YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

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This shiur is dedicated in honor of the birth of Yosef Netanel,   
born to Naomi and Ari Zivotofsky ('80). Mazal Tov!

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LECTURE # 11: SCIENCE & RELIGION PART II

"Tikkun" and the Evolutionary Concept

Review:

In the previous lecture we analyzed letter no. 134 and observed that, in principle, Rav Kook does not perceive scientific development as dangerous; instead, he explains how we can build the palace of Torah on top of the new scientific outlook, and as a result, deepen and improve our religious devotion. R. Kook is not afraid of science, rather he embraces the concept that scientific development is steered by God.

Evolution

Our primary text in this lecture will be taken from Orot Ha-kodesh II, chapter 19, page 537 - "Evolutionary Science." In this section, R. Kook states that the evolutionary concept better suits the kabbalistic perception of the world than any other philosophical system to date. The same idea which many see as a danger and a threat to our religious view, R. Kook understood as the closest a philosophical idea has ever come to achieving harmony with the esoteric world of the Kabbala.

What is the cause of his enthusiasm?

Rav Kook perceives a parallel between the fundamental kabbalistic principle of "tikkun" ("correction") and the basic assumption of evolution. He takes three concepts - evolution, repentance, and tikkun, and demonstrates how, in his deep understanding, the concepts are all linked. First let us examine the concept of tikkun.

Tikkun - a broken vessel

A simple reading of Genesis 1 gives rise to the belief that God created the world starting at the bottom (with raw matter) and working upwards. Kabbala, however, describes a world originating from and revealed by God (similar to Plotinus' concept of emanation). That is to say that the actual physical creation of this universe was preceded by a lengthy process of Divine planning.

When God "decided" to create the world, this set off a chain of Divine events. First existed a rough plan, which was followed by the fleshing out of that plan. The final step was the plan’s execution, and creation ex nihilo began. Genesis 1 is in fact the conclusion of an extensive, hidden, internal "top-down" process, the "bottom-up" process beginning only with the first moment of physical creation.

However, the Kabbala talks of something more extreme, more powerful. The world in which we find ourselves is not the world which was ready to be realized at the end of the Divine planning stage, but is the remnant of a much more lofty, sublime world which God originally designed. This original world was affected by a crisis, which caused it to topple and shatter. It is in this shattered world that we exist. The kabbalistic metaphor is that of a vessel dropping and breaking (shvirat ha-kelim). Our role in this secondary, damaged world is to gather the shards and reconstruct the original vessel. This process of improvement, repair, correction and perfection is known as tikkun. This event can be described as a priori - occurring before Adam's sin, before even creation. In Kabbala, our world is known as olam ha-tikkun - the world of repair.

Why did the vessels break? - Tzimtzum (limitation)

In brief, the vessels broke so that man could create himself. God could have created a more perfect world, but in such a case there would have been an absolute chasm between the Creator and the created. In creating a world requiring tikkun, God assigned to man not merely the role of created, but also of creator. God created for man the option of self-creation.

This concept can be compared to the parent-child relationship. A parent can shield a child, never letting him make a decision and, should a dilemma arise, solve the problem on behalf of the child. A good parent, however, allows the child to decide for himself. The wise parent appreciates that, in doing so, he gives rise to the possibility of the child creating and developing himself. The decision-making process is itself beneficial to the child. Indeed, a child brought up in the guarded fashion will never become a complete person; a human becomes a person by way of the freedom to make his own decisions.

Such is the relationship between God and man. God holds back, restricts Himself, limits Himself ("tzimtzum"), partially shading man from the Divine light, and thus enables man to make his own decisions. It is man's task to use that freedom for tikkun, construction. God grants to His creation the possibility of generating itself. (The idea developed here is one of Rav Kook’s explanations of the concept of "shvirat ha-kelim." We have developed this idea in explaining the concept of tzimtzum. It must be stated, however, that the Kabbala clearly distinguishes between these two concepts.)

Tikkun and Evolution

We have seen that God chooses not to play Puppeteer, but instead cuts the strings, allowing His creatures to act independently. We have also seen that the world requires repair, development, and an upwardly directed process of improvement in order to restore it to its pre-creation state. Therefore, we would expect to find some sort of energy which is pushing it upwards, some sort of force, craving, or yearning, aspiring to perfection.

This tikkun is not to occur only in the historical process. In religious and philosophical discourse such a concept is common, established, and accepted. The world is understood to have developed from a barbaric to a civilized stage, and ultimately man aspires to a world of peace, that is devoid of hunger, free of poverty, and ultimately, to reach the Messianic Age. Rav Kook explains that in olam ha-tikkun, we require cosmic tikkun.

This is precisely what is proposed by evolution. Evolutionary biology, as well as evolutionary physics, describe tremendously complex structures (the inanimate universe, living creatures) as having started off as the most simple structures, developing into the state they have achieved today, billions of years later. Compared with Aristotle's world view - which was widely accepted in the Middle Ages - we have made a tremendous leap, philosophically speaking.

Aristotelians believed in a static world. The world has existed since infinity, and will continue to exist for eternity. Everything always was and always will be. This perception directly contradicts Judaism. Had the world existed for ever, there would be nothing that had not been actualized, and hence, the concept of "tikkun" would be meaningless. We ought to be living in the Messianic age by now. We should all be reaping the fruits of the Garden of Eden. The beliefs of tikkun and statio are totally opposed.

The modern scientific view arose and propounded the idea of progressive, evolutionary processes. The philosophical concept of evolution penetrated not only the sciences, but also the humanities. In the twentieth century, we apply the concept of development to fields of cosmology, biology, history, religion - indeed, to all facets of life. We perceive everything as starting with a humble beginning, followed by an upward development.

Tikkun and Repentance

Rav Kook’s view of repentance is broader than the classic concept of repentance. He views repentance as a process of tikkun streaming upwards towards the sublime, always driven by the desire of the soul to reunite with and return to its source.

Reservations Regarding Evolution

We do not fully accept everything claimed by science. We have certain boundaries; certain red lines may not be crossed.

In letter no. 134, Rav Kook states that the principle of evolution itself requires evolution, and that it is currently in its infancy. The strict causative, gradualistic explanation offered by evolution is so rigid and stiff that Rav Kook - who, as we saw last time, is usually at ease with causality - finds it artificial and synthetic. He believes that ultimately we will realize that evolution does not occur through a simplistic, mechanistic upward progression from A to B and B to C, but that there are jumps and punctuations. "Then the light of Israel will be understood."

There appear to be two different attitudes towards evolution within Rav Kook's writings. In the first part of this lecture we saw Rav Kook embrace the theory's implications in their entirety, but in this letter, Rav Kook expresses hesitancy and awaits a change in the theory. This apparent inconsistency vanishes if we examine Rav Kook's writings on the topic more closely. In Orot Ha-kodesh Rav Kook talks about the implications of the evolutionary approach in the sciences, whereas in letter 134, he refers to its applications in the humanities.

In the humanities, such as history, evolutionists would argue that events that occur later are inevitably better than those which preceded them. For Rav Kook, to say that is the only historical pattern is inconceivable. In Jewish history, we view many past events as more powerful, more holy, or more significant than events of today. Such events include the exodus from Egypt, the theophany at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah, and the writing of the Talmud. It is bizarre to suggest that today's greatest Jewish scholars are of the calibre of Abraham, Moses, King Solomon or the Talmudic sages. Indeed, were we to accept such a concept of a gradual, smooth and steady advancement of society, we would have to accept Christianity as better than Judaism, and Islam as greater than both! Some philosophers (e.g. Hegel, Branis) really believed in such a necessary succession. They saw the world as beginning in idolatry, and via Judaism, progressing to Christianity.

It is noteworthy that whereas Rav Kook instinctively felt it was impossible to take a simplistic principle - evolution - and use it to explain all phenomena, as many in the nineteenth century attempted, many years later others would reach the same conclusion through intensive research. The late Prof. Amos Funkenstein wrote a pamphlet several years ago entitled "Maimonides: Nature, History and Messianic Beliefs". In chapter nine he discusses how in the twentieth century we have been freed from the primitive notion of evolution: "For us today, it is easier to understand the development of monotheism in Israel as a sudden eruption of a new idea, as a mutation, within the spiritual history of mankind." (p. 49.)

In the sciences, such as biology, however, Rav Kook is more eager to accept evolution as it was proposed in its pure form. Kabbalists see the spiritual world as developing by way of cause and effect processes, with one world leading to the next. If the material world is found to behave in the same manner as the spiritual world, this does not bother the kabbalist at all; he is well accustomed to this mode of thinking. Furthermore, a gradual augmentation in biological sophistication, complexity and refinement is more satisfying for Rav Kook than a non-uniform, jerky journey, advanced at each and every stage by a Divine impetus. In the former model, a far more complete world is revealed, and thus God's greatness is amplified. God wishes to create a fuller, more perfect world, without holes or gaps. This is the notion of the Great Chain of Being. This is precisely what palaeontologists reveal as they dig up extinct evolutionary intermediates.

Of course, Rav Kook does not see this process as determined solely through random chance and natural forces. Even this seemingly dry scientific process is directed by Divine Providence. Here we touch upon a basic disagreement in religious outlook. The conventional religious view seeks the "breaks" in history; it wants to demonstrate new beginnings, an intrusion by God into the natural order. In this way, God's presence is manifest clearly and obviously. A simple reading of the first chapter of Bereishit supports this view - "God said...", and again "God said...", - each stage delineates a new beginning directly resulting from a new act of God. It is clear, therefore, that this view will emphasize the importance of miracles. The alternative view perceives a process of cause and effect, and discovers God's providence within the process as a whole. The verses in Bereishit are explained according this view as expressing God's supervision of a process which appears simple and natural. There are many ramifications to this disagreement in many areas - for instance, the nature of redemption: Does a natural process reflect the Divine redemption, or does redemption descend miraculously "from the sky?"

Elsewhere in his writings, Rav Kook highlights two problems with the belief in evolution, both connected with the story of the Garden of Eden. If we view our origins from the perspective of the improvement and better adaptation of the previous, lesser species, then we may look at ourselves, our institutions, and societies and give ourselves a pat on the back. Great-great-grandmother was a chimpanzee, but look how well we are doing! If, however, we remember that our history began with the Garden of Eden, then, in comparison to the spiritual level of our ancestors, we have declined, starting with Adam's sin. Hence we have something to which we must aspire; a goal to reach for: the religious stratum that was occupied by our foremost ancestors.

Secondly, if we originate from the crude depths of nature, even if we are climbing the ladder towards heaven, how do we know if the ladder is long enough? Will we ever arrive? If the origin of man was in the Garden of Eden, then undoubtedly the ladder reaches that high, because we began right there, on the top rung, only we have since descended. The Garden of Eden is our natural home. The drive to ascend is not a transcension of our nature, but rather the revealing of the real essence of our nature. The world in which God and man "stroll" together is the world most appropriate for us. The optimism in this view is noteworthy. The world, in its original state, is good. Man is good. The faults are the result of sin - and that can be corrected. According to Rav Kook, the Torah invigorates us with a positive outlook: there is almost no limit to what one can achieve.

Primary and Secondary

Rav Kook is arguing here that that the story of the Garden of Eden is the very root of the Jewish outlook. The Torah is presenting a principle, explaining the nature of man and the world, and demonstrating the potential outcome of sin. We are not required to accept the story literally.

In Jewish thought, there are some items of primary importance, and many others of secondary importance. What is crucial to us is the foundation of our faith. With everything else we can contend.

Rav Kook presents his position on this issue in the fourth paragraph of letter 154. The central dogma of Judaism is our belief in a single God, from Whom radiates eternal righteousness. This is a system of metaphysics from which ethics emerges - ethical monotheism. It mandates a belief in God which also generates a way to live our lives, how to behave, how to live in virtue. Can this be taken away from us - can any scientific discovery force us to abandon this? Obviously not! This is the heart and soul of Judaism - although there may be a body and clothing to Godliness, this is the essence.

Rav Kook teaches that we are not going to engage in ferocious conflict for ideas which are not at the heart of our beliefs, and that this heart is unaffected by scientific thought and discovery. It is above science, in a different realm, and science cannot touch it. No scientist can observe a test-tube and proclaim that God is not One, or that we do not have to behave ethically. There may be apparent contradictions with some of our more peripheral axioms, but we can cope with this problem, (perhaps through the method of explaining biblical verses differently).

Nothing science proposes can touch the essence of Judaism - that we have one God and a way of worshipping Him, through righteousness and virtue.

(This lecture summary was prepared by: Benjamin Ellis)