YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The teachings of the Maharal**

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**Shiur #04: The Maharal's Books – An overview**

The previous two *shiurim* presented some of the unique aspects of the Maharal’s writings, the questions that set him apart from previous Jewish thinkers, and the objectives he seeks – the essence and the whole. In the coming *shiurim*, we will examine the foundations of the Maharal's thought – but first we will take a short break and survey the books he authored.

The Maharal lived a long life and wrote many books, which he published in the later years of his life – the first, *Gur Aryeh* on Rashi's commentary to the Torah, at the age of 66 (in 5338/1578).

Why did he open with this book? On one level, it was a genre that occupied a central place during this period; studying the Torah with Rashi's commentary was already a standard activity in the Jewish world, and super-commentaries on it became common. (The most famous of those preceding the Maharal’s was the commentary of the Re'em, Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi.) I will also suggest another reason below, one that is more typical of the Maharal's unique approach, for why he wrote such a book and how it fits into the overall body of his works.

**The Maharal's Overall Plan**

Four years later (5342/1582), the Maharal published his second book – *Gevurot Hashem*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here, he began to pave his own path in a more distinctive way. In the introduction to the book, he presents the subject of the book, which deals with Pesach and the exodus from Egypt:

Therefore the name of the book is *Gevurot Hashem – The Mighty Deeds of the Lord*. In it I will explain the mighty deeds that God performed for the people of Israel and the wondrous things that He did against those who rose up against Him; with His strong arm He humbled the lofty, and a poor nation He seated on high; may His name be praised forever." (*Gevurot Hashem –* third introduction)

However, from other lines in that same introduction, we clearly see that the book *Gevurot Hashem* was part of a broad plan to write a systematic array of books dealing with the Torah's fundamental issues of faith, in a unique structure.

This work, which includes the order of what exists, is divided into six books. The first book, the order of Shabbat, is called the Book of Greatness (*Gedula*), as Rabbi Sheila expounded: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness" – this is the act of creation. The second part, the order of Pesach, is called the Book of the Might (*Gevura*), as was explained. The third part, the order of the giving of the Torah, is called the Book of the Glory of Israel (*Tiferet Yisrael*), as Rabbi Akiva expounded: "And the glory" – this is the giving of the Torah. The fourth part, the order of Tisha be-Av and what is connected to it, is called the Book of Victory (*Netzach*), which is the fall of the wickedness which destroyed our Temple. The fifth part, the order of Sukkot, is called the Book of Majesty (*Hod*), for on it we give thanks (*hodot*) and praise to the Holy One, blessed be He, with the four species. The sixth part, the order of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, is called the Book of Heaven and Earth (*Shamayim Va-aretz*). We will begin with the order of Pesach, because it is also the cause of Shabbat, for included in the *Kiddush* of Shabbat are the words: "in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt."

The Maharal lists a series of books that he intends to write, based on the verse: "Yours, O Lord, is the *greatness*, and the *might*, and the *glory*, and the *victory*, and the *majesty*; for all that is *in the heaven and in the earth* [is Yours]; Yours is the kingdom and the prominence above all" (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 29:11). Each book deals with a different issue of faith and is connected to the Jewish calendar: the Book of Greatness, which deals with the creation of the world, on Shabbat; the Book of Might, which deals with the issue of miracles and God's actions, on Pesach (the time of the exodus from Egypt); the Book of Glory, which deals with the essence of the Torah, on Shavuot; the Book of Victory, which deals with the issues of exile, redemption, and the fall of the wicked kingdom, on Tisha be-Av; the Book of Majesty, on Sukkot; and the Book of Heaven and Earth on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

The Maharal assigns a heading to the entire series that he writes to correspond to the various appointed times of the year: "the entire order of what exists." The six books together comprise the Torah's overall outlook on reality. We have here a general structure of spiritual reality, folded into the verse: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the might….”

Why does the Maharal see this verse as one that contains the whole of spiritual reality? This is a fundamental verse in kabbalistic thought, understood as alluding to seven ways God reveals Himself in the world – the *sefirot*: kindness (greatness), might, glory, victory, majesty, foundation,[[2]](#footnote-2) and kingship ("for all that is *in the heaven and in the earth* [is Yours]; Yours is the *kingdom*"). There is an entire complex of Divine revelations, in which every revelation has a particular function. In accordance with this principle, the Maharal understands each special time as components of a whole complex. Just as a ray of white light enters a prism and then appears as seven colors, so the Divine light appears on the appointed times of the year (including Tisha be-Av) as a complex of seven aspects. The Maharal's books are intended to reflect this general picture.

**Morality, Character Traits, and Values**

Seventeen years passed from the time that the Maharal published his first book in the planned series – *Gevurot Hashem* – until he published the next one – *Tiferet Yisrael*, to which we will return below. In the intervening years, he published several other important books that were not mentioned in the aforementioned overall plan.

The first two of these – *Derekh Chaim* (5349/1589) and *Netivot Olam* (5356/1596) – deal at length and in depth with the realm of morality, character traits, and values. *Derekh Chaim* is a comprehensive commentary on tractate *Avot*, some excerpts from which we encountered in the previous *shiur*. *Avot* is the most natural choice for writing a book on these matters, since it is the only tractate in the Mishna that deals exclusively with values and character traits.

In *Netivot Olam*, the Maharal seeks to complete his clarification of the field of morality and character traits, discussions of which are scattered in many other places in Rabbinic literaturebeyond tractate *Avot*. He writes in his introduction:

We saw that the early authorities set words of moral instruction upon the hearts of men and introduced the practice of reciting every Shabbat a chapter of tractate *Avot*,in which there are words of moral instruction. And there are many words of moral instruction in the Talmud that guide a person in good and righteous ways, and I saw fit to join them together. Our intention is only to join together such statements and explain the words of the Sages, and nothing else. This work is only an explanation of the words of the Sages found in the Talmud, just as we explained tractate *Avot*, so that if a person wishes to learn words of moral instruction taught by the Sages of Israel, he will find them together. The name of this work is *Netivot Olam*, because one who walks in these paths (*netivot*), death will not reach him[i.e., he will achieve eternal (*olam*)life]. (*Netivot Olam* I, introduction)

The Maharal collects these *aggadot* and arranges them according to topics. He builds the book around thirty-two traits and “paths,” inspired by the introduction to *Sefer Ha-Yetzira*: "With thirty-two paths (*netivot*)of marvelous wisdom, the Holy One, blessed be He, formed His world," and prefaces them with the path of the Torah.

We divided it into thirty-two paths, and they are all words of moral instruction, and one more path regarding Torah study, for if there is no Torah, there is no good behavior. In all, there are thirty-three paths. May the Blessed One illuminate our eyes and guide us in the path of truth and honesty; *amen*. (ibid.)

During those years, the Maharal also published several profound *derashot* that he delivered in the communities he led: a *derasha* on repentance (5344/1584), a *derasha* for Shabbat Ha-Gadol (5349/1589), and a *derasha* on the Torah and *mitzvot* (5353/1593).

The third book the Maharal published during those years is *Be'er Ha-Gola* (5358/1598), in which the Maharal deals firmly with many criticisms that were raised against the *aggadot* of *Chazal.* As noted in the previous *shiur*, he divides the book into seven sections, or "wells" (*be'erot*), each of which deals with a different topic of criticism that arises in connection with the *aggadot*. Each chapter presents a number of examples and reconciles the difficulties in an in-depth manner. In many cases, the Maharal explains that a difficulty stems from a misunderstanding of the essence of the words of *Chazal*, as understanding their statements correctly requires a grasp of their language and how they address dimensions beyond simple reality. Many fundamental principles of the Maharal's understanding of Aggada and faith appear in this book.

In the introduction to the book, the Maharal states the main principle that guides him: the absolute validity of the words of *Chazal* even regarding Aggada, validity that stems from an understanding that the statements of *Chazal* are a continuation of the words of God at Mount Sinai, that they are profoundly deep and far beyond simple human understanding, and that the difficulties in understanding them follow precisely from the enormous gap between their lofty level and our level. The Maharal sharply criticizes the underlying assumptions of the critics, responding with a combination of reverence for the Oral Law and great exegetical depth.

It turns out that the ability to recognize our deficiency is a level we possess. But when we do not know and feel this at all, it is due to the magnitude of the deficiency in our wisdom. The sages in this generation do not need to be admonished about this, because we are all already admonished with the strongest admonishment, for the words of the ancients are [like] Sinai, and whoever touches them will be shot or stoned, and if [the words of the ancients are] far from his mind, he should assign the fault to himself, unless the leprosy of heresy has spread on his forehead, and of this it is forbidden to speak. But recently people have entered the gates of the Talmud, gates that had truly been locked before those who knew its entrances. And they passed from gate to gate, thinking that they understood all of its treasure houses and saw all of the treasures, and they found in it things that they deemed worthy of being distanced, and for this reason they slandered the Talmud…

And now, if we remain silent, sin and guilt will be found in us, because we will hear contemptuous words about the Sages of old, and we will pay evil for good – for their intention was to benefit us, the later generation, empty of wisdom, void of reason, and we are silent and do not remove their disgrace. But to clarify the things that need to be interpreted, as they are difficult for the person who does not understand their words, this is impossible, and all the more so when a person seeks an excuse. But we will explain a small part of their words, and that will serve as testimony and proof for the rest of what they said, because, with the help of God, the matters will be explained in their place according to the order of the Talmud, and therefore, if a person seeks, he will find it in its place, because in faith they said what they said. And these matters that they thought – they are wicked thoughts thought about the Sages of old. (*Be'er Ha-Gola*, author's introduction)

**Completing the Series on the Holidays**

Later on, the Maharal finally returned to the plan he had laid out in the introduction to *Gevurot Hashem* and published the next two books in the series – *Tiferet Yisrael* (5359/1599) and *Netzach Yisrael* (published in the same year). *Tiferet Yisrael* deals with the essence of the Torah, and *Netzach Yisrael* deals with Israel's exile, their future redemption, and the fall of the wicked kingdom.

In doing so, the Maharal completed half of the original plan that he had set seventeen years earlier. The other three books were never published. What happened to them? Did the Maharal write them and then not have time to publish them, or were they never written?

Although we cannot know for sure, there are indications that these books were never written. As a whole, the Maharal's books contain many references to each other. In *Chiddushei Aggadot Ha-Shas* (which we will discuss later), the Maharal refers many times to both *Tiferet Yisrael* and *Netzach Yisrael*, but the only time he refers to *Sefer Ha-Gedula*, he clarifies that this is a book that he has not yet written: "There are other great things regarding this matter, but this is not their place, and they will be explained in *Sefer Ha-Gedula*, if the Creator allows me to write it" (*Chiddushei Aggadot Sanhedrin* 97). *Sefer Ha-Gedula* is also mentioned in one other place in the Maharal's writings, and there too, it appears as a book that had not yet been written: "And it will be clarified with the help of the Blessed in *Sefer Ha-Gedula*" (*Netzach Yisrael*, chap. 55). The other two books are not mentioned at all in the Maharal’s writings, other than in the plan laid out in the introduction to *Gevurot Hashem*. Apparently, the Maharal did not have time to write these three books (though some basic ideas connected to Shabbat and Rosh Hashana can be reconstructed from his commentaries to the *aggadot* in tractates *Shabbat* and *Rosh Hashana*, which we will discuss later in the *shiur*).

One year later (5360/1600), the Maharal published two more books, this time on the holidays of the Oral Law – *Ner Mitzva* on Chanuka and *Or Chadash* on Purim. Even though they were not included in the original plan that the Maharal had outlined in his introduction to *Gevurot Hashem*, they can be viewed as an extension of that plan. In *Ner Mitzva*,the Maharal addresses a spiritual conception of the course of history on the axis of the four kingdoms spelled out by *Chazal* – Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome – and especially with the struggle against Greek culture. In *Or Chadash*, the Maharal makes use of the *midrashim* on *Esther* to discuss the struggle against the kingdoms of Persia and Amalek reflected in the days of Purim.

The issue of God's appearance in history through the people of Israel thus occupies a broad place in the writings of the Maharal, especially in *Gevurot Hashem*, *Netzach Yisrael, Ner Mitzva*, and *Or Chadash.*

**Interpretation of the Aggada**

All of the books described above were published during the Maharal's lifetime. It is interesting that, although the Maharal was greatly admired, the books he published during his lifetime were not reprinted for about two hundred years. They were reprinted mainly under Chasidic influence, after his teachings took a central place in the thought of several Chasidic rebbes (especially Rabbi Yisrael of Koznitz and the Peshischa-Kotzk-Ger line). In our generation, the Maharal's books were published with various commentaries (such as those of Rabbi Pardes and Rabbi Shilo), and recently they were published by Rabbi Hartman and Machon Yerushalayim in an accurate edition, with references to parallels in the various writings of the Maharal and with a detailed and useful index.

During the centuries that passed since the Maharal's death until close to our time, we did not merit any new books by the Maharal. However, a few decades ago, the Maharal's commentaries on the *Aggadot* in the Babylonian Talmud were published for the first time, in four volumes. It turns out that the Maharal wrote a comprehensive commentary on many tractates in the orders *Nashim*, *Nezikin*, and *Kodshim*, and on tractates *Nida*, *Shabbat*,and *Rosh Hashana*. This is a comprehensive and in-depth interpretive enterprise, in which the Maharal uses all the tools at his disposal to offer a consistent interpretation of a huge number of *aggadot*.

The Maharal was one of the first to devote an organized work to the interpretation of Talmudic *aggadot*. The famous collection of the *aggadot* in the Talmud, *Ein Yaakov*, was published in several places during the early days of his life, but the Maharal's commentaries preceded the main commentaries on it – those of Rabbi Yaakov Reisher (*Iyun Yaakov*), Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto (*Me'or Einayim*), and Rabbi Chanokh Zundel (*Etz Yosef* and *Anaf Yosef*). He also preceded the Maharsha, whose commentaries on *aggadot* were published in the Vilna edition of the Talmud and were collected from there to the *Ein Yaakov.* However, in practice, the Maharal's commentaries were published hundreds of years after them.

This comprehensive work sheds additional light on the Maharal's overall enterprise. With its help, an entire division is created within the books of the Maharal, which effectively encompasses the main sources of *Chazal*’s *aggadot* and interprets them. Regarding the words of the *Tannaim* – his commentary to tractate *Avot*,which is the main source of *aggadot* in the Mishna; and regarding the words of the *Amoraim* – his commentary to the *aggadot* in the Babylonian Talmud. To a certain degree, we can add to them the book *Gur Aryeh.* Earlier, I presented *Gur Aryeh* as a book revolving around Rashi's commentary – but Rashi can be seen not only as a commentator on the Torah, but also as the creator of a collection of the main *midrashim* of *Chazal* relating to the Torah. By choosing to explain Rashi's commentary, the Maharal also had an avenue to discuss essential *midrashim* on the Torah, which Rashi had collected from throughout the literature of *Chazal.*

Indeed, the title page of the first edition of the *Gur Aryeh* indicates that this was an explicit element of the book’s purpose. It is written there:

[The *Gur Aryeh* comes] to explain [Rashi's] commentary… because his commentary is the first… to explain the plain sense of the text. It also includes [material] from the Talmud, *Midrash Rabba*, *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifrei.* [The *Gur Aryeh* comes also] to clarify his words, whether the truth is with him in light of the objections raised against him by those who came after him. [Furthermore, it comes] to clarify everything that he brings from the words of *Chazal*, whether in matters of Halakha, to clarify the depth of the Halakha, or whether in matters of Aggada, to explain it in light of its secret [meanings]… And from the well-known statements found in the commentary of Rashi, there is proof regarding the others, that they are all words of wisdom, and there is no flaw in them.

It turns out that even the Maharal’s first book, *Gur Aryeh*, was intended not only to interpret the words of Rashi, as other similar books did, but also to address the great challenge of offering a thorough explanation of the *aggadot* of *Chazal* and defending them from criticism, in order to show that "they are all words of wisdom, and there is no flaw in them." As we have already seen, rising to this challenge, which is one of the goals of *Gur Aryeh,* was later the central goal of *Be'er Ha-Gola.* The Maharal is aware that it is almost impossible to include all of the *aggadot* of *Chazal* and answer all of the objections that could be raised against them; therefore, he emphasizes in both books that he will bring fundamental examples, from which one can draw conclusions about the rest of the *aggadot*.

From this it follows that we can identify two comprehensive enterprises in the writings of the Maharal, one exegetical and one conceptual. The exegetical enterprise involves comprehensive and in-depth explanation of *aggadot* (this category includes primarily the books *Gur Aryeh* on the Torah, *Derekh Chaim* on *Avot*, *Chiddushei Aggadot Ha-Shas*, and *Be'er Ha-Gola*), and the conceptual enterprise involves a series of books related to the holidays, each one dealing with a different central topic in the Jewish faith (this category includes mainly the books *Gevurot Hashem*, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Netzach Yisrael*, *Ner Mitzva*, and *Or Chadash*).

**Two Life Enterprises That Are One**

We saw that the Maharal had two life projects: one in the field of faith – a comprehensive explanation of Jewish faith and its foundations – and one in the field of *aggadot –* writing an organized and in-depth commentary on a selection of *aggadot*: those incorporated in Rashi's commentary to the Torah, the words of the *Tannaim* that were included in tractate *Avot*, and the words of the *Amoraim* that found their way into the Babylonian Talmud. The Maharal made decisive contribution to the world of Torah in both areas, contributions that are expressed both in the content he taught and in the conceptual approach he created, which influences us to this day. Is there a connection between these two enterprises?

Careful examination reveals that the two enterprises are in fact one, and this teaches us a very fundamental element in the Maharal's approach. The fact that we are dealing with a single enterprise is reflected in the uniform format in which all his books are structured. His books of faith are built, like the books of Aggada, out of a sequence of quotations from the *aggadot* of *Chazal* that the Maharal explains, and his books of commentary explain all of the *aggadot* of *Chazal* as dealing with essential foundations of faith (rather than instructions that come for the most part only to offer moral or educational advice, as one might think at first glance).

What does all this mean? The Maharal’s fundamental perspective, underlying both enterprises (which are one), is that Jewish beliefs are based on the words of *Chazal.* The Jewish authorities on matters of faith who preceded the Maharal did make use of aggadic statements, but they did not consider *Chazal*’s *aggadot* as the primary, almost exclusive, source of Jewish doctrine; rather, they incorporated them into broad discussions that included logical arguments and proofs, verses, and words drawn from the Oral Law. The Maharal teaches that *Chazal's* main concern in their *aggadot* was to demonstrate the Torah's worldview, and that those who wish to learn the Torah's view must turn specifically to these *aggadot.* Each of the two elements of this sentence is an innovation. It could have been argued that the goal of *aggadot* was primarily to teach moral and educational instruction, and only a few of their statements deal with matters of faith; it could also have been argued that the Jewish faith has other anchors, such as rational thinking and intellectual conclusions. The Maharal's mission is to engage with the principles of faith according to *Chazal*, as the exclusive source for building the worldview of the Torah.

We will continue our journey on the basis of the two united enterprises in the Maharal's words. In the coming lessons in the series, we will address the Maharal's methods of explaining *aggadot*, and then we will move on to deal with the doctrine of faith and the worldview that he taught.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. An earlier version of the book, which has interesting differences, was found in a manuscript and was published in recent years. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This *sefira* is alluded to in the verse by the phrase “all that is in the heaven and in the earth,” as *yesod* connects heaven and earth. The Maharal does not assign a separate book to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)