YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THe Purpose of creation and the Mission of man**

**In Jewish thought**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 03:**

**The purpose of creation in the thought of *Chazal***

The previous *shiur* suggested three different paths through which one might approach the issue of the purpose of creation, even though it involves contemplation of what preceded the world and would seem to be above and beyond our comprehension.

In this *shiur*,we will begin to deal with the issue itself and consider the words of *Chazal* on the subject. The relevant sources are best seen as initial musings on the issue, as they do not appear in the Talmud and *midrashim* in an orderly and structured manner. We will encounter orderly contemplation of the subject in the writings of Jewish thinkers in later generations; these writings are heavily based on the sources in *Chazal*, so we will first examine selected sources in the words of *Chazal* themselves.

**There is no “first” except the Torah**

As noted in the previous *shiur*, the book of *Mishlei* serves as a central source for learning about what preceded creation. The first source we will examine is based on the verses in this book that we already saw:

The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, the first of His works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; where there were no foundations abounding with water; before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth; while as yet He had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the beginning of the dust of the world. When He established the heavens, I was there; when He set a circle upon the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the fountains of the deep showed their might, when He gave to the sea His decree, that the waters should not transgress His commandment, when He appointed the foundations of the earth; then I was by Him, as a nursling; and I was daily all delight, playing always before Him. Playing in His habitable earth, and my delights are with the sons of man. (*Mishlei* 8:22-31)

These verses mention the central elements of earthly creation: the earth, the sky, the sea, the mountains and the hills, the depths and the fountains – all these were preceded by wisdom. This is reported by wisdom itself, as it were – which, according to the plain meaning of the verses, is to be identified with the Torah.

With that report, a question arises: What did wisdom do before all these things were created? Here we come to a significant verse, which describes what there was before the world was created: "And I was daily all delight, playing always before Him." It is somewhat surprising that what wisdom did before the world was created was play. In the next verse, human beings appear: "And my delights are with the sons of man." This verse is certainly already talking about the stage after creation, indicating that the description of play and delight has ramifications and echoes even after the world was created. It seems that the “delight” here goes beyond simple play and refers to something that is an end in itself; one who delights in something enjoys that thing itself, and does not see it as a means to another end. We will come across this concept in later writings, so we will not dwell upon it here but will continue to consider the verses and the midrashic discussions about them.

After this unit of verses, the book of *Mishlei* returns to words of moral exhortation: "Now therefore, you children, hearken to me; for happy are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Happy is the man that hearkens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors" (*Mishlei* 8:32-34). We can understand from this continuation that the entire description above, about how wisdom preceded the world, has meaning for man's mission in the world. The obligation of moral behavior, according to the Torah, is intrinsically related to the fact that the Torah existed before creation.

These verses are important and meaningful. There are other verses in *Mishlei* that refer to the Torah's position before creation, but here the Torah itself speaks, as it were, telling us about itself at that time and deriving from that the moral demand that is made of man. In light of this, it is not surprising that the very beginning of the entire *Midrash Rabba* – which begins with *Bereishit Rabba* – opens with a midrashic exposition of the verse, "Then I was by Him, as a nursling; and I was daily all delight, playing always before Him." Some even suggest that the entire *Midrash Rabb*a is named after Rabbi Hoshaya Rabba, who offers that exposition:

Rabbi Hoshaya Rabba opened: "Then I was by Him, as a nursling [*amon*], and I was daily all delight"… *Amon* means artisan [*uman*]. The Torah is saying: "I was the artisan's tool of the Holy One, blessed be He." The way of the world is that when a king of flesh and blood builds a palace, he does not build it based on his own knowledge, but rather based on the knowledge of an artisan. And the artisan does not build it based on his own knowledge, but rather, he has [plans on] sheets and tablets by which to ascertain how he should build its rooms, how he should build its doors. So too, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked in the Torah and created the world. The Torah says: "In the beginning [or: with the beginning, *be-reishit*] God created" (*Bereishit* 1:1), and *reishit* is nothing other than the Torah, as it is stated: “The Lord made me as the beginning of [*reishit*] His way" (*Mishlei* 8:22). (*Bereishit Rabba* 1,1)

This *midrash* expounds the word "*oman*" as "*uman*," artisan, and sees the Torah as the artisan's tool used to create the world. The *midrash* deals with what preceded the world, but it is not clear whether it relates to the question of the *purpose* of creation. The artisan is not the goal of creation, but rather the person who was needed in order to create it. The word "*bereishit*" is related to the Torah, which is called "*reishit*"; however, the *midrash* does not state that the world was created **for the sake of** the *reishit*, but rather **by means of** the *reishit*. It is possible that the Torah is also the purpose of creation, but that is not what is written here. The Torah played a very significant role in the creation of the world, but it is not necessarily the objective of creation.

The allegory mentions both the artisan and his sheets and tablets. The Torah as represented by the allegory plays two roles; it is both the king's artisan and his plans. In light of this, someone who wishes to understand the purpose of creation should look for it in the Torah, because the Torah contains the plan for the entire creation, but this does not mean that the Torah itself is the purpose of creation.

Let us pay attention to a phrase that appears in the parable: "The way of the world is that when a king of flesh and blood builds a palace..." It seems, then, that we have two tools to understand the thinking that preceded creation: one is the exposition of the verses, and the other is “the way of the world.” The *midrash* uses conventional behavior in our world to understand the verse, which implies that the structure of our world can also be used to understand the purpose of creation.

**Thoughts of Israel preceded creation**

Another *midrash* at the beginning of *Bereishit Rabba* lists the things that preceded the world:

"In the beginning, God created" – Six items preceded the creation of the world; some of them were [actually] created, and some of them God contemplated creating, [though He did not actually do so].

The Torah and the Throne of Glory were created. Torah, from where is it derived? As it is stated: "The Lord made me as the beginning of His way" (*Mishlei* 8:22). The Throne of Glory, from where is it derived? As it is written: "Your throne is established of old" (*Tehillim* 93:2).

The patriarchs, Israel, the Temple, and the name of the messianic king – God contemplated creating them [before the world, but did not]. The patriarchs, from where is it derived? "I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness, [I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig tree at her first season (*be-reishita*)]" (*Hoshea* 9:10). Israel, from where is it derived? "Remember Your congregation, which You have gotten of old" (*Tehillim* 74:2). The Temple, from where is it derived? "Your throne of glory, on high from the beginning, [the place of our sanctuary]" (*Yirmeyahu* 17:12). The name of the messianic king, from where is it derived? "May his name endure forever; [may his name be continued as long as the sun]" (*Tehillim* 72:17)….   
Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Yirmeya said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Rabbi Yitzcḥak: *Contemplation about Israel preceded all other things*. This is analogous to a king who married a noblewoman but did not have a son from her. Once the king was found passing in the marketplace. He said: "Take this ink and inkwell for my son." Everyone was saying: "He has no son, and yet he says: Take this ink and inkwell for my son?" Then they said: "The king is a great astrologer; had it not been that he is destined to beget a son from her, he would not have said: Take this ink and inkwell for my son." So, too, had it not been that the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that after twenty-six generations, Israel was destined to receive the Torah, He would not have written in the Torah: "Command the children of Israel"; "speak to the children of Israel." (*Bereishit Rabba* 1,4)

Even the things that preceded the world do not necessarily tell us the purpose of creation. The fact that the Torah or the Throne of Glory existed before the world does not prove that they are the goal of the world. However, we also find *thoughts* among the things that preceded the world, such as "contemplation about Israel." Here, we are dealing not with the reality that existed before creation, but with a thought, which can teach us about the desires and objectives that existed before creation.

The midrashic statement that contemplation about Israel preceded creation can serve as a source for the idea that Israel is the purpose of the world. In addition to Israel, the *midrash* also mentions pre-creation thoughts of the patriarchs, who gave rise to the people of Israel, the messianic king, who is from the people of Israel, and the Temple, which is also clearly connected to Israel. The first two items in the *midrash* – the Torah and the Throne of Glory, which were created before the world – are more Divine and are not related specifically to Israel, but from the four things that were thought of before creation, it is possible to conclude that the world was created for Israel.

The *midrash* then offers a parable to teach that "the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that after twenty-six generations, Israel was destined to receive the Torah." This is a continuation of the statement that contemplation about Israel preceded the world, but from its wording, it can also be understood differently – that the purpose of Israel is to receive the Torah. That is to say, the world was actually created for the Torah – not for the sake of Israel. Here, the picture becomes more complicated.

The *midrash* continues:

"Speak to the children of Israel." Rabbi Banai said: The world and its contents were created only in the merit of the Torah, as it is stated: "The Lord with wisdom founded the earth; with understanding He established the heavens" (*Mishlei* 3:19).

Rabbi Berakhya said: It was due to the merit of Moshe, as it is stated: "And he chose a first part for himself [for there a portion of the lawgiver was reserved]" (*Devarim* 33:21).

Rav Huna said in the name of Rav Matana: The world was created for the sake of three things: For the sake of *challa*, for the sake of tithes, and for the sake of first fruits. What is the source? "In the beginning, [*be-reishit*] God created," and *reishit* is nothing other than *challa*, as it is stated: "The first of [*reishit*] your kneading basket" (*Bamidbar* 15:20); *reishit* is nothing other than tithes, as it is stated: "The first [*reishit*] of your grain" (*Devarim* 18:4); and *reishit* is nothing other than first fruits, as it is stated: "The choicest of [*reishit*] the first fruits of your land" (*Shemot* 23:19).

This part of the *midrash* also seems to be dealing with the purpose of the world, and this time it sets the Torah as the purpose of creation. But here the wording is "in the merit of the Torah." The world was created **in the merit** of the Torah, but not necessarily **for the sake of** the Torah. Even in the next lines, when the *midrash* highlights the *mitzvot* of *challa*, tithes, and first-fruits, it does not seem that the entire world was created just for the sake of the observance of these *mitzvot.* It also stands to reason that the world was not created for the sake of Moshe, but rather that Moshe was able to express a central point in the world, through which we can put our finger on the purpose of the world. In this way also, the *mitzvot* of *challa*, tithes, and first fruits, the *mitzvot* that are designated as “firsts,” may comprise some central point of creation. If so, it seems that the Torah, Moshe, and the *mitzvot* designated as "firsts" are not necessarily the purpose of the world, but they provide the merit of its existence and are apparently connected to its existence is some essential way.

**The world was founded on the Torah**

Let us move on to a source in *Midrash Tanchuma*, which also places the Torah at its center:

"In the beginning [or: with the beginning – *bereishit*] God created." This is what Scripture means when it says: "The Lord with wisdom founded the earth" (*Mishlei* 3:19). That is, when the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, He consulted the Torah and created the world, as it is stated: "Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom; I am understanding; I have might" (*Mishlei* 8:14)… The Torah served as an artisan in all the work of creation, as it is stated: "Then I was by Him, as a nursling [*amon*]" (*Mishlei* 8:3) – read the word not as *amon* ("nursling"), but as *uman* ("artisan"), since it was with the assistance of the Torah that God stretched out the heavens and established the earth, as it is stated: "If My covenant be not with day and night, [if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth]" (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25). With it, He bound up the sea lest it should go forth and overflow the world, as it is stated: "‘Do you not fear Me?’ says the Lord. ‘Will you not tremble at My presence [who has placed the sand for the bound of the sea]?’" (*Yirmeyahu* 5:22). With it, also, He locked up the deep so that it might not inundate the world, as is stated: "When He set a circle upon the face of the deep" (*Mishlei* 8:27). Similarly, He fashioned with it the sun and the moon, as is stated: "The Lord gives the sun to light the day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars to light the night. Who stirs up the sea, that the waves thereof roar, the Lord of hosts is His name" (*Yirmeyahu* 31:35). Hence, you learn that the world was founded upon the Torah. The Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel so that they might devote themselves to it and to its commandments day and night, as it is stated: "You shall meditate therein day and night" (*Yehoshua* 1:8). And it is stated elsewhere: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law does he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water" (*Tehillim* 1:2-3). [Furthermore,] the world endures because of those who keep the law, as Chana stated: "For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's" (I *Shmuel* 2:8). Who are "the pillars of the earth"? They are the keepers of the law, for whose sake alone the world was fashioned, as it is stated: "He has fashioned the world because of them" (ibid.). (*Midrash Tanchuma Bereishit* 1)

In this *midrash* as well, we see the Torah as preceding the world, but this time we also see it as sustaining the world – in the setting of laws and boundaries for the world. The laws of nature stand by virtue of the laws of the Torah. The *midrash* summarizes: "The world was founded upon the Torah." But even the fact that the world was **founded** **on** the Torah does not yet prove that the world was **created for** the sake of the Torah.

The *midrash* goes on to talk not only about the Torah in general, but also about our Torah. "The Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel so that they might devote themselves to it" – the reference is to the Torah study of the people of Israel. Once again, we see how occupation with the purpose of creation, or the foundations upon which the world was founded, directly affects man's mission in the world: if the Torah is what sustains the world, then Torah students are needed for it to exist.

**For the sake of the Torah and for the sake of Israel**

We have seen several *midrashim* that set the Torah in the center but do not mention the word "*bishvil*," for the sake of. One *midrash* speaks about Israel, but it has not yet been explicitly said that the statement that "contemplation about Israel preceded the world" means that the world was created for their sake. The expressions "for the sake of Israel" and "for the sake of the Torah" are, however, found in Rashi's commentary at the beginning of the Torah:

"In the beginning God created" – This verse calls for explanation, in the manner that our Rabbis expounded it: For the sake of the Torah which is called "the beginning of His way" (*Mishlei* 8:22), and for the sake of Israel which is called "the beginning of His [God's] harvest" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:3). (Rashi, *Bereishit* 1:1)

As mentioned, we do not find a *midrash* that says this explicitly, which raises the question: From where did Rashi take this idea? Indeed, there is a *midrash* in which both the Torah and Israel appear explicitly, though it is not quite the same:

From when did the Holy One, blessed be He, become magnified? When he created heaven and earth. And by whose merit did He create it?

The merit of Israel, of whom it is stated: "Israel is holy for the Lord, [the beginning of His harvest]" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:3)…

Another interpretation: In the merit of the Torah were heaven and earth created, as it is stated: "Moreover, I have put My words [i.e., the Torah] in your mouth; [and I covered you in the shadow of My hand, so that I may plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth]" (*Yeshayahu* 51:16).

Another interpretation: [Heaven and earth were created] in the merit of Tzion, as it is stated: "[To plant heaven, lay the foundation of the earth], and say to Tzion: You are My people" (ibid.). (*Midrash Tanchuma Bereishit* 10)

This is the *midrash* that relates to both the Torah and Israel – as well as "Tzion," which is connected to the people of Israel, as the *midrash* concludes: "and say to Tzion: You are My people." This refers to Tzion when the people of Israel are living in it. As a source for the creation of the world "in the merit of the Torah," this *midrash* does not cite the verse "the beginning of His way" that Rashi cited,but rather the verse, "Moreover, I have put My words in your mouth… so that I may plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth." It seems, therefore, that this is not Rashi's source, though it is very close to his words.

We find Rashi’s phrase, "for the sake of Israel," in a less well-known *midrash*:

The Holy One, blessed be He, created the world only **for the sake of** three things that are called *reishit*, and they are: the Torah, Israel, and fear [of God]. Torah, from where is this derived? As it is written: "The Lord made me as the beginning [*reishit*] of His way" (*Mishlei* 8:22), and "His way" is the Torah, as it is stated: "Her ways are ways of pleasantness" (*Mishlei* 2:17) – these are the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings; "and all her paths are peace" (ibid.) – these are the halakhic and aggadic *midrashim*. And from where do we derive that Israel is called *reishit*? As it is stated: "Israel is the Lord's hallowed portion, His first fruits (*reishit*] of the harvest" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:3). And from where do we derive that fear [of God] is called *reishit*? As it is stated: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning [*reishit*] of wisdom" (*Tehillim* 111:10). From here we learn that fear before the Holy One, blessed be He, is greater than all the wisdom and understanding with which He created the world, as it is stated: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom" (*Iyov* 28:28). (*Seder Rabba de-Bereishit*, and *Midrash Aggada* to the beginning of *Bereishit*)

Here we see the phrase "for the sake of Israel" that appears in Rashi. The Torah also appears here, as well as a new factor that also serves as a reason for creation: fear of God. "Fear of the Lord is the beginning [*reishit*] of wisdom." The *midrash* adds that fear of God is greater than all wisdom. That is to say, if until now it seemed that the world was created for the sake of the Torah, it turns out that there is something even deeper than the Torah, and that is the fear of God.

A similar statement appears explicitly in the Gemara, though based on another source:

The Holy One, blessed be He, created His world only **so that** men would fear Him, as it is stated: "And God has done it, **that** men should fear before Him" (*Kohelet* 3:14). (*Shabbat* 31b)

The Gemara learns from the words "*that* men should fear before Him" that God made the world *so that* people would fear Him; the *midrash*, in contrast, learns this from the word "*reishit*" itself – which was also used by other *midrashim* – and argues that the most profound beginning is the fear of God. This *midrash* also has a clear impact on man's mission; a person who fears God is actualizing the purpose of creation.

**He created the world only for His glory**

If we go back to a point that appears in *Midrash Tanchuma* before the opinions regarding the reason for creation, we will see that it too serves as an opinion in itself:

From when did the Holy One, blessed be He, become magnified? When He created heaven and earth. And by whose merit did he create it?…

If God became magnified when He created heaven and earth, it could be understood that this was the purpose of creation – so that God would be magnified. This idea is developed in several other sources, e.g., *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*:

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos opened: "Who can utter the mighty acts of the Lord, or sound all His praise?" (*Tehillim* 106:2). Is there any man who can utter the mighty acts of the Holy One, blessed be He, or who can sound all His praise? Even the ministering angels are able to narrate only a part of His mighty deeds, to delve into what He has done and what He will do in the future, so that His name will be exalted among His creatures, whom He has created, from one end of the world to the other, as it is stated: "One generation to another shall laud Your works" (*Tehillim* 145:4).

Before the world was created, the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Name alone existed, and the thought arose in Him to create the world…

He immediately took counsel with the Torah, whose name is Tushiya (Stability or Wisdom), regarding the creation of the world. [The Torah] replied and said to Him: Master of the universe! If there be no host for the king and if there be no camp for the king, over whom does he rule? If there be no people to praise the king, where is the honor of the king? The Holy One, blessed be He, heard this and it pleased Him. The Torah said: The Holy One, blessed be He, took counsel with me concerning the creation of the world, as it is stated, "Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom (*tushiya*); I am understanding; I have might" (*Mishlei* 8:14). From here they said: Any government which has no advisors is not a proper government. (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 3)

Why is this the reason for creation? Why should the name of God be magnified? These are questions we will have to clarify later, when we encounter the many Jewish thinkers who see the glory of God as the reason for creation; at this point, we only see the *midrashim* that serve as the basis for this approach.

Another source for this approach:

Another explanation: *Alef –* I will open the tongue of the mouth (***e****ftach* ***l****eshon* ***p****eh*). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I will open the tongue of the mouth of all men of flesh and blood so that they may praise Me every day and crown Me as king in the four corners of the world – for were it not for the songs and hymns that they recite before Me every day, I would not have created My world. (*Otiot de-Rabbi Akiva*)

According to this source, the world was created only for song and hymn. This could be understood in the sense of the "delight" we saw above, which is a goal in itself and not a means to an end. But from the context here, "that they may praise Me," it seems that the purpose of the song is to praise God – that the world was created in order to express the greatness of God.

This approach is actually already found in the famous passage in *Pirkei Avot*:

Whatever the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He created only for His glory, as it is stated: "And as for everything that is called by My name, indeed it is for My glory that I have created it, I have formed it, yea I have made it" (*Yeshayahu* 43:7); and it is stated: "The Lord shall reign for ever and ever" (*Shemot* 15:18). (*Avot* 6:11)

**A divine dwelling, and more**

Before we conclude for now, let us consider another point related to the purpose of creation that is found in several *midrashim*:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, he yearned to have a dwelling in the lower world, just as He does in the upper world. (*Tanchuma Naso* 24)

The reason of "a dwelling in the lower world" relates to a kind of partnership between God and Israel, a state of being present together in this world. We will not elaborate on this reason now, but it too is raw material that will later be developed by the sages of Israel.

We have seen several factors that the *midrashim* may have seen as reasons for creation, meaning that the world was created for their sake: Israel, the Torah, the *mitzvot*, fear of God, the glory of God, and His presence in the lower world.

Starting with the next *shiur*, we will discuss the teachings of the sages of Israel across the generations, one after the other, and see how each of them – based upon, among other things, the sources in *Chazal* – defined the purpose of creation and the mission of humanity that derives from it.

(Translated by David Strauss)