself.” While one might have thought that this nomadic state is connected to Avraham’s modest means, the text tells us explicitly that even when he leaves Egypt with great wealth, in the beginning of *Bereishit* 13, his journeying continues. It is an odyssey without end.

Indeed, even after Avraham has parted from Lot and it seems that each of them has chosen his permanent dwelling place, God calls to him (ibid. v. 17): “Arise; go about (*hithalekh*) in the land, throughout its length and its breadth.” The command “*Lekh lekha*” does not end at the stage of reaching “the land which I will show you” (12:1) but rather remains in force up until the realization of its purpose: “And I shall make of you a great nation… and I shall make your name great… and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you” (ibid. vv. 2-3). Avraham experiences a journey before he has any progeny, and it is only after another even longer odyssey that he brings blessing upon all of mankind. That odyssey is all of human history, with the Jewish people at the center of that history.

This is a conceptual foundation upon which Manitou’s teachings are based. Manitou makes two significant assertions concerning Avraham’s journey. Firstly, it is executed not only in physical space, by walking from one place to the next, but also inwardly, within Avraham himself. He has to undergo a long and complex process of development. At every stage of his outer journey, we must try to understand what station he has reached in his inner journey and what part of his personality is being developed. We should not think that Avraham remains the same Avraham while all sorts of things happen to him; rather, he grows from each experience. Secondly, the journey has many junctions. Avraham does not simply move on a straight path from one station to the next. Rather, he moves from one crossroads to the next; each time he is faced with different possibilities, and he has to decide how to proceed:

We must not be mistaken into thinking that right away, at the Covenant Between the Parts, Avraham’s identity as a Hebrew is immediately and fully revealed and manifest. At this stage, he is still at the start of his journey. He is still Avram who deliberates, who knows himself — in terms of identity — only as being the end of the previous era. This is reflected in the fact that at this stage he is still childless, and this is how he regards himself…

He succeeds in undergoing an “identity mutation,” as I call it, as expressed in the verse in his change of name from Avram to Avraham…

This happens in the wake of a long process that Avraham and Sara undergo, relating to identity. This point must be understood in depth: this isn’t promised to Avraham or to Sara from the outset. He was born as Avram from Ur Kasdim… he wasn’t born as Avraham the Hebrew. After a long and difficult process, he manages to expose and reveal from within himself his identity as a Hebrew, that special quality that he possesses, that uniqueness. (*Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* V, 37-40)

Manitou describes the events of his life in a similar manner. He does not merely chronicle what happened to him, but also how he learned and developed from the events. Similarly, he adopts the same perspective on a larger scale: all of history, as he understands it, is a journey of identity-molding. Avraham occupies a central place in Manitou’s teachings, and the concept of identity is likewise dominant. The question is never just “Which events have I experienced?” but also “Who am I, and what has molded me on the way to becoming who I am?” Manitou emphasizes that what might have been regarded as stations are in fact junctions, and at every stage there is more than one possible way of proceeding.

With regard to Avraham, Manitou does not regard his life story as a path that continues from one event to the next, from the War of the Four Kings to the Covenant Between the Parts, onwards to the birth of Yishmael, etc. If we adopt his perspective, we must stop at every stage of Avraham’s story and ask ourselves: What would have happened if Avraham had not taken Lot with him? What would have happened if he had not gone down to Egypt, or if he had not presented Sara as his sister? What would have happened if Avraham had not proposed a separation between them, or if Avraham had not set off to save Lot years later? What would have happened had he accepted the king of Sedom’s offer, or had he decided to take the captives without the spoils? What would have happened if Sara had not given Hagar to Avraham?

Each such point is a junction, and we have to understand what happened as a result of it, and how things could have happened differently. Each of the above questions entails a whole discussion. They are not merely hypothetical questions. *Chazal* address them too: what would have happened if the characters in the Torah had chosen differently; what changed in the wake of the events; what needs repairing; what road should be taken now.

Such questions are scattered throughout the commentaries. For instance, at the junction where Avraham goes down to Egypt, there is a disagreement between Rashi and Ramban: Rashi maintains that Avraham has no choice but to head for Egypt, while Ramban frowns on this decision.

The difference is that in Manitou’s work this manner of questioning is systematic: his entire reading of the Torah is built on a view of history as a journey.

It is specifically our intimate familiarity with the biblical story that hampers us, for we do not try to imagine how the story could have proceeded differently. We know that Kayin murdered Hevel, and that Tuval-Kayin caused Kayin’s death. We know that there was a Flood ten generations after Adam, and that it wiped out all of humanity, with the exception of one family. We are so familiar with the details of the story that it seems to us as though every stage is preordained and inexorable. But the message of our Torah of life is the opposite: that at every stage, humanity has freedom of choice as to how to behave. At every stage, each of the human characters who shape the historical events has the freedom to choose whether to go in the direction of destruction and ruin, or in the direction of building and life. (*Sod Ha-Ivri* I, 169)

The question that I wish to ask is whether from the outset it could have been otherwise. Obviously, we find it difficult to describe how it could have been different, but we must make the necessary intellectual effort. The axiom of the Torah is that at every stage, in every generation, from Adam until the End of Days, everything is open. (*Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* II, 158)

**The dimensions of Manitou’s teachings**

So far we have looked at some of the dimensions of Manitou’s teachings. Let us review those we have already encountered and add others that we have yet to address. All are interconnected, and they will become manifest over the course of our *shiurim*:

1. **The exegetical dimension**: Manitou has rules or principles for reading and studying the Torah, for restoring its language. We have already seen one example: the question of what should have happened versus what actually happened, or what might have happened differently, is one of the foundations of his exegetical approach in understanding the chain of events recorded in the Torah.
2. **The dimension of identity**: the psychological dimension; the building and molding of a person’s identity.
3. **The conceptual dimension**: Building one’s identity is not just a process like adolescence. There is a certain process towards which the Torah is oriented — a defined edifice that must be built; the ideal towards which the Torah aspires, and in accordance with which humanity is meant to be molded. One of the elements comprising this dimension is the realm of morality (*mussar*), which occupies a central place in Manitou’s teachings.
4. **The historical dimension**: the process via which identity is built. History is the axis along which the process of building human identity in its entirety is carried out. The significance of this perception is that the process of building continues to our time, since history has not ended.
5. **The dimension of destiny**: the root of the whole system. The dimension of Creation, Divine intention, which is the purpose of everything.
6. **The yardstick of Torah**: All study in every one of the above dimensions takes place via this metric. We do not approach Torah with the mindset of whatever happens to be our contemporary culture, making this the yardstick for understanding and evaluating every event and every law of the Torah. Rather, we evaluate all cultures, including the contemporary culture surrounding us, according to the yardstick of Torah. This is not a simple task; it requires proficiency in Torah as well as in philosophy and the dominant culture at any given time and place. This perspective, as we noted in the introductory *shiur*, was inculcated in Manitou by his teacher, Rabbi Jacob Gordin.

The above dimensions will accompany us as we delve into Manitou’s teachings, and collectively they comprise an integrated system. This entire system is meant to bring about realizing the Divine intention behind Creation. Over the course of the *shiurim,* we will see that there is a profound inner connection linking these dimensions, including the seemingly simple, straightforward dimension of biblical commentary.

Translated by Kaeren Fish