YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

**“And the Lord regretted” – On the Meaning of Free Choice**

**I. Divine Foreknowledge and Free Choice**

**“And the Lord regretted” – How so?**

And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. (*Bereishit* 6:5-6)

The commentators have difficulty understanding how it is possible that God could have “regretted” having created man. Already in the *midrash*, a heretic raised the issue with Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha:

A certain heretic asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha, saying to him: Do you not say that the Holy One, blessed be He, sees the future? He said to him: Yes. [The heretic then] said to him: But surely it is written: "And it grieved Him at His heart." (*Bereishit Rabba* 27,4)

This is, indeed, a difficult question. How can it be that God, who knows everything from beginning to end, was apparently surprised by the change in human behavior?!

When one digs a little deeper, the question becomes even stronger: Surely God knew that humanity would reach such depths. Is it for this that He created the world?

Various answers have been suggested. Some addressed the issue by slightly "altering" the meaning of the verse. For example, Onkelos translates:

And the Lord went back on His word that He had made man on the earth, and He said with His word to break their strength in accordance with His will. (Onkelos 6:6)

Onkelos seems to understand that we are dealing here with a divine decision to change direction for the future, not truly a sense of sorrow and regret about the past. This is how he resolves the difficulty raised above.

The *midrash* cited above offers a different answer:

[Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha] said to him: "Has a son ever been born to you?" He said: "Indeed." He said to him: "What did you do [when your son was born]?" He said to him: "I rejoiced and I made everyone happy.” [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to him: “But didn’t you know that your son would ultimately die?” He said to him: “At the time of joy, I am joyous; at the time of mourning, I am mournful." [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to him: "So too is the work [of creation] before the Holy One, blessed be He." (*Bereishit Rabba* 27,4)

According to the *midrash*, God's grief does not stem from a lack of knowledge, God forbid. He is not surprised by the turn which humanity took. Rather, the verse describes sadness that originated from an expected disappointment. Even though the outcome was known from the beginning, it is still disappointing.

Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar, the *Or Ha-Chaim*, offers two understandings of God's regret, following the Rambam's position on the question of Divine foreknowledge and free choice.

In his introduction to *Avot*, the Rambam raises the timeless question: How can it be that, on the one hand, God knows everything, including our actions, when, on the other hand, we humans have free choice and can choose to act as we wish? If God knows from the outset what we will choose, our choice is not completely free! The Rambam offers an answer that at first glance appears a little evasive:

Thus, we have shown how utterly futile is the pretension to define His knowledge. All we can comprehend is that just as we know that God exists, so are we cognizant of the fact that He knows. If we are asked, "What is the nature of God's knowledge," we answer that we do not know, any more than we know the nature of His true existence. Fault is found, moreover, with one who tries to grasp His knowledge, and it is said about him: "Can you find out the deep things of God" (*Iyov* 11:7). (*Shemoneh Perakim*, chap. 8)

The Rambam repeats the same idea in his *Hilkhot Teshuva* (5:5), and there the Raavad argues that it leaves the problem unresolved:

Avraham said: This author did not follow the custom of scholars; for no man begins something that he knows not how to finish, but he commenced with inquiries and questions and left the matter under question and turned it around to faith. It would have been better for him to leave the matter to the innocence of the innocent, not to awaken their hearts and leave their mind in doubt, lest, during some hour, a [negative] thought will enter their heart concerning it. (*Hasagot Ha-Raavad*, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:5)

The Raavad then offers his own answer to the question of Divine foreknowledge and free choice. According to him, there is no connection between God's foreknowledge and the necessity of a person performing any particular action; God knows in advance what he will choose, but the choice itself is man's alone.

Moreover, although there is no convincing reply to this question, it is best to give a partial answer, saying: If either the righteousness or wickedness of man would have been dependent upon the decree of the Creator, blessed be He, we would be saying that His knowledge is His decree; then the question would, indeed, be very difficult. But now that the Creator ceded this power from His Hand to the hand of the man himself, His knowledge cannot be said to be a decree, but is similar to the knowledge of astrologists who know by another power what the conduct of a certain person will be. (Ibid.)

Within the Raavad's approach, however, the difficulty arising from our verses regains its strength: If God indeed knows all human actions, why was He surprised by those actions?

In contrast, the *Or Ha-Chaim* follows the path of the Rambam and offers a wonderful explanation:

The words of the Rambam are surely closer to the truth, for we cannot comprehend the manner of God's knowledge. Who is like God, so that he can understand His knowledge from something similar to it? I will enlighten you, that God is able to deny, i.e., totally ignore and remain unaffected by, knowledge He had previously acquired, as if He does not know it, when He so pleases. It is not within the power of man to do this, that he should acquire knowledge and not know it. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 6:5)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that according to the Rambam, God chooses to deprive Himself of the knowledge!

As proof, the *Or Ha-Chaim* cites the words of the wicked Bilam: "None has beheld iniquity in Yaakov, neither has one seen perverseness in Israel" (*Bamidbar* 23:21). This verse is exceedingly difficult: One might explain that Israel does not sin and therefore God does not find iniquity in him (as is implied by the Targum Yerushalmi there), or like the second explanation offered there by Rashi, that God *overlooks* the evil performed by Israel. The *Or Ha-Chaim* adopts the second explanation: God chooses not to look at the evils performed by Israel – and therefore, He grieves when they arrive.

This is a difficult thing to say, that on the one hand, God's knowledge is part of His essence, while on the other hand, He can withhold certain knowledge from Himself! That is what the Rambam meant when he said that the pretension to define God's knowledge is utterly futile.

Why would God wish to ignore His knowledge? The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers two reasons:

First, God is good and does not dwell on evil. This reason does not suffice, however, because God needs to know what will happen and what will be the ultimate outcome of what happens now.

There is another reason, namely, that God excludes such future events from His consciousness so that the wicked cannot claim they were forced by God due to His omniscience. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The first reason is indeed not convincing, but the second reason is basic and fundamental; it is only the absence of foreknowledge that makes free choice possible.

**II. The Power to Choose Even Against Divine Will**

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* words open a door to an important principle. According to him, we can contemplate the possibility that God's will would change in the course of His governing the world; He does this deliberately in order to enable man's ability to choose, even at the expense of his Creator’s knowledge. Furthermore, not only does the *Or Ha-Chaim* explain in several places that God can change His plans in order to enable man's power to choose, but in the most extreme instance, he suggests that man can choose even *against* the will of God.

When the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the story of the sale of Yosef, he has difficulty explaining the following verses:

And Reuven heard it, and delivered him out of their hand, and said: Let us not take his life. Reuven said to them: Shed no blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him – that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. (*Bereishit* 37:22-23)

What kind of rescue is this? If they cast him in a pit, Yosef will simply die there! This is especially problematic in light of the *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 84,16) that says that while the pit was empty of water, there were snakes and scorpions in it; surely, they would have expected him to be killed in it. Is this considered salvation?

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that Reuven's rescue plan consisted of transferring Yosef's fate from his brothers to the snakes and scorpions. Why is this considered a rescue? He explains:

[This action was applauded by the Torah] as man is a free creature possessing freedom of choice **and able to kill people who are not liable for the death penalty**, as distinct from wild beasts, which do not kill humans unless the latter are liable for the death penalty in the eyes of God. This is what is meant by the words: "And [Reuven] delivered him out of their hand." That is, out of [the brothers’] *free* hand. By doing so, he contradicted what they said: "And we will see what will become of his dreams." Because [the brothers’] free choice would have cancelled the matter, and there would be no proof if they killed him **that [Yosef] spoke a lie [in his dreams].** (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 37:21)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the entire process of Yosef’s descent to Egypt was a test to see whether Yosef's prophetic dreams would indeed come true, or not. This is how he explains the words of the brothers above:

"And we shall see what will become of his dreams" – They wished to prove that his dreams contained falsehoods. (*Or Ha-Chaim Bereishit* 37:20)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thus, the *Or Ha-Chaim* teaches us a great lesson: man can choose to do things of his own free will *even against* the will of God! Therefore, the brothers would be able to harm Yosef, even against God’s wish to fulfill his dreams.

**III. Free Choice as an Element in the Creation of Man**

**1. The importance of human will in the eyes of God**

Twice in *Parashat* *Bereishit* we find an account of the creation of the woman, and there is a big difference between these two accounts. In chapter 1, the creation of the woman is described together with the creation of the man:

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (*Bereishit* 1:27)

Afterward, in chapter 2, we find an account that describes the creation of human beings in two different stages:

And the Lord God said: It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmate for him. And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man would call every living creature, that was to be its name. And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found a helpmate for him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, and He took one of his ribs, and closed up flesh in its place. And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, He made a woman, and brought her to the man. And the man said: This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. (*Bereishit* 2:18-23)

Much has been written about these differences. The simple explanation appears in Rashi (*Bereishit* 1: 27): Chapter 1 gives a general account, while chapter 2 describes the specifics. However, Rashi also brings a midrashic explanation:

Rav Shmuel bar Nachman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first human, He created him with two faces, and [afterwards] He sawed him [into two] and made him backs, a back here and a back there. (*Bereishit Rabba* 8,1)

The *midrash* describes the division of the first human into two, referred to by the Kabbalists as "*nesira*," sawing. Based on this description, the *Or Ha-Chaim* asks: Why did God allow Adam to be split from his wife Chava? Surely this led to Adam's first sin; without this division, Adam would not have sinned! He answers:

And according to our approach, there is good reason for one inquiry, as to why God went back on his first thought when He created the man and his wife with him and later sawed them apart. For the intention was to announce that God's work is good for all, and God thought for the good and created male and female together, but for the sake of man's pleasure, He set them apart from all the creatures [to create a separate helpmate]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 2:18)

Here, too, there is a "retraction" of the fundamental will of God for the sake of man's will. *Or Ha-Chaim* seems to have based himself here on the words of the Ramban:

And He brought before him all the species so that any one of them to which Adam would give a name and say that it is a living soul like himself, that would remain its name and it would be a helpmate to him. So Adam gave names to all, but did not find help for himself which he would be able to call a living soul like his own name. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 2:19)

Thus, chapter 2 actually describes the first search in history for a matrimonial partner. According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, God saw that the man did not find what his heart desired in the animal kingdom, and so for the sake of the man's personal desire, and even though this would lead to sin (!), God enabled the man's will, once again, as it were, against His own will.

The Ramchal (*Kelalim Rishonim* 28) sees in this story of the sawing the birth of free choice. When the man was one, the connection between the male and the female was necessary and not by choice. Their separation allowed for the possibility to also choose to distance one from the other, and essentially symbolized the possibility to sin (something which in fact happened in the end). Of course, this is a metaphor for the relationship between the people of Israel and God: after a severance between man and God, the connection between them is not forced; man can choose to do things against God's will. This being the case, choosing the good takes on much greater meaning.

**2. Division and the birth of free choice**

Why did God allow for the separation between Adam and Chava, for man's ability to choose? It seems that a person who does not sin would be more desirable; why allow man to sin? The Ramchal goes on to explain that it is precisely the ability to choose that confers praise and honor. The distance between the man and the woman also allows for closeness and a renewed connection. When this connection is made voluntarily and not out of necessity, it is greater, stronger, and much more meaningful. The greater the distance and the challenge arising from it, the greater the joy of renewed connection.

This principle also arises in the *Or Ha-Chaim*'s explanation of why the serpent was created. One might think it would have been better for the world if the snake, which is known as the "seducer" (*meisit*) and often symbolizes the evil inclination (see *Zohar Bereishit* 35b), had never been created! But the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains:

Know that this creature, the greater that God made it, the greater the attainment of the soul in the supernal world. For in accordance with the strength that a person needs to emerge victorious, so will he reap his reward, as they said: "The reward is commensurate with the pain" (*Avot* 5:23). Had God limited the power of the seducer to entice us, overcoming him would not have amounted to much, for there is no attainment other than by overcoming the seducer. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 3:4)

As great as the distance is, so is the closeness, and as great as the seduction and the ability to sin, so is the reward for those who overcome sin – "God has made the one vis-à-vis the other" (*Kohelet* 7:14). Thus, the seducer plays a very important role, making it possible for us to control it and thus receive reward and closeness to God.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* continues with a parable:

Go out and learn from what is stated in the holy *Zohar* (*Teruma* 163a) in a parable about the king's son whose father instructed him not to draw near to a harlot, and the harlot he instructed to seduce him – to test whether the son will honor his father; see there. Similarly, God was gracious with those who love Him to prepare something for them through which they can attain eternal life. Happy is the people for whom it is thus. (Ibid.)

The more the king makes it difficult for his son and tests him, the greater and clearer is the proof of the son's love for his father the king!

**IV. "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" – To Choose, Or to Choose Not to Choose**

What we have discussed so far is very complex. God wants to bestow goodness upon man and so He creates evil, so that man can overcome it and receive the greatest good. This sounds beautiful in theory, but when you consider it in the framework of the real world, it is almost unimaginable! Let's take, for example, the son of the king in the *Zohar*’sparable; would we put our children through such tests, or would we prefer to remain with the innocent assumption that they do in fact love us, without trying to test them in such a difficult manner?

God "took a big risk," as it were, when He gave man the power to choose, especially when He created the serpent that would seduce him to do evil, when it would have been possible to withhold all this and leave man exclusively on the path of the good.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* adds another variable to this equation – the commandment not to eat from a certain tree:

And the Lord God commanded man, saying: Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die. (*Bereishit* 2:16-17)

The creation of the tree of knowledge is also puzzling: someone setting up a garden outside his house would not plant a tree in it that can cause death, and then warn his household about it! Why does God act in this manner? Here, too, the *Or Ha-Chaim* comes to our aid and explains the reason for the prohibition to eat of the tree of knowledge:

You should know that the principal reason that God commanded man not to eat from the tree of knowledge was to prevent knowledge of evil becoming an integral part of his perceptions. His perceptions were meant to concentrate only on what is good. This is what Shlomo meant when he said: "God made man upright" (*Kohelet* 7:29) – that is, with singular knowledge of the good, evil not figuring as part of his imagination. When evil became known to him, as indicated by: "And they knew that they were naked and they were embarrassed," there was no place for this commandment in the world… (*Or Ha-Chaim* 3:22)

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the ability to know the world and from this knowledge to choose the good, which is a basic condition in the creation of the world, as we saw above. However, though God created the world with the possibility of choice and sin, He created man himself without knowledge. It seems that God does not leave the choice exclusively to the good will of man; rather, He intervenes a little.

In contrast to the serpent, which was more cunning (*arum*)than any beast of the field, Adam and Chava at first "were both naked (*arumim*)… and were not ashamed" (*Bereishit* 2:25) – they did not know evil. God commanded them to remain in this natural and innocent simplicity by forbidding them from eating the tree of knowledge. In this way, God essentially sought to prevent true choice, which stems from the knowledge of evil and the exposure to it by way of another choice. Refraining from eating from the tree of knowledge is also voluntary. God created potential for evil, but at the same time told the man: Stay away from evil! Be careful with it, for once you have become exposed to it, the task will be much more difficult!

Since the time of creation, Man acquires knowledge over the course of his life, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; they are a reflection of our own lives. No one describes this better than King Shlomo, the wisest of men, in the verse that the *Or Ha-Chaim* cites from *Kohelet*:

Behold, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many thoughts. (*Kohelet* 7:29)

In our lives as well, there are different ways of choosing the good; some try to expose themselves to the *meisit* as little as possible, while others are not afraid of being exposed to it and prefer the contest. This question already occupied the *Amoraim*, Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Yonatan:

Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Yonatan were walking on the road and came to a parting of ways, one of which led by the door of a place of idol-worship and the other led by a brothel. The one said to the other: Let us go [through the one leading] by the place of idolatry, the inclination for which has been abolished. The other, however, said: Let us go [through that leading] by the brothel and defy our inclination and receive a reward. (*Avoda Zara* 17a-b)

There does not seem to be an absolute answer, and the fate of this question, with which the world has been preoccupied from the beginning of creation and until this very day, is to remain as a question.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See also *Or Ha-Chaim* *Bereishit* 37:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)