YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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

**In Jewish thought**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 20: The Purpose of Creation in the Thought of the Maggid of Mezeritch (1)**

**The Baal Shem Tov and the *Maggid* of Mezeritch**

Before we begin our examination of the purpose of creation in Chasidic thought, I will share a few words about Chasidic teachings in general.

The notion of "*Chasidut*" was not invented by the Baal Shem Tov. Already in the writings of *Chazal*,we find people referred to with the title of "*Chasid*," and later there arose "*Chasidei Ashkenaz*" and others. The term *Chasidut* refers to service of God that goes beyond what is necessary; the aspiration to serve God to perfection and not just to fulfill the obligatory requirements. This type of service brings a person to level beyond that of the general public, which upholds only the required level of the Torah's obligations. The aspiration to go beyond the letter of the law can find expression on different planes, both in the relationship between man and God and in the relationship between man and his fellow. *Chasidim* of this type were found among the people of Israel since time immemorial, with no connection to any particular movement.

*Chasidut* as we know it, as the movement founded by the Baal Shem Tov, began during one of the most difficult phases in our nation's history. The people of Israel found themselves in an exile that was getting longer and longer, and it was becoming more and more difficult to keep their heads above water. There were also crises that were unique to the period, such as Sabbateanism, which left a spiritual break and huge disappointment. Jewish society had developed a class gap between those wielding authority and the common people, and in the spiritual world as well, between the learned and the common Jews. Service of God in this period was centered on intellectual study, and those involved in moral work were characterized primarily by privation and a struggle against materialism.

The Baal Shem Tov entered into the picture with strong spiritual inspiration and huge influence on those around him. As for his spiritual-religious views, he set as a central element the principle that "the whole earth is full of His glory." He added a dimension of devotion and joy to the service of God. Within the framework of the concept that the whole earth is full of His glory, he developed worship of God in the areas of what is permitted and optional, and not only in the areas of what is prohibited and obligatory. This notion also contributed to increased joy, for we are in a world in which God is present, and it affected the relationship between man and his fellow – for it leads to the conclusion that an element of the Divine is found in every man, and therefore ordinary Jews must also be valued.

At this stage, *Chasidut* was mainly associated with the people close to the Baal Shem Tov (who died in 5520). Only later, in the generation of the disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch, would it expand into a movement and increase its popularity.

The Maggid, Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, was a contemporary of the Baal Shem Tov. He died in the year 5533, apparently twelve years after the Baal Shem Tov died. Initially, he belonged to the "old" *Chasidut*, in which service of God was based on privation and fasting. He engaged extensively in ascetic practices, which evidently caused him complicated medical problems.

The book *Shivchei ha-Besht* recounts the first meeting between the two. The Maggid was sick from his many privations, and it was suggested to him that he go to the Baal Shem Tov, who was known for his healing abilities (hence his designation, "Baal Shem"). The Maggid resisted the idea, arguing that "it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man" (*Tehillim* 118:8), a response in which we also hear criticism directed at the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov, on his part, heard about the Maggid and wanted him to come to him. When the Maggid arrived and wished to go in to see the Baal Shem Tov, the Baal Shem Tov saw him and rebuked him, saying: "My horses do not eat unleavened bread," and did not receive him. It seems that the phrase "eating unleavened bread" refers to the Maggid's privations, which the Baal Shem Tov frowned upon. The rebuke and the refusal to receive him shook the Maggid, who remained by himself outside. The Maggid asked one of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov to persuade him to receive him, using the words, "and you shall love the stranger," which express the Maggid's submission. In the end, the Baal Shem Tov received him and even healed him, and the Maggid changed his path from privation to *Chasidut*. He stayed with the Baal Shem Tov, studied with him, and later became one of his greatest disciples. It was his disciples who turned *Chasidut* into a broad and extensive movement.

This story, even if its details went through several incarnations, reflects the moving encounter between the Maggid and the Baal Shem Tov. The Maggid encountered another world in the Baal Shem Tov, a world entirely different from the one he knew, which opened up a new spiritual horizon for him that stems from the belief that "the whole earth is full of His glory." This is a world in which God's presence is found at every moment and in every place – completely different from a world without Him.

**And He Would Delight in the Deeds of the Righteous**

In several of his teachings, the Maggid of Mezeritch touches on the purpose of creation from a unique angle that we have not yet seen in our study.

In the first paragraph of his book "*Maggid Devarav le-Yaakov*," the Maggid quotes a *midrash* that is very reminiscent of Rashi's famous words at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah:

Rabbi Yannai said: The Torah should only have been taught from "This month shall be to you" (*Shemot* 12:2). Why then did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal to Israel what happened on the first day, and what on the second day, until the sixth day? By virtue of what they said: "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and obey" (*Shemot* 24:7). (*Shir Ha-Shirim* *Rabba* 1)

This *midrash* asks the same question that Rashi brings from Rabbi Yitzchak at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah, but it gives a different answer. Rabbi Yitzchak's answer is that the Torah starts with the story of creation in order to testify that God gave us the Land of Israel, in case the nations of the world claim that we stole it. Rabbi Yannai’s answer is that this is by virtue of Israel who said “We will do and obey,” but it is not clear what the connection is between these matters. How is the statement "we will do and obey" connected to the act of creation? One might explain the *midrash* as saying that because Israel has a special virtue, God revealed to them the act of creation – even though it is a secret that is not supposed to be revealed. The Maggid cites the *midrash* (in slightly different wording from the version quoted above) and explains it differently:

In the *midrash*: "Rabbi Yannai said: The Torah should only have started from 'This month shall be to you.' Why then did He reveal to them the act of creation? For the sake of Israel, because they said: ‘We will do and obey.'" This is in accordance with what the Sages said, that Israel rose in His thought. The primary concern of His will was that Israel would be righteous in every generation. God contracted His clarity, as it were, like a father who contracts his intelligence and speaks of small matters for his small son. So too all the attributes of youthful behavior are born in the father, who loves youthful behavior, so that his son will find delight in him. For the Holy One, blessed be He, the past and the future are the same, and He took pleasure in the behavior of the righteous, and contracted Himself. This contraction is called wisdom, because wisdom is nothingness [*ayin*], in the sense of: "But wisdom, from where [or: from nothingness; *mei-ayin*]shall it be found" (*Iyov* 28:12). And the contraction is for the sake of Israel, and also love caused the contraction. This is the meaning of: "These are the generations of Yitzchak; Avraham [begot Yitzchak]" (*Bereishit* 25:18). (*Maggid Devarav le-Yaakov*, 1)

The Maggid explains the *midrash* with the help of another *midrash* that establishes that the thought of Israel preceded all special things that preceded the world. The thought of Israel is essentially what led to the act of creation. If we combine what is stated in the two *midrashim*, it is because of the thought of the people of Israel saying that they will do and obey that the world was created. What is it about the statement "we will do and obey" that led to the decision to create the world? The Maggid explains that God saw the righteous who were to be born, and the pleasure that He would have from them, and therefore He created the world. It is true that the *midrash* speaks only of Israel, who said "we will do and obey," in the particular generation of the revelation at Mount Sinai, but according to the Maggid, the reference is to the righteous of every generation. The statement "we will do and obey" includes all the moments that the righteous will perform God’s will, and it was for these moments that God wanted to create the world. As we will see over the course of our study, the Maggid sometimes uses the term "Israel" and sometimes the term "righteous," and it is not so clear to whom he is referring. In any event, if we have to briefly formulate what the world was created for, the answer at this time seems to be "for Israel" or "for the righteous."

Both *Maggid Devarav le-Yaakov* and the book *Torah Or*, the two books that comprise anthologies of the words of the *Maggid*,open with the statement that the world was created because God "delighted in the deeds of the righteous," indicating the centrality of this idea in the Maggid's thought.

This fundamental idea also appears in several other places in the words of the Maggid. For example:

Another matter: "And God created man in his image" (*Bereishit* 1:27). Since a person loves his son and delights in him, therefore, when his son speaks, the father contracts his thoughts about his son because of his love for him. It is the same with the Holy One, blessed be He, because past and future are all the same for him. Therefore, at the beginning, before the existence of all the worlds, He took pleasure and delight in the work of His hands and His speech, and for them He created the worlds. As it were, they made Him want to create the worlds in order to take pleasure in them. This is what is written regarding the tree of life, when it arose in His will to create, etc. It turns out that all the worlds were first in His will, from which followed the other *sefirot* until the worlds were created. This is what is written: "And God created man in his image”; that is to say, as it were, He contracted himself into the image of Israel and then He created man with that image. (Ibid., no. 9)

The statement that the world was created "for the sake of Israel, who are called '*reishit* [first]’" appears in the words of *Chazal*, and we already saw it at the beginning of our journey, when we discussed the words of *Chazal* regarding the purpose of creation [(*shiur* #3)](https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/taam-habria-bemishnat-chazal). Rashi brings this statement in his commentary to the first verse in the Bible, together with the statement that the world was created "for the sake of the Torah, which is called *reishit*,” but among all of the Jewish thinkers we have seen thus far, we have not found anybody who developed this idea as one of the purposes of creation. The Maggid develops it, explaining the notion of creating the world for the sake of Israel: in order to delight in the righteous.

This rationale, however, raises questions. Why does God delight in the righteous? How can one grasp such an explanation, that the Supreme Being takes pleasure in man? The Maggid does not explain this in these paragraphs, but only offers a parable. The way to perceive the "pleasure received from the righteous" as a reason for creation is by likening God and the righteous to a father and son. The fact is that parents take pleasure in their children, which indicates that such a situation can exist.

In the upcoming *shiurim*, we will expand on the conception that stands behind the idea of pleasure from the righteous being the purpose of creation, and on the main analogy that the Maggid uses, that of the relationship between a father and a son.

(Translated by David Strauss)