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**

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**Shiur 05:**

**The purpose of creation in the thought of the Rambam (1)**

To understand any issue in the Rambam’s thought, it is not enough to read a single source, and the purpose of creation is no different. This topic spans several sources in the Rambam’s writings, which at first glance seem to contradict each other.

**I. *Introduction to the Mishna* – The purpose: a wise and good man**

We will open our study of the Rambam with his *Introduction to the Mishna*, and then move on to his *Guide for the Perplexed*, to explore how he deals with the question of the purpose of the world and of man.

However, in general, one should know that all of what exists under the sphere of the moon came into existence only for man. And [with regards to] all types of animals, there are some of them for his food – like sheep and cattle and the rest of them – and there are some for his use, for [things] other than foods – like the donkey to carry upon it that which he cannot bring in his hand, and horses to reach with them the path of a long journey in a few days – and there are types of them that we do not know their purpose, but they have a use for man and we [just] don't recognize [it]. And so [too with] trees and plants: some of them are for his food and some of them are for his healing from his illnesses; and so [too with] grasses and other species. And [regarding] everything that you find from the animals and the plants that does not have a use [for] nourishment, and there is no [other use] for it according to your thinking, know that this matter is from the weakness of our intellects. And it is impossible for any grass or for any fruit or for any type of animal – from the elephants to the worms – that it not have a use for man…

And when they found that the purpose of all of these matters was for the existence of man, we needed to likewise investigate why man exists and what was the intention of his creation. And when they spent much time investigating this matter, they found that man has very many activities. As, behold, all types of animals and trees have only one activity or two activities; just as we see that palm trees have no activity besides putting out dates, and so [too with] the other trees. And so [too with] the animals, you will find among them one that only weaves, like the spider, and one that builds, like the *shemamit* – which is small wild bird that nests in homes during the hot season – and one that devours, like the lion. But man does many actions – one differing from the other. And they investigated his activities – [each] activity – to know the purpose of his creation, from these activities. And they found that his purpose is one activity alone, and that because of it, he was created. And the rest of his activities are to maintain his support so that he may perfect himself in that activity. And that activity is to depict for himself the intellectual secrets and to know the truths, according to what they are. As reason indicates that it would be worthless and false for the purpose of man to be eating and drinking and sexual intercourse, or to build a wall, since these are all events that recur to him – they do not add to his inner power – and also since he shares this with most of the animals. And wisdom is that which adds to his inner power and takes him from the level of disgrace to the level of honor – as behold, he was a man in potential and he became a man in actuality, [since] before man understands and knows, he is considered like an animal. He is only distinguished from other types of animals by [his] reason – as he is [unique in being] a reasoning life-form…

And it has become clear from these introductions that the purpose of the world and all that is in it is the wise and good man…

And, if so, it has become elucidated from all that we have said that the intention in the creation of all that there is in the present and transitory world is only for the man who is complete in wisdom and in deed, as we said. And when you reflect and study these two matters from their words, peace be upon them – I mean to say wisdom and deed – from that which they elucidated and hinted, you will know that what they said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, has in His world only the four cubits of the Halakha alone," was correct. (Rambam, *Introduction to the Mishna*)

According to the Rambam, the purpose of all creatures in this world is to benefit man, and the purpose of man is to attain truth – and especially the pinnacle of truth: the knowledge of God.

Somewhat surprisingly, in light of this focus on wisdom, the Rambam also includes a practical element. He defines the ideal to which man aspires as “a wise and good man,” meaning that in addition to attaining wisdom, the ideal individual must also be good in his actions. He brings a statement of *Chazal* which, according to its plain sense, does not deal with wisdom but instead emphasizes action: "The Holy One, blessed be He, has in His world only the four cubits of the Halakha alone" (*Berakhot* 8:1). It seems that the attainment of wisdom is still the main goal, but in order to reach that end, a person has to free himself from his materialistic activities. If one seeks wisdom but at the same time is immersed in materialism, this is a sign that his wisdom is not wisdom – because if he were wise, he would understand that his goal is to transcend the physical.

The Rambam has sharp words to explain the existence of all those who do not reach a high intellectual level:

But if so, why did the Holy One, blessed be He, bring into existence all the people who do not depict ideas for themselves? And we see that most people are bereft of cunning and devoid of wisdom [and] seek desire; and that the wise man who reviles the world, he is [only] one of many – you will only find one in a generation, among the generations. The answer to this is that these people came into existence for two reasons: The first is that they serve that one [that is wise]. For if all people were to pursue wisdom and philosophy, the care of the world would be obliterated and [this] species of animal would become lost from the world in a few days. Since man is very lacking and would need many things, he would have to study plowing and reaping and to thresh and to grind and to bake and to fashion tools for these crafts in order to complete the production of his sustenance with them… Therefore, these other people came into existence to take care of these activities that are required for the country, such that the sage will find his needs at hand and that the earth will be inhabited and wisdom be found… And the second reason for the existence of one who has no wisdom is because men of wisdom are very few… And therefore, the masses were created to give company to the sages, that they not be desolate. And maybe you will think that this purpose is small, yet it is more necessary and fitting than the first. As behold, the Holy One, blessed be He, [even] maintained evildoers in the Land of Israel in order to give them company and to remove desolation from the pious souls. This is [the meaning of] that which is stated (*Shemot* 23:29): "I will not drive them out before you in a single year, lest the land become desolate." And the Sages explained this matter also and said (*Berakhot* 6b): What is "for this is all of man" (*Kohelet* 12:13)? The whole world was only created to join with this one" – the explanation [of which] is, to remove sadness and desolation from His solitary one.

Why did God create all the people who are not wise? According to the Rambam, they exist only for the sake of those people who are wise. They are needed to sustain the world and to serve as a society for the wise, but the goal is the people of wisdom.

**II. *Guide for the Perplexed* – There is no single purpose**

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam presents a completely opposite picture:

If you consider that book which guides all those who seek guidance toward what is correct, and therefore is called Torah, the notion that we have in view will become manifest to you from the commencement of the story of the creation till the end. For with reference to none of them is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other thing. He only says that He brought every part of the world into existence and that its existence conformed to its purpose.

This is the meaning of the saying: "And God saw that it was good" (*Bereishit* 1). For you know what we have explained with regard to their [*Chazal*’s] saying: The Torah speaks in the language of man.[[1]](#footnote-1) And "good" is an expression applied by us to what conforms to our purpose. About the whole, it says: "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good" (ibid. v. 31). For the production in time of everything that was produced conformed to its purpose, and nothing went wrong…

Hence be not misled in your soul to think that the spheres and the angels have been brought into existence for our sake. For it has been explained to us what we are worth: "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket" (*Yeshayahu* 40:15). Consider accordingly your substance and that of the spheres, the stars, and the separate intellects; then the truth will become manifest to you, and you will know that man and nothing else is the most perfect and the most noble thing that has been generated from this [inferior] matter; but that if his being is compared to that of the spheres, and all the more to that of the separate beings, it is very, very contemptible…

For when man knows his own soul, makes no mistake with regard to it, and understands every being according to what it is, he becomes calm and his thoughts are not troubled by seeking a purpose for what has not that purpose, or by seeking a purpose for what has no purpose except its own existence, which depends on the Divine will – if you prefer, you can also say: on the Divine wisdom. (Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed*,III, 13)

According to the simple understanding of these words, the Rambam argues that one should not seek a single purpose for creation as a whole, and for this reason it is also impossible to say that man is the purpose of the entire world. Every creature has a purpose of its own.

At first glance, the two sources we have cited seem to be contradictory. However, we will now read them a second time, with greater care, and try to understand how the Rambam's words can be reconciled.

**III. Reconciliation of the two sources: Man is the purpose only of this world**

Let us look again at the Rambam's words in his *Introduction to the Mishna*:

All of what exists under the sphere of the moon came into existence only for man.

The issue here is the purpose of the creatures under the sphere of the moon – not the purpose of the stars, the angels, or any reality that is beyond the earthly world. Within the framework of the material world, the purpose is man. So too at the end of his remarks, the Rambam emphasizes that he is talking about the present and transitory world – that being his definition of this world, in which everything is created and eventually ceases to exist. Compared to this world, the reality that is beyond the earth – at least according to the Rambam – is consistent and unceasing. The fact that the heavenly bodies have been moving in the same orbits for thousands of years, without change or weathering, led the men of science of the Rambam's generation to perceive them as a more perfect reality. They do not change because they have no deficiency or weakness. Thus, the Rambam's words in his *Introduction to the Mishna* clearly refer to our reality, and not to what exists beyond it.

The worlds beyond our reality are discussed in the *Guide*, where the Rambam writes:

Hence be not misled in your soul to think that the spheres and the angels have been brought into existence for our sake. For it has been explained to us what we are worth: "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket." Consider accordingly your substance and that of the spheres, the stars, and the separate intellects; then the truth will become manifest to you, and you will know that man and nothing else is the most perfect and the most noble thing that has been generated from this [inferior] matter; but that if his being is compared to that of the spheres, and all the more to that of the separate beings, it is very, very contemptible.

The Rambam is troubled by an approach that would see the angels and the heavenly spheres as means to an end – for the sake of man. He emphasizes that their rank is much higher than that of man (the spheres consist of pure matter, and the angels are pure spirit without matter), so it is impossible that they were created for his sake.

Thus far, then, there is complete correspondence between the two sources: the *Introduction to the Mishna* is explained in light of the *Guide.* In both places, the Rambam states that man is not the purpose of the supernal reality above this world, but he is the purpose of this world.

However, there are still points in the *Guide* that have not been reconciled with the *Introduction to the Mishna*. The Rambam seems to say that even regarding the creatures of this world, every creature has its own purpose, a statement that runs contrary to the declaration that all creatures were created for the sake of man. This gap between the sources still requires explanation.

The fact is that the entire chapter is written in a complicated way – apparently by design. Among the sages of Israel, the Rambam is one of the greatest experts in orderly writing, as is evidenced by the beautifully organized *Mishneh Torah.* When he writes something in a way that is not clear to us, this too is surely done on purpose. In our case, certainly the issue is more complex than the simple statement that every creature has its own purpose, for several times in the chapter, the Rambam mentions creatures that do not have a purpose of their own. Regarding plants, for example, he says they exist only for the sake of animals for whom they serve as nourishment.

In fact, a few sentences after the resolute statement that every creature has its own purpose, the Rambam writes:

For we say that by His will He brought into existence all the parts of the world; some of them with a purpose for their own sakes, and others for the sake of some other thing that is intended for its own sake. Just as He has willed that the human species should come to exist, thus He willed that these spheres and their stars should come to exist, and thus He willed that the angels should come to exist.

Note that all of the Rambam's examples of creatures with an independent purpose are beyond this world: man, the spheres, the angels. The animals and the plants do not appear here; nothing that exists in this world is mentioned in the chapter as being intended for its own sake. Thus, even if the Rambam does not say it explicitly, it seems that he only meant to negate the notion that the angels and stars were created for man. Man and everything that exists above him were created because the Creator willed them, while the creatures below man were created for the sake of an existence higher than them – man.

It turns out that according to both sources, the *Introduction to the Mishna* and the *Guide*, the purpose of this world is the perfect man, though this is not the purpose of the reality that is beyond this world.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue to examine the position of the Rambam, and we will try to understand the differences between it and the position of Rav Saadya Gaon that we saw in the previous *shiur.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. E.g., *Berakhot* 31b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)