YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #16: Loving God (VI): Levels of Loving God**

**There is None Beside Him**

In the previous *shiur*, we emphasized the awe a person experiences upon encountering the divine power. This awe brings the person to the revelation that each and every detail in the vast universe represents one mere glint of light from the divine wisdom. As we mentioned, a person seeks to penetrate through the outer “garments” that conceal the true source of this wisdom.

At that moment of revelation, one discovers that the perspective that envisions a real separation between the Creator and His creation is not truly accurate. At that moment, one understands that God’s creations are merely external garments, one of countless manifestations of the Creator Himself.

Just as a person’s thoughts preceding his actions exist only within that person’s consciousness and as a part it, so too the thought that preceded God’s creation of the world existed within God’s consciousness and as a part of it.

However, there is a considerable gap between a person’s mental plans and designs and how these thoughts are carried out and realized. Even if one succeeds in aligning his ideas to their realization and executing his plans almost to perfection, the thing that is created still attains its own identity through its independent existence. The moment that it is created, it becomes its own separate unit, existing wholly on its own.

Not so divine creation. There is no gap between the divine thought and the divine action. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (*Tehillim* 33:6); “For he spoke, and it was” (*Tehillim* 33:9); “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (*Bereishit* 1:3). There is no gap between the Thinker and the thought, since He Himself is the wisdom; He Himself is the knowledge. As Rambam explains in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

Rather, the Creator, may He be blessed, He His knowledge and His life are one from all sides and corners, in all manners of oneness. Were He to live as life is [usually conceived], or know with a knowledge that is external from Him, there would be many gods – Him, His life, and His knowledge. The matter is not so. Rather, He is one from all sides and corners, in all manners of oneness. Thus, you could say, “He is the Knower, He is the Subject of knowledge, and He is the Knowledge itself.” All is one. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:10)

The entirety of God’s creation is contained within Him, with the same degree of reality that it possessed when it arose in His thoughts. The gaps between thought and reality exist only in human consciousness, due to a person’s limited scope of vision.

The deep contemplation that is required does not suffice itself with the revelation that God is “the great king of all divine beings” (*Tehillim* 95:3) and of all of existence and reality. It is not enough to recognize that “There is none like you among the gods, O Lord” (*Tehillim* 86:8). The contemplation, at its highest level, requires a fundamental recognition that all of existence is merely one specific manifestation – a reflection that human beings can grasp – of the divine power. At its core, proper contemplation requires that one internalize – as paradoxical as it may seem – that there is none beside Him.

With this point of recognition, understanding returns, penetrating to a person’s consciousness. Here, we are no longer referring to the *mitzva* of expressing a love of God that bursts out from one’s being. This love is an internal convergence toward the one possible object of love in existence: God, as indeed, there is none beside Him.

At this moment, a person reaches the aspect of knowledge, in the sense of “Now the man knew his wife Chava” (*Bereishit* 4:1). This knowledge is a person’s act of attaching himself to the knowledge of God. As R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi wrote:

*Da’at*, the etymology of which is found in the verse: “Now the man knew (*yada*) his wife Chava,” implies attachment and union. That is, one binds his mind with a very firm and strong bond to, and firmly fixes his thought on, the greatness of the blessed *Ein Sof*, without diverting his mind [from Him]. For even one who is wise and understanding of the greatness of the blessed *Ein Sof* will not – unless he binds his knowledge and fixes his thought with firmness and perseverance – produce in his soul true love and fear, but only vain fancies. Therefore, *da’at* is the basis of the emotional attributes and the source of their vitality. (*Tanya*, *Likkutei Amarim* 3)

This explains the meaning of the verse: “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; **there is no other**” (*Devarim* 4:39).

In the same chapter cited above in the *Tanya*, the author describes the relationship between love of God and fear of God and the internal stages that a person experiences through this contemplation:

For when the intellect in the rational soul deeply contemplates and immerses itself exceedingly in the greatness of God, how He fills all worlds and encompasses all worlds, **and in Whose presence everything is considered as nothing** – there will be born and aroused in his mind and thought the emotion of **fear of the divine majesty**, to fear and be humble before His blessed greatness, which is without end of limit, and to have the fear of God in his heart. **Next, his heart will glow with an intense love, like burning coals, with a passion, desire and longing, and a yearning soul**, toward the greatness of the blessed *Ein Sof*. This constitutes the culminating passion of the soul, of which Scripture speaks, as “I long, I yearn for the courts of the Lord” (*Tehillim* 84:3), and “My soul thirsts for God” (*Tehillim* 42:3), and “My soul thirsts for You” (*Tehillim* 63:2).

The person who stands before the infinite divine power understands that in God’s presence, “everything is considered as nothing.” At this stage, he grasps the magnitude of the distance between him and his Creator, and fills with “fear of the divine majesty” before the splendor of His great might: “What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him” (*Tehillim* 8:5).

On the other hand, it is specifically this perspective – that “in His presence everything is considered as nothing” – that hones our understanding that “His glory fills the universe” and that “the thing is very close to you.” It is through this understanding that our feelings of longing and yearning for the only entity that truly exists in this world can develop.

This yearning derives from a dual feeling. First, it derives from the feeling that “the whole world is filled with His glory,” a feeling of great closeness that seems to beckon to a person, encouraging him to say, “I must turn aside to look” (*Shemot* 3:3), as Moshe did at the burning bush. The feeling of closeness that Moshe experienced was likewise linked to the great fear that preceded his attempt to draw closer: “For the place on which you stand is holy ground” (*Shemot* 3:5).

The second source of our yearning is tied to the same internal contemplation into one’s own heart and soul that leads to the understanding that “the whole world is filled with His glory” and “in His presence everything is considered as nothing.” Such a person is in awe of his very ability to reach this understanding and comprehension. He then understands that it is not merely a merit that God has laid upon his doorstep, but a great and powerful obligation to contemplate God and draw closer to Him. As we read on in *Tehillim* 8, “That You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty” (*Tehillim* 8:6). This glory leads to the recognition that “You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his feet” (*Tehillim* 8:7). Then, the following declaration bursts out from his inner essence: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!” (*Tehillim* 8:10). Thus, a person lusts and yearns for this knowledge – so that he can draw closer to God and love Him with a powerful love.

This is what Rambam means in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, in the passage that we cited to open this entire discussion:

“From the statement, ‘You shall love the Lord your God,’ can I know how to love God? The Torah therefore says, ‘Take to heart these words with which I charge you this day’ (*Devarim* 6:6), i.e., that through this you will understand the nature of ‘He who spoke and brought the world into being.’” From this it is clear that contemplation will lead to understanding, and then a feeling of enjoyment **and love will follow automatically**. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 3)

This contemplation, which demonstrates to a person that there is none beside Him, is what necessitates that one love the only object of love in existence, the only true entity that exists in the world, in which the entire universe and all of existence are contained.

**There is None Beside Him – In the Torah and the *Mitzvot***

As we mentioned earlier, Rambam presented before us two objects of contemplation on the path to reaching the love of God: contemplation of the universe and contemplation of the Torah and the *mitzvot*. In this *shiur*, we have focused thus far on the first object of contemplation – the heaven above and the earth below – and this led us to the conclusion: There is no other. However, let us turn now to the other object of contemplation and attempt to reach this insight through this contemplation as well.

The Talmud relates:

R. Simlai when preaching said: 613 *mitzvot* were communicated to Moshe, 365 negative precepts, corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and 248 positive precepts, corresponding to the number of the members of a person’s body. Said R. Hamnuna: What is the [authentic] text for this? It is: “Moshe charged us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Ya’akov” (*Devarim* 33:4) – “Torah” being in *gematriya* equal to 611; “I [the Lord] am [your God]” and “You shall have no [other gods]” [not being reckoned, because] we heard from the mouth of the Might [Divine].[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Makkot* 23b-24a)

Is there significance to the fact that out of all the 613 *mitzvot*, the only ones that we heard directly from God were “I the Lord am your God” and “You shall have no other gods”? And even these two *mitzvot* both draw on the same basic concept; the negative commandment of “You shall have no other gods” is the opposite side of the same coin that features the positive commandment of “I the Lord am your God.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

We read in the *mishna*:

R. Chananya ben Akashya says: The Holy One, blessed be He, desired to make Israel worthy; therefore He gave them the Torah [to study] and many *mitzvot* [to perform]. For it is said: “The Lord desires His [servant’s] vindication, that he may magnify and glorify [His] Torah” (*Yeshayahu* 42:21). (*Makkot* 3:17)

Rambam echoes this notion as well in his *Commentary on the Mishna*:

It is a principle of belief in the Torah that **when one performs one of the 613 *mitzvot*** as it should be performed, allowing no ulterior consideration whatsoever to enter into his observance, **but performing it for its own sake, out of love**, as I have explained to you, such a man merits the life of the World to Come through that [*mitzva*]. That is why R. Chananya said that because of the large number of *mitzvot*, it is impossible for a person to neglect performing one [*mitzva*] properly over the course of his life, and thus he will merit the immortality of his soul through that action. (Rambam, *Commentary on the Mishna*, *Makkot* 3:17)

Rambam understands that the foundation of a person’s divine service is performing one *mitzva* out of love, with a pure heart, without any ulterior motive whatsoever. A person’s willingness to do God’s will and fulfill His *mitzvot* derives from the deep, fundamental recognition of “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

In this sense, “I the Lord am your God” is the root of all the positive commandments that a person is expected to fulfill, since the basis for every positive commandment is recognition of the Commander. It is possible to forge a deep connection to “I the Lord am your God” through the performance of any positive commandment, but each of these pathways leads to the same destination: the immortality of the soul and intimacy with God.

This is why God was able to “magnify and glorify [His] Torah” by giving us many *mitzvot* to perform. Every additional *mitzva* serves as another possible pathway toward intimacy with God. We find a similar idea in the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov:

“One who performs one *mitzva* is rewarded well, his days are prolonged…” (*Kiddushin* 39b),[[3]](#footnote-3) as we have found that the Holy One, blessed be He, only spoke one positive commandment explicitly – “I the Lord am your God.” This indicates this very message: that even if one fulfills [only] one *mitzva* properly, it is enough… And since the Torah and the *mitzvot* emanated from God’s essence, may He be blessed, which is the true unity, therefore when one fulfills one *mitzva* properly and with love – which refers to clinging to Him – one can attain with this *mitzva* a part of the unity. Therefore, he is accorded merit as if he fulfilled all the *mitzvot*, which together constitute His unity. (*Keter Shem Tov* 250)

The Ba’al Shem Tov emphasizes that the foundation of one’s fulfillment of the *mitzvot* is rooted in clinging to God and seeking intimacy with Him. Whoever performs one *mitzva* properly, with love, is clinging to God in that act. This is why, according to the Ba’al Shem Tov, we only heard one *mitzva* – “I the Lord am your God” – directly from God: because it is the root of all the *mitzvot* in the Torah.

With each *mitzva* that one performs, he expresses his connection to the One who commanded it: “I the Lord am your God.” He stresses the notion that when one grabs hold of part of something, it is as if he grabs hold of the entire thing. It is in this way that a person can achieve intimacy with his Creator.

The *mishna* continues to elaborate on the concept of “One who performs one *mitzva*,” providing a second possibility: “But one who does not perform one *mitzva*, good is not done to him, his days are not prolonged, and he does not inherit the land.” This statement seems to contradict the previous one. At first we said that it is enough to fulfill one *mitzva*. If so, why does it matter if one neglects to fulfill only one of the 613 *mitzvot*?[[4]](#footnote-4)

We can answer this question in the following way. In terms of the value of intimacy with God – the God of “I the Lord am your God” – achieved through the fulfillment of a *mitzva*, neglecting a *mitzva* or committing a transgression constitutes an act of disobedience of a divine command. This disobedience creates a separation between a person and his Creator. Yeshayahu describes this separation, saying, “But your iniquities have been a barrier between you and your God” (*Yeshayahu* 59:2). This is the root of “You shall have no other gods besides Me.” The root is always the same: When a person internalizes the fact that there can be no other will aside from that of God, he negates his own will in the face of the divine will. In a deeper sense, though, this is not actually the negation of one’s own will, but the realization that no will exists aside from the divine will. This is the true root of intimacy with God.

In contrast, if – God forbid – a person makes room for his own will beside that of God, this is an untenable situation; the two cannot coexist. This is the root of heresy and separation from God: “You shall have no other gods besides Me.”

However, while we heard only the first two of the ten commandments – “I the Lord am your God” and “You shall have no other gods” – directly from God, we heard the 248 positive commandments and the 365 negative commandments from Moshe. These *mitzvot* encompass all of a person’s limbs and organs and envelop all of his actions throughout all the days of the year. Thus, a person has numerous possible ways of finding and attaining intimacy with God.

In the continuation of the passage in *Makkot*, there is a repeated process of convergence. As we have seen, we began with one fundamental command (the dual command of “I the Lord am your God” and “You shall have no other gods) and then moved on to 613 *mitzvot* (“Moshe charged us with the Torah”). The Talmud in *Makkot* describes a process of convergence in the return from 613 *mitzvot* to one single *mitzva*:

David came and reduced them to eleven, as it is written: “A psalm of David. Lord, who may dwell on Your holy mountain? He who lives without blame, who does what is right, and in his heart acknowledges the truth; whose tongue is not given to evil; who has never done harm to his fellow, or borne reproach for [his acts toward] his neighbor; for whom a contemptible man is abhorrent, but who honors those who fear the Lord; who stands by his oath even to his hurt; who has never lent money at interest, or accepted a bribe against the innocent. The man who acts thus shall never be shaken” (*Tehillim* 15:1-5)…

Yeshayahu came and reduced them to six, as it is written: “He who walks in righteousness, speaks uprightly, spurns profit from fraudulent dealings, waves away a bribe instead of grasping it, stops his ears against listening to infamy, shuts his eyes against looking at evil” (*Yeshayahu* 33:15)…

Mikha came and reduced them to three, as it is written: “He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God” (*Mikha* 6:8)…

Again came Yeshayahu and reduced them to two, as it is said: “Thus said the Lord: Observe what is right and do what is just” (*Yeshayahu* 56:1).

Amos came and reduced them to one, as it is said: “Thus said the Lord to the House of Israel: Seek Me, and you will live” (*Amos* 5:4).

To this R. Nachman bar Yitzchak demurred, saying: [Might it not be taken as,] Seek Me by observing the whole Torah and you will live? But it is Chavakuk who came and based them all on one, as it is said: “But the righteous man is rewarded with life for his fidelity” (*Chavakuk* 2:4). (*Makkot* 24a)

The sole purpose of this convergence is to reduce all the commands and principles of the Torah to their single, mighty root: “But a righteous man is rewarded with life for his fidelity.” One’s faith in “I the Lord am your God” and one’s self-deprecation toward Him creates the intimacy between a person and He who spoke and brought the world into being.

As we have seen, some positions relegate a person’s love of God to the first realm – that of fulfilling and obeying God’s commands. Other positions emphasize the principles of knowing God or standing in awe of the divine power. However, it seems that we can only attain a complete perspective in light of all the positions that we have presented if we view each approach as a step or a stage on the path to the complete love of God, which we discussed at great length in this *shiur*.

Thus, we have before us various stages of contemplation. The deep, fundamental contemplation at the highest level connects all the various levels to the pinnacle of sanctity and intimacy with God. In my humble opinion, this approach is implied in Rambam’s commentary, as we will explain further in the upcoming *shiurim*.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. This *midrash* distinguishes between the first two commandments and the remaining eight, based on the simple reading of the text; only in the first two commandments does God speak in the first person:

   **I** the Lord… who brought you out (***hotzeitikha***)… You shall have no other gods besides **Me**…. You shall not bow down to them or serves them. For **I** the Lord your God am an impassioned God… but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love **Me** and keep **My** commandments. (*Shemot* 20:2-5)

   However, from the next commandment onward, God is referred to in the third person:

   You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God; for **the Lord will not clear** one who swears falsely by **His name**. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy…. For in six days **the Lord made** heaven and earth… **and** **He rested** on the seventh day; therefore **the Lord blessed** the Sabbath day and hallowed it. Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that **the Lord your God is assigning to you**. (*Shemot* 20:6-11)

   See also Ibn Ezra’s commentary on this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is also how we relate to the first two commandments when we read the Ten commandments according to the “upper cantillation” used in the synagogue: “I the Lord am your God” and “You shall have no other gods” are read as one textual unit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Ba’al Shem Tov interprets this *mishna* in the same way that Rambam interprets the *mishna* in *Makkot*. See Rambam’s *Commentary on the Mishna,* *Kiddushin*, for a different interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It may be that this is the reason that Rambam interpreted the *mishna* here differently from how he interpreted the *mishna* in *Makkot* (see previous note). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)