YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The teachings of the Maharal**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 01: Introduction to the Series**

**Preface**

With God's help, over the coming year we will explore the teachings of Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Betzalel, the Maharal of Prague – one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the people of Israel, the most prominent Ashkenazi thinker at the beginning of the period of the *Acharonim*, and the author of a long list of profound books that are studied to this day.

**The Maharal and His Period**

The Maharal was born in 5272 (1512) and died in 5369 (1609), an exceptionally long life of 97 years. He lived in Central Europe and served as a rabbi in communities in what is today Poland and the Czech Republic, and eventually as the rabbi of the Jewish community in Prague. Though he was an important halakhic arbiter and a revered community rabbi, his primary influence on the Jewish world was through his writings.

The Maharal lived in a significant time period. Four exceptionally prominent figures flourished at that time, most of them in the Land of Israel: Rabbi Yosef Karo, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the Rema), Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (Ramak), and Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the Ari). The first two were great halakhists, and the latter two were notable kabbalists. While the Rema lived closer to the Maharal, the others lived in Tzefat. The work of Rabbi Yosef Karo and the Rema together created the *Shulchan Arukh,* which has served as the basis for all of the halakhic literature of subsequent generations. At the same time, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, and the Ari after him, were the two central figures in the world of Kabbala. It is commonly argued that the Kabbala can be divided into two periods: the work of the kabbalists who preceded the Ari is known as "the early Kabbala," and that of the Ari and his disciples is known as the "later Kabbala." The Ramak, who died in Tzefat right after the Ari arrived there, summed up the "early Kabbala" in his famous book *Pardes Rimonim*. The Ari lived for about two years after the Ramak's death in Tzefat; during this short period, he revealed unique teachings that reshaped kabbalistic thought to this day, influencing – among others – the Ramchal and Chasidism, the Vilna Gaon and the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook. These revolutions took place in the middle of the Maharal's long life; the Ari lived during a little less than half of the Maharal’s life, and the Rema a little longer.

The period in question came after the 1492 expulsion from Spain. Before the expulsion, Spain was a Torah center, especially regarding conceptual developments in Torah. Most of the religious thought during the period of the *Rishonim* was written in Spain (Rabbeinu Bachya, Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, Rambam, Ramban, Rabbi Yosef Albo, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, and others). This flourishing center collapsed during the crisis of the Spanish expulsion, but as has happened many times in Jewish history, this crisis also led to a new breakthrough. We see this breakthrough in Tzefat, in the realms of both Halakha and Kabbala, and at the same time in the Maharal in the world of Jewish thought and faith.

**A Lighthouse in the Dark**

It may be said that the Maharal was active at a time when there was a vacuum in the area of faith. Years had passed since the last of the thinkers of Spain (the last prominent thinker who preceded him – Rabbi Yosef Albo, author of the *Sefer Ha-Ikarim –* was born about 130 years before the Maharal and died about 150 years before the Maharal passed away), and new and original thought had not yet emerged. The next major thinker after the Maharal would be the Ramchal (who was born about two hundred years after the birth of the Maharal). Against this background, the Maharal is like a lighthouse on an uninhabited island, in the middle of a dark sea. No other contemporary Jewish thinker wrote about matters of religious faith in a non-kabbalistic context and influenced generations in the way that he did.

This picture brings us face to face with the mystery of who the Maharal's teachers were in the realm of faith, and to what degree they influenced him. Of course, the Maharal bases himself to a certain extent on the scholars who preceded him, but he does not draw directly and exclusively from any particular figure. At this stage, we can say that he combines extraordinary fidelity to Rabbinic teachingswith unique profundity and originality.

The Maharal’s religious world did not yet exert its greatest influence during his own time. It is regarding halakhic matters that we find contemporary arbiters mentioning him in their writings, with great appreciation; his faith-related books had not yet become widely known. The books that were first printed during his lifetime were reprinted only about 200 years later, and only then did they begin to be more present in the Jewish world – especially in some of the currents of Chasidism (among the most prominent: R. Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, the teacher of the Kotzker Rebbe, who said that his rabbi in the world of truth is the Maharal; and in his wake, the *Sefat Emet* as well), in the *beit midrash* of Rav Kook, and among several key figures in the Mussar movement (the most prominent among them being Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler). We should also note the influence of the Maharal's writings on Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, the Satmar Rebbe, and Rabbi Ashkenazi (Manitou).

One aspect of the Maharal's being a trailblazer is that his writings are very difficult to understand – at least until one gets used to his style of writing and thinking. Perhaps it was for this reason that his books were not printed in large numbers in the first generations after the Maharal. Even after his books were reprinted, their influence was initially on a select few, and they were not seen as intended for the masses. However, in recent decades, in the wake of the influence of several of the scholars mentioned above, the Maharal has gained a wider audience and there have also been new and enlightening editions of his works published that greatly benefit those who study them.

**Characteristics of the Maharal's Books**

The Maharal's writings are impressive in their scope. His fundamental books on Jewish thought are *Gevurot Hashem*, *Tiferet Yisrael*,and *Netzach Yisrael*, which deal with the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah, and issues of exile and redemption. According to the Maharal's introduction to *Gevurot Hashem*, each of these books is connected to one of the holidays (Pesach, Shavuot, and Tish'a be-Av, respectively). He also mentions books for Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, but he apparently did not have a chance to finish and publish these and they have not reached us. He later published a book dealing with Chanuka (*Ner Mitzva*) and another about Purim (*Or Chadash*), in which he explains the *aggadot* related to the book of *Esther*.

Other major books written by the Maharal include: *Netivot Olam* on character traits; *Derekh Chaim* on tractate *Avot*; *Gur Aryeh* on Rashi's commentary to the Torah; and collections of sermons that he delivered to his community. His major work on Talmudic *aggadot* was published only after his death, though he did publish *Be'er Ha-Gola*, which resolves puzzling *aggadot* of *Chazal* that are liable to arouse criticism by those who understand them in a simplistic manner.

The Maharal engaged extensively in explaining *Chazal’s* *aggadot* in an orderly fashion. In this he preceded the Maharsha and most other interpreters of Talmudic *aggadot*. His explanations of the *aggadot* were printed in a four-volume series, and they constitute a breakthrough in the systematic and in-depth understanding of the *aggadot* of *Chazal.*

One of the unique characteristics of the Maharal's writings is the internal cross-references between his various books. Authors often refer in their later books to their earlier works, a phenomenon which enables us to know the order in which the books were written. With the Maharal, however, all of his books refer to all of his other books. Hence, it is difficult to know what was written before what. It is possible that the Maharal in fact wrote all of his books at the same time (his books were published only at the end of his life, after he was 60 years old, and it is possible that until then he was working on them all concurrently); alternatively, perhaps he wrote them in a certain order, one after the other, but updated the references in each book before it was printed. In any case, it is clear that the Maharal kept a complete picture of all his books in his mind and related to them in a comprehensive manner.

It is noteworthy that the Maharal deals comprehensively with issues of faith and morality. Some earlier Jewish thinkers had focused more on morality (such as Rabbeinu Bachya and Rabbeinu Yona), and some focused more on faith and theology (such as Rabbi Saadya Gaon, Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, and the Rambam). Comprehensive treatment of both areas is less prevalent. There is, of course, a degree of relationship between the two areas; for instance, Rabbi Saadya Gaon's worldview has implications for how to live correctly, and he deals with this in the last section of his book, but it is a limited component of the book in comparison to the philosophical discussions; on the other side, Rabbeinu Bachya deals with theological issues a little bit in the introduction to his book and in the first section, but nine of the ten sections of his book, *Chovot Ha-Levavot,* deal with character development. The Maharal, in contrast, writes entire books on both theological and moral issues.

Fundamentally, the Maharal strives to create an inclusive and comprehensive approach. This is evident in his introduction to the first book that he wrote, *Gevurot Hashem*, already mentioned above. There, the Maharal mentions six books that he intends to write, which together build a systematic framework and are described as "an ordering of all that exists." (We will discuss this further in later *shiurim*.) There is an order to the Maharal’s teachings, a comprehensive picture of the world, based on which he writes his array of books.

**The Maharal and Philosophy**

During the period of the *Rishonim*, books that addressed issues of faith had to deal with philosophy. The presence of philosophy is especially noticeable in the writings of the Rambam, as well as those of Rabbi Saadya Gaon and others. Arguments with and critiques of the Rambam, such as those of Rabbeinu Yona, were centered mainly on the issue of how to approach philosophy. The Ramban, who tried to calm the argument, also related to this conceptual world. However, even before the Spanish expulsion, the philosophical approach began to collapse. This is evident in the writings of Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, who dismantled the Aristotelian premises one by one (and based on this, also argued with the Rambam on many conceptual issues). Philosophy makes an appearance in the writings of his student, the author of *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*, but already in a more subtle way.

The Maharal arrived on the scene after philosophy had already sustained significant challenges in Jewish thought and in the world at large, as well; the Europe of that time had begun to rid itself of the dogmas of Aristotle and his successors. The new science that freed itself of Aristotle’s astronomical assumptions was taking its first steps forward, and the Maharal was involved in the new science and understood it (his disciple, Rabbi David Ganz, was an astronomer). The updated astronomy was beginning to perceive the earth as revolving around the sun, rather than the other way around. This too greatly affected understandings of the world and uprooted Aristotle's views. These transformations occurred before the Maharal and during his time, and we will need to clarify his particular attitude towards philosophy.

The Maharal was strongly attached to the words of *Chazal*. While his predecessors certainly all mentioned *Chazal*’s teachings, none of them expressed perspectives that stemmed so directly from their *midrashim.* For the Maharal, *Chazal* serve as his exclusive source – which in a certain sense replaces the philosophical basis.

It is evident that the Maharal comes to present an alternative to the conceptual worldviews that preceded him – sometimes covertly, and sometimes quite openly. The religious world he builds serves primarily as an alternative to the religious world that grew out of philosophy.

The Maharal's language and conceptual world include many philosophical concepts. Matter and form, cause and effect, existence and corruption – these are just a few examples of philosophical terms through which the Maharal articulates his ideas. However, he also often criticizes philosophy in an open and strident manner. One of the questions that will accompany our study is whether there is still room for philosophy in the thought of the Maharal, or whether he only uses its concepts in a technical way.

As mentioned, the Maharal's writings are difficult to decipher. He is frequently repetitive, and his explanatory sentences often leave the passage in its ambiguity, as if he comes to explain an idea but does so with a sentence which is not any easier to understand. He has his own set of words and concepts, which he appears to have built by himself to explain and illustrate profound matters.

Another difficulty lies in the Maharal's "music"; the general atmosphere that dominates his writing is one of absolute decisiveness. He is certain that his words are the truth and that there is no possible alternative, but the explanations that he gives for his words are not always sufficiently clear.

Thus, on the one hand, the Maharal's teachings carry great promise, while on the other hand, they present many hurdles that must be overcome in order to fully understand the depth of his words.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)