YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #32: Conclusion**

In this *shiur*, we close the circle and come back to the subject with which we started our series on the teachings of Manitou. We started with Manitou’s perception of the Creation and came all the way back to his view of the deliberate deficiency of Creation as the root of all deficiency in the world and the basis of our mission to repair it (in contrast to the view that Manitou rejects, which attributes all deficiency to the sin of Adam).

Let us review our journey and summarize what we have learned. This will shed light on the connection between the beginning of the series and its end.

**Summary of the Foundations of Manitou’s Thought**

We introduced our series with a discussion of Manitou’s view of Creation. We saw that Creation can be viewed in two different ways – as whole and complete, or as essentially imperfect. Manitou sides with the latter view: God is perfect, and He deliberately created a world that is imperfect. There is an inherent and unbridgeable gap between Divine thought and the actual world. This gap gives rise to two central concepts: history, the axis that leads the world through constant movement towards perfection until the Divine purpose of Creation is achieved, and messianism, the ultimate perfection to which the world progresses. These two concepts might sound self-evident to us, but they are not part of the other religions and cultures with which we are familiar; where they are to be found, they have usually been borrowed from Judaism.

At this point we make mention of Manitou’s approach that prescribes first studying the Torah and its conceptual foundations, and then observing reality and cultural perceptions in light of the Torah, rather than trying to adapt the Torah to the prevailing wisdom and culture. While there had been other figures, such as Maharal, who maintained that Jewish philosophy should be developed from within Torah, rather than as an adaption to other worldviews, Manitou emphasized and highlighted this point.

There are many schools of thought that did not and do not believe in the idea of the world progressing towards its ultimate perfection. Others, such as Christianity, may accept the idea of ultimate perfection but do not believe in man’s ability to move the world in this direction. Some have posited that man can progress alone, without God and without Torah, but this approach largely collapsed. Its most prominent version was modernism. Countering all of these views, Manitou insists that man’s purpose is to move the world forward, towards realization of the Divine thought behind Creation.

The reason for the world being created deficient and requiring work in order to achieve perfection is God’s desire that man attain his completion by his own efforts, so that he can truly “own” it. The path to achieving completion and perfection is through morality, the essence of which is making room for the other. This is the definition of morality according to Manitou, in contrast to two prevailing philosophical views – the morality of Aristotelian utilitarianism and Kantian morality as arising from the law. Manitou maintains a polemic with both of these views and points to their dangers. He argues that the foundation of morality, implanted by God in Creation itself, is making room for the other.

The idea of acquiring one’s own perfection by his own efforts necessitates the principle of free choice. Here, too, Manitou’s view contrasts with central philosophical systems, especially those that claim that all is pre-determined. He shows that almost all schools of thought outside of Judaism, both ancient and contemporary, whether openly or covertly, do not truly believe in free choice.

According to Manitou, our choices must be meaningful. He means this not just in terms of the reward that the individual will eventually receive for his choices, but also in terms of the effect that our choices have on molding the future. A person’s path is a long series of junctions where a decision has to be made to follow one or another direction. In the biblical narrative, these points affect not only the reward/punishment and fate of the individual, but also influence the way in which history progresses from that point onwards. The Divine purpose and destiny of the world will eventually be realized no matter what, but the question is how complicated the path will be until that purpose is reached. The biblical narratives should be read not as a predetermined plot, but rather from a fresh perspective: at every junction that the forefathers encounter, the continuation of the story is determined by their choice. Had they made a different choice, history would have followed a different course. According to the Divine plan, there will be an “Israel” that will lead the world; the question is who this will be. The candidate who starts his life as Avram might successfully deal with all the challenges he faces in molding the identity of this nation, thus becoming Avraham and being the one chosen to establish the nation tasked with leading the world to its ultimately aim.

The foundation of morality finds expression in the world along two main axes: the “fraternity equation” and the unification of attributes. The fraternity equation starts with Kayin and Hevel, where for the first time brothers are challenged to make room for one another. Kayin is meant to make room for Hevel, rather than dominating the entire arena, and Hevel is supposed to stand up for his existence and cause Kayin to make room for him, rather than nullifying himself. Both fail in their tasks, and Kayin kills Hevel. Later on, in the generation of the Tower of Bavel, there is an attempt to bring about the repair of humanity through cosmopolitanism – a single leader who consolidates all of mankind around him. Countering this trend, Avraham upholds the universalist model – a nation that will be at the center and allow each force in the world to fulfill its proper function in the overall picture. This nation is built up through the balance and unification of attributes, leading to the molding of an Israelite identity that is neither absolute *chesed* nor absolute *din*. This molding takes place over the course of the forefathers’ lifetimes, from Avraham via Yitzchak to Yaakov, and through the various stations that each of them passes individually on his life’s journey.

Avraham’s most fundamental attribute is absolute *chesed*, and in the process of building up his identity (reaching a climax at the *akeida*) he has to integrate *din*, so that Yitzchak will be able to continue from him. From this process we see that the moral principle is not limited to the theoretical realm; the process is realized through actual people who represent these values and display these attributes. They do not just speak about ideas, but live them. The process that is gradually undertaken by all of mankind throughout all of history, generation after generation, eventually leads to *Mashiach* at the End of Days.

**The Theme Running Through: “Making Room”**

Before concluding, let us return to the question we raised in the previous chapter: Is there any connection between the two directions that Manitou takes, shifting the focus from Adam and the Garden of Eden both backwards, to the Creation of a world that is intentionally deficient, and forwards, to the sin of Kayin and Hevel and its ramifications?

The repair of Creation from its state of “void and chaos,” the fraternity equation, and the balance and unification of attributes are all connected by a common theme. All three are examples of awarding everyone and everything its proper place, a transition from conflict between different forces to a situation that is complete, balanced and perfect. In the case of Creation, it is God Himself Who removes the world from a state of void and chaos, in which each force seeks to dominate the others, bringing order and balance. Since that time, man is entrusted with removing all of humankind from a similar void and chaos, giving each individual, each nation, and each attribute its precise and proper place.

The repair of the world is not connected in any way to the question of man’s atonement for his sin, over the course of the effort he makes in order to repair the world so as to complete the task that the Creator entrusted him with at the end of the Six Days of Creation. The repair of the world is necessary in any case. It is an ontological, inherent need on the part of the Creator Himself, in order that His thought be realized…

The *Ivri* knows that ultimately he will succeed in his task. He knows that the world is progressing in a successful direction, towards realization of the Creator’s thought in reality. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot IV*, pp. 67-69)

Manitou’s teachings show how the Torah presents an alternative to many other approaches that exist in the world. It is an alternative that carries hope, optimism, morality, a mission, and confidence in man and in mankind. His teachings explain the narrative of the Written Law and the foundations of Kabbalah. They place history at the center, and interpret its events. His teachings flow from within the Torah, and in light of the Torah they imbue reality with meaning and significance for our times.

Translated by Kaeren Fish