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 16: The Purpose of Creation in the Thought of the Ari**

Following our discussion of the Maharal in the previous *shiurim*, the next significant station in our study of creation will be the Ramchal, who dealt extensively with this issue. However, the Ramchal and other thinkers after him based their positions on the words of the Ari – Rabbi Yitzchak Luria. Therefore, we will first examine the teachings of the Ari, even though his discussion of this specific topic is very limited.

In general, there are many issues in the realm of Jewish thought that cannot be discussed without seeing the foundation laid by the Ari. This is somewhat similar to the Rambam’s place in this discussion; once he had expressed his opinion – and especially once he had raised fundamental questions concerning the possible purposes of creation – everyone who came after him had to address these difficulties. So too, the thinkers who came after the Ari often related to his words, though not with resolutions of a difficulty but with interpretations and development of the foundations he had set. Regarding our issue, even if the novelty in the Ari's words is less obvious, his linguistic formulations are present in the discussions from here on. We will see this with the Maggid of Mezeritch, Rav Kook, Manitou, and others.

**About the Ari**

The Ari was born in the Land of Israel, lived for a significant period in Egypt, returned to Israel at about the age of 36, and arrived unknown in the city of Tzefat. At the time, Tzefat was already home to various great kabbalists, and it was the Ari who arrived there without any previous public recognition. However, in the two years that he lived in Tzefat until his death, he managed to transform the entire world of *Kabbala*, to the point that kabbalistic thought is commonly divided into two periods – pre-Lurianic and post-Lurianic. The "earlier *Kabbala*" is the one that existed until the Ari; its last significant figure was the Ramak, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, who died shortly after the Ari's arrival in Tzefat, and who had summarized the principal ideas of the earlier *Kabbala* in his book, *Pardes Rimonim.* The "later Kabbala" began with the Ari. The Ari’s disciples did little to spread his Torah, and it took a considerable number of years for his teachings to reach the sages of Europe – not so much because of technical problems or geographical distance, but primarily because of efforts on the part of his disciples, especially Rabbi Chaim Vital, to hide the Ari's innovations from the eyes of the masses, due to their greatness and profundity.

The Maharal, for example, lived during the period of the Ari, and in terms of the length of his life, was his very opposite: the Ari died before reaching the age of forty, whereas the Maharal was born before him and died decades after him. However, the writings of the Ari did not reach Europe in his time and the Maharal never saw them. Only in the writings of the *Shela*, Rabbi Yeshayahu Halevi Horovitz, who succeeded the Maharal's successor as rabbi of Prague, do we find citations from the Ari.

The greatness and influence of the Ari is an extraordinary phenomenon. For the most part, *Kabbala* is based on the tradition of generations; the very word *kabbala* means "reception, tradition." The Ari's teachings were full of sweeping innovations that created a revolution in the world of *Kabbala*; they were not attributed to the authorities of earlier generations, but to the level of the holy spirit of the Ari. Nevertheless, the teachings of the Ari were accepted and became an essential part of the spiritual world of the people of Israel.

In the generations leading up to the Ari, the kabbalists were more concerned with conceptual questions; the Ari restored inner discourse within the esoteric teachings. The kabbalists before the Ari would study an issue and reach conclusions, whereas the Ari would, as it were, "see"; he would have a picture in front of his eyes and hand it over. He also saw his students in this manner, knowing things about them that ostensibly no one should have known, and thus they felt that a man of God was standing before them.

Unlike the Ramak, who wrote a lot himself and authored a commentary on the *Zohar*, the Ari himself left us almost no written teachings. The teachings that we have are mainly thanks to his great student, Rabbi Chaim Vital, who made a great effort to preserve and process everything he had learned from his teacher over the course of their two years together. His major work containing the teachings of the Ari is "*Shemona She'arim*," which collects the Ari’s teachings and divides them into eight different areas. The first section, which serves as an introduction to the entire book, is called *Sha'ar ha-Hakdamot*, "the gate of introductions." Rabbi Chaim Vital kept these writings to himself, and they were published only many years later. Another edition of Rabbi Chaim Vital's summaries is found in the book *Otzarot Chaim*, which his disciple, Rabbi Yaakov Tzemach, found in a *geniza*. On the basis of that book, his disciple, Rabbi Meir Poppers, wrote the book *Etz Chaim*, which is considered a foundational book on the *Kabbala* of the Ari, alongside *Shemona She'arim.*

We will see a few prominent concepts that were introduced in or placed at the center of the Ari's teachings: *tzimtzum* (contraction), *shevirat ha-keilim* (shattering of the vessels), *olam ha-tikkun* (the world of repair), and *partzufim* (Divine personas). Before the Ari, *Kabbala* dealt primarily with the *sefirot* (emanations), whereas the Ari deals primarily with the *partzufim*. These constitute a more elaborate system than the *sefirot*, to the point that the *Nazir*,Rabbi David Cohen (in the book *Kol ha-Nevu'a*), called the Ari's *kabbala* "*ha-Kabbala ha-Partzufit*," the *Kabbala* of the Divine personas.

**The Location of the Purpose of Creation**

As we did with some of the previous thinkers, we must first examine whether or not the issue of the purpose of creation plays a central role in the teachings of the Ari. For some of the earlier thinkers whose writings we examined, it did not have a central place, but for the Ari it is found right at the beginning; *Etz Chaim* opens with this issue, as does another treatise, called *Sha'ar ha-Kelalim.*

However, it is not clear how much can be learned from this. As mentioned, “the writings of the Ari” were not written by the Ari himself, and the writings of his students went through several editions and periods during which they were put aside. The location of the issue of the purpose of creation reflects at least the thinking of the editor – in the case of the *Etz Chaim*, Rabbi Meir Poppers. For us, as we investigate the topic, it is nonetheless convenient to encounter the issue immediately upon opening his writings.

**To Be Called Merciful and Gracious**

In the book *Otzarot Chaim*,edited by Rabbi Chaim Vital himself, there is a passing reference to the purpose of creation at the beginning of his account of the emanation of the worlds. Over the course of the discussion, it is stated that the world was created "for the well-known reason," which is "to be called merciful and gracious." This is slightly reminiscent of the Ramban, that people should know Him and offer Him their gratitude; the traits of mercy and grace remind us perhaps of the benefaction of Rabbi Saadya Gaon; but the term "to be called" is especially reminiscent of the opinion brought and rejected by the Maharal. Let us recall that the Maharal emphasized that the world was created for the glory of God, but it was not about Him being “called” in one way or another. We tried to understand exactly what position the Maharal was contending with, but in any case, we can see from his response that there was such a position in the world of Jewish thought – that God created the world so that He would be called by a certain name.

**To Reveal His Names or to Bestow Goodness?**

The main source dealing with our issue is found at the beginning of the *Etz Chaim*; the book opens with an "inquiry" regarding the purpose of creation. It is interesting that the matter is not presented as a tradition from previous generations, nor as a revelation to the Ari, but as a substantive discussion between the scholars and the kabbalists, although at the end he brings support from the *Zohar*:

Regarding the matter of the ultimate purpose of the creation of the worlds, we will now explain two inquiries that have occupied the kabbalists. The first inquiry is what early and later scholars have explored in order to understand the reason for the creation of the worlds, to what end it was made. They concluded that the reason for this was because it was necessary for God to be complete in all His actions, powers, and names of greatness and glory. If His actions and powers were not actualized through action and deed, He would not be called complete in His actions, powers, or names…

And likewise with all His other names and designations, including "merciful," "gracious," and "long-suffering." He could not be called by these names except for when there are creations in the world that call Him by those names, and the same applies to all other designations. However, once the worlds were created, His actions and powers were actualized, and He could be called complete in His actions and powers, as well as in all His names and designations, without any deficiency, God forbid…

This idea is well explained in the *Zohar*, *Parashat Pinchas* p. 257b: … "One should know that He is called Wise with all kinds of wisdom and Understanding with all kinds of understanding, only that before He created the world, He was called with all these levels because of the creatures that would be created in the future." (*Etz Chaim* 1, 1)

A logical question is raised here: Why did God create the world? And the answer is that without the world, God would not have been called complete. God must be complete in all His actions and names, and had the world not been created, He could not have been called complete. The *Etz Chaim* adds that this idea is stated in the *Zohar*, which says that prior to creation, God was called in accordance with what would be in the future, when the world would be created. Of course, these remarks raise big questions. Why is it necessary for God to be called by one name or another, and why, if He fails to actualize His powers, is He not called complete? This question about the purpose of creation was already raised by the Rambam and will be dealt with by later thinkers who follow in the Ari’s footsteps and develop his ideas.

In another source, the purpose of creation is mentioned in a single sentence, from which a different idea emerges:

When the Supreme Emanator wanted to create the world, the purpose of its creation was to benefit the creatures that He wanted to create, so that they recognize His greatness, and merit by way of their actions to serve as His chariot above, and cling to Him. (*Sha'ar Ha-Hakdamot* 39, 1)

This sentence is much shorter than the previous passage we saw, but it contains many more components. It includes the element of benefaction (which we already encountered in the words of Rabbi Saadya Gaon and the *Or Hashem*)and the element of recognizing His greatness (which is perhaps connected to the revelation of God's names that stood at the center of the previous source). To these elements there is added another element – the devotion of God’s creations, through which they become a chariot for the upper worlds. This is a new concept that we have not yet seen.

**The Two Purposes of Creation**

As mentioned, we will not explain these purposes at this stage, but will wait until we discuss the later thinkers who contend with them. In the meantime, we see two main purposes – to reveal the names and designations of God, and to benefit His creatures. Up until now, each of the thinkers that we saw focused on a single purpose; with the Ari, the starting point is two purposes. It is important to emphasize that we are dealing here not only with two purposes, but with two different focuses: for the sake of God (calling on His name, knowing His name) and for our sake (benefaction). What is the relationship between these two purposes; can we hold them together side by side as equals, or is one of them central and the other merely a component within it?

One of the main positions expressed on this issue is found in the words of the Italian kabbalist Rabbi Yosef Ergas (who lived about one hundred and fifty years after the Ari), in his book, *Shomer Emunim*. He expresses the question that arises from the words of the Ari: How can we say that God needs the world in order to be called perfect and complete; is He, God forbid, in some way deficient and in need of the world in order to become complete?

His words are obscure and I do not understand them. For on the face of it, his words imply that the infinite, the *Ein Sof*, is more complete with the world than He is alone, and it is impossible to say this, for the *Ein Sof* is complete in Himself, and needs no other at all, for He acquires no completeness or benefit from any being. (*Shomer Emunim*, 12)

Rabbi Yosef Ergas answers:

The Ari means to say that the purpose of creation was to benefit others. Since the *Ein Sof* is the absolute good, benefaction being essential to Him, He therefore created the worlds in order to benefit and help others. And since the question still arises, there is no getting around the dilemma: If He benefited by benefiting others, if so He helped Himself when He helped others, and thus He was [previously] deficient, and the creation completes Him. And if He did not benefit by benefiting others, the question returns: Why, then, did He create the worlds? Therefore, the Ari explains that the purpose of creation was, as it were, in order to be called whole in actuality. That is to say, the creation did not come to achieve a benefit or perfection that God had been lacking, but rather to actualize His perfection…. In this sense, the Ari said that this is the purpose of creation, that is, that the *Ein Sof* is the absolute good, in which all perfection is collected, before creation and after creation, as was His power then is His power now. He wanted to create worlds, not in order to add completeness to Himself, for the fact that others benefit from Him does not add to His completeness, but rather because this is the way of the good and complete, to benefit and to bestow completeness and existence; so too, He wanted to create the world for the purpose of benefaction and kindness, so there would be creatures benefitting from Him, for when they receive His goodness and comprehend the greatness of His perfection, they will call Him merciful and gracious and the like, among the other Divine names and designations, and He will, as it were, be called complete. (Ibid., 13)

Rabbi Ergas first says that the main purpose is benefaction. The question of why God wants to benefit others, and whether or not this indicates, God forbid, deficiency, he answers as did his predecessors (e.g., the *Or Hashem*), that God's benefaction is not an expression of deficiency, but on the contrary, it is the absolute expression of God's perfection, He being the absolute good.

As for the difficulty arising from the argument that the purpose of creation was to reveal the Divine names, he explains that this purpose comes precisely to clarify and reconcile the first purpose of benefaction, and in a certain sense, to answer the question of the questioner. It teaches that God's benefaction comes from a place where God is already complete, and all that remains is to reveal this, not that God was initially deficient and needed the world to complete what He lacked.

Thus, regarding the relationship between the two purposes, we can conclude that according to the *Shomer Emunim*, the main purpose is benefaction; the second purpose completes the primary purpose, but does not stand on its own.

We see that the kabbalists in the generations after the Ari engaged with the question of the relationship between the two purposes, and also with the deep questions that each purpose evokes. These two purposes, and the question of the relationship between them, will be the focus of the discussions among the next thinkers whose writings we will examine.

(Translated by David Strauss)