YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT(VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE 3: THE HOLY AND THE SECULAR

Rav Kook discusses the relationship between the holy and the secular throughout his writings. In order to gain an understanding of Rav Kook's approach to this important topic, we will attempt to do two things: to compare the various and multi-faceted descriptions of the holy and the secular in Rav Kook's writings and attempt to synthesize and understand them, and then to incorporate our conclusions into the context of our discussion until now.

Let us quickly summarize our previous discussions. In the past two classes, we have developed two models which appear in Rav Kook's writings, that of the tree and the fruit, and that of the light centre and the dark surroundings. Both of these models relate to the ends and the means, the instruments used and ultimate goal, or in other words, the holy and the secular.

This topic is of the utmost importance in Rav Kook's teachings. During Rav Kook's lifetime, a Jewish societal framework not based on holiness appeared for the first time. A world of tremendous strength and of stimulating vitality, characterized entirely by secular values and concerns, suddenly emerged into existence.

Rav Kook's approach to this phenomenon stood in contra-distinction to the position adopted by various leaders in Jerusalem at the time. These leaders completely turned their backs on the secular and all that it encompassed, closing themselves within the walls of the Bet-Midrash. Rav Kook, on the other hand, saw a clash between the world of the Zionist pioneer and the world of classical Judaism, and felt compelled to react.

(At this time, we will not deal with the historical aspect of this issue - rather we will attempt to analyze the relationship between the holy and the secular on a purely conceptual and spiritual plane.)

Jewish thought has dealt with the relationship between the holy and the secular throughout the ages. The discussion, however, was always limited to the question of how to relate to the problems posed by those daily activities that are not in and of themselves holy. Even the Chassidim did not speak of "the secular," but rather, they provided an approach which allowed man to relate his individual mundane activities to the encompassing world of holiness.

Rav Kook, on the other hand, wished to analyze the world of the holy and of the secular separately, attempting to confront and understand the role of the secular in itself. In this respect, Rav Kook innovated an approach to the secular world. (I heard this point from Rav Yosef Avivi.)

While Rav Kook wrote many, many articles on this subject, we will only be able to focus on a few. In the following passage, taken from Ma'amarei Ha-Reiya, Rav Kook speaks of three conceptual categories: the secular, the holy, and the holy of holies.

"There is a world of the secular, and a world of the holy, worlds of secularity and worlds of holiness. These worlds contradict each other. Obviously, the contradiction between them is relative: Man, in his limited comprehension, is unable to harmonize secularity and holiness, and is unable to neutralize their contradictions. They are, however, reconciled in the higher world, in the place of the holy of holies." (p. 400)

We have here three strata, the secular, the holy, and the holy of holies. As we take a closer look at this passage, we notice that these three concepts are not presented as building blocks, one placed upon the other, with the holy placed upon the secular. Rather, they form a pyramid in which the secular and the holy form the base, with the holy of holies as the pinnacle, binding the other two aspects (the secular and the holy) together.

Here we have an incredibly innovative idea - the secular is placed on the same plane as the holy, and it is only the holy of holies that stands above them.

Rav Kook spoke about the secular, the ordinary holiness, and the holy of holies. We live in a world in which our experiences seem to emerge from two different realities (secularity and holiness), both in an ideological sense and in an existential sense. However, the tension that often results is not due to the inherent reality of these two different worlds, but rather from a limited understanding which has difficulty forging a synthesized existence.

"One of the purposes of the disclosure of the esoteric mysteries of the Torah in this world - is to view the secular from the vantage point of the holy, to realize that in truth, there is nothing totally secular in this world. On the other hand, all of the dimensions of holiness are themselves secular in comparison to the exalted light of holiness which emanates from the Ein Sof (the Infinite). The result is that these concepts come together, and the unity of these worlds stands out, and the spirit of man grows greater and greater, and his actions grow and become glorified in the foundation of an upper existence." (pg. 399)

Revealing the "mysteries of the Torah" creates a world that is not merely black and white; rather, it is a world comprised of a myriad of colors. If until now we have spoken about the secular, the holy, and the holy of holies, we now speak of the secular, the revealed holiness, and the holy of holies that attaches itself to the world of mysteries - of eternity.

The world in which we live defines life in simple terms: the holy and the secular. Each is placed against the other: the secular is empty because the holy is full, and the result is that there is no connection between them. Rav Kook stressed that we cannot view life in such simplistic terms. We must look deep and penetrate beneath the surface, and find holiness in existence. Much of it may be hidden within the secular. And even within the holy, aspects of the secular may be found.

It is in this way that we may perceive the connection between them. In other words, while we see things that may appear to be secular, in truth they do not necessarily contradict the world of the holy. It is a superficial understanding that cannot reveal the essence of what life is all about; a broad and penetrating vision, however, allows one to understand the inner, secret world - that of various aspects and evolving mysteries.

Slowly, as we progress in future lectures, we will find that a full grasp of the inner nature of God, that is, from the perspective of the "holy of holies," becomes much deeper and broader, to the extent that Rav Kook was able to write the following astonishing sentence: "There are times when we may find a heretic who possesses a powerful, inner enlightening faith which emanates from the holy, elevated source [note -which is parallel to the 'holy of holies' discussed above] who is greater than thousands of 'believers of weak faith.'" ("Believers of weak faith" refers to people whose only concept of holiness is holiness in its regular sense, as opposed to the idea of the "holy of holies." We will elaborate on this point in the future.)

"In all paths of life, it is the secular which awakens first, and then the holy is compelled to awaken, to complete the renewal of the secular, to beautify it and to redeem it from dirtiness and filth. Woe unto the secular if it considers using its power of the first-born, the power of the fact that it was born first into the light of the world and activity, and to say because of this 'I, and there is no other' - if it has no desire to know anything about holiness, about its precious brightness and its radiant appearance. And woe unto the holy if it says 'Since the secular came to the world first, it is infringing on my boundaries. Therefore I must know only to fight against it, to destroy what it builds, to uproot what it sows.' The content of life, and a clear perspective of existence, will teach us otherwise, completely otherwise. Thus is destiny: the secular will march first on the platform of life. It is true that in its innerness, it draws from the elevated holiness, the holy of holies, also in these first steps. But the values of the holy are not at all recognized in clarity and understanding in the beginning of the appearance of the secular, and after the first strides of the secular, the holy must inevitably come, to radiate its light and to appear in its glory." (pp. 403-404)

The secular is that which is created first; chronologically, it precedes the holy. The tree grows before the fruit, and only afterward does the holy come and perfect the secular, giving it meaning, and preventing it from degenerating into ugliness and confusion.

Ideally, Rav Kook maintains, the holy should prevent the secular from believing that since it came first, it is the reason for the world's existence. On the other hand, the very existence of a relationship between the holy and the secular ought to ensure that holiness will not view secularity as limiting its own expression.

Unfortunately, it is those very sparks of holiness within the secular that give the secular the false impression that it does not need holiness. The problem of the secular world is that its hidden, inner holiness only realizes its potential upon contact with other, revealed sources of holiness. Left alone, not only do those sparks of holiness within the secular remain hidden, but the entire entity may even be spoiled by the external, negative aspects of secularity. Furthermore, because the holiness cannot see what is hidden inside the secular, the holy denies legitimacy to the secular. In return the secular becomes aggressive and violent, and a battle ensues.

Rav Kook considers this war between the holy and the secular to be dangerous and wrong. Secularity without holiness is brazen and empty. And, just as we need air to breathe, holiness needs secularity to act upon. When the holy rejects the secular, it becomes dry and arid. Therefore we need to place ourselves in both worlds, to penetrate into their inner depths and elevate them both. Thus we will prevent the fall of both worlds.

(This lecture summary was prepared by Jonty Blackman.)

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