YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Thought of the Maharal of Prague**

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**Shiur 10: Moral Instruction (4-5) – Truth and Faith**

We continue our study of the Maharal's thought regarding the moral realm. So far, after a general introduction regarding morality (*mussar*) and moral qualities or traits (*middot*), we saw how the Maharal applies his principles to the *middot* of justice, kindness, and mercy. We will now proceed to discuss other qualities that appear in the first part of *Netivot Olam* – truth (*emet*)and faith (*emuna*).

Let us first consider how we might define these qualities based on our own understanding, without the Maharal. On the simple level, truth means correct information, while if we do not know with certainty that certain information is correct, yet relate to it as correct, that is faith. The Maharal, in keeping with his constant efforts to plumb the abstract essence of all things and to uncover their Divine roots, is not content with these definitions.

***Netiv Ha-Emet* – The Path of Truth**

In his customary fashion, the Maharal opens the section on the “path of truth” with a verse from the book of *Mishlei*:

In the book of *Mishlei* (12:19): "The lip of truth shall be established forever; but a lying tongue is but for a moment (*argi’a*)." King Shlomo speaks about the trait and virtue of truth, for when a person's words are spoken with truth and uprightness, then even if all come to dispute him and to nullify the truth and to fight against him with force, the truth remains in its place. A lying tongue is just the opposite; a lie has no permanence, and this is what is stated: "But a lying tongue is but for a moment." That is to say, the smallest measure that can be said of it, namely, a day or half a day. "*Argi'a* a lying tongue," in the sense of "breaking," like "who stirs up (*roge’a*)the sea and its waves" (*Yeshayahu* 51:15), that the lying tongue will be broken... This is the meaning of the verse: In the smallest measure of time, the lying tongue will be broken… This is the opposite of “the lip of truth,” which has permanence for eternity. (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Emet* 1)

Put simply, the Maharal says that truth is a thing that lasts, whereas falsehood has no permanence. This definition may accord with the basic definition laid out above: true information exists in reality, whereas false information does not exist in reality. However, if we examine the matter more closely, we see that the Maharal is aiming at a deeper idea. He defines falsehood in terms of time: "the smallest measure that can be said of it, namely, a day or half a day" – not as something that has no reality at all. A lie *can* exist in reality, but only for a short time. We may see it with our eyes, but that does not mean it has permanence, for it will soon cease to exist. A lie may have a transient existence. Truth, on the other hand, has lasting existence in its very essence.

The truth is what exists in reality not by chance but essentially, and for that reason it will endure forever. There are bits of information that exist in reality by chance. For example, at this particular moment clouds are covering the sun. The clouds are in fact there, but this is true only by chance and temporarily. The existence of the sun, on the other hand, is a permanent fact. A fundamental part of the natural order of the world is that there is a sun in the sky, and if someone were to come along and say there is no sun – because it is momentarily obscured by clouds – this would be a lie.

Since truth is correct, "even if all come to dispute him and to nullify the truth and to fight against him with force, the truth remains in its place." If truth means facts of reality, it can be overpowered and cancelled. But if truth is what is essentially correct, no one can nullify it. It may be possible to conceal it, but not for long.

A lie, on the other hand, is short-lived and doomed to collapse. Throughout history we have seen many such lies, which appeared to be solid realities but did not last. An example of this is found at the beginning of history, with the tower of Babel; it was a grandiose project but lacked a real foundation, and so it eventually collapsed. Examples can also be brought from recent generations, such as the Soviet Union, which appeared strong and powerful but ultimately collapsed like a house of cards. That which is not based on essential and necessary truth will ultimately fall. The Maharal continues to develop this profound conception of truth:

As alluded to by *Chazal* in chapter *Ha-Boneh*: "*Shin* [stands for] *SHeker* (falsehood); *Tav* [for] *emeT* (truth). Why are the letters of *sheker (shin*, *kof*, *resh*) close together [in the alphabet], while those of *emet* (*alef*, *mem*, *tav*) are far apart? Falsehood is commonly found; truth is rare" (*Shabbat* 104a). That is to say, since *tav* is the last letter of the alphabet, it is appropriate for the last letter of the word *emet*, truth. It would have been appropriate to say that *alef* stands for truth, and not *tav*; just as it says that *shin* stands for *sheker*, and it is the first letter of *sheker*, it could have said *alef* stands for *emet.* But it wanted to teach that the seal is what comes at the end, as it seals everything, and therefore it is appropriate that the *tav*, which is the seal of the alphabet, should be the final letter that seals the word *emet*, for the *tav* is at the end of the alphabet, and it seals the alphabet, and it is fitting that it be at the end of the word *emet*, and thus seal the word. For truth is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He. Therefore the letter is called *tav*, like "*ve-hitvita*, and set a mark" (*Yechezkel* 9:4), which denotes a mark and a seal.

Here the Maharal adds another element. He notes that the word *emet*,truth, is composed of the first letter of the alphabet (*alef*), the middle letter (*mem*), and the last letter (*tav*). Truth is the full picture, from *alef* to *tav*. As a result, we do not necessarily see the truth at a particular moment in a manifest manner, but only at the end, when we have a broad and complete perspective. The word *sheker*,lie, is composed of letters that exist in the alphabet, which means that it has some hold on reality, but it occupies only a narrow segment of the alphabet (*kof-resh-shin*).

A fundamental point is hereby established. Every lie rests on a kernel of truth, but it is a partial, narrow, and restricted kernel. It sits on a small point of reality and presents it as if it were a reflection of reality as a whole. For example, a person may suffer from a certain difficulty in life; even if the difficulty is real, if the person blows it up as if there is nothing else in his life but this difficulty – that is false.

And truth and falsehood are joined together, for the *shin* is falsehood and the *tav* is truth, for as soon as one distances himself from the truth, even one letter, immediately there is falsehood, and therefore falsehood is next to truth.

Besides the fact that a lie rests on a kernel of truth, the lie may be very close to the truth – which means that if one strays even a little from the truth, one arrives at the lie. We saw in the previous *shiur* that there are two kinds of traits: those that cover a wide expanse, such as kindness, and those that are very precise, such as justice. Truth, like justice, is exacting; one cannot deviate from it. One can practice kindness only occasionally, but one who speaks the truth only occasionally is not a speaker of the truth. What is not true is a lie.

And it says that the letters of the word *sheker* are close together, for there is no need to trouble oneself in order to lie, and one can tell lies as he wishes. But the truth is not commonly found, and therefore the letters of the word *emet* are as far [from each other] as they could possibly be.

The Maharal returns to this theme when he explains why it is specifically truth that is said to be "the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He":

We must be explain why the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth and not one of the other *middot* ascribed to God. It can be explained that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth because He is one and there is no other, and therefore the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth, for there is nothing that is one except the truth, and it is impossible that the truth should be two. For if you ask about man, “What is he?” – if you say he is a beast or a bird or a fish or any of the things you can say about him, all of them are false, and they are many, to the point that there is no end or limit to lies. But the truth is one, for he is a man and not a beast. If so, the truth is one. And thus every falsehood is many, but the truth is one.

Lies are commonplace, for there are countless narrow and partial views of reality. Each person can view reality in a partial way, in accordance with his personal needs. Many examples of this abound in the age of media; there are hardly any articles that are entirely false, but often a partial picture is presented in a way that serves particular positions or interests. There are therefore countless possibilities of lying, and only one comprehensive picture which is the truth.

Indeed, truth is also expressed as correct information that exists in reality, but information is only an expression of essence. The reason a given datum exists in reality in a permanent manner is because it has an essential foundation. God is the Necessary Being, and therefore, the world He created includes absolutes, things that are fixed in the world in accordance with the Divine plan. But not everything appearing in reality is absolute; rather, only that which derives from necessary Divine truth. Reality is comprised of both incidental and essential components, but only the essential components endure forever.

Thus, factual data exists in the mundane world, but being factual is not what defines truth. There can be data that is true for the moment, but that eventually fades away. Truth is defined by the world of essences and principles, by the essential foundations of reality. Torah is true and endures forever, and the people of Israel are true and endure forever, while cultures and peoples who present themselves as having a strong presence in this world, and therefore seem at the time to be the truth incarnate, eventually fade away.

***Netiv Ha-Emuna* – The Path of Faith**

The path of faith is also introduced with a verse from *Mishlei*:

In the book of *Mishlei* it is written: "Most men will proclaim, every one, his own goodness; but a faithful man who can find?" (*Mishlei* 20:6). King Shlomo, peace be upon him, said that there are many people about whom it may be said that “he is a kind man”; this one is kind in this matter, and that one is kind in another matter, to the point that there are many people about whom it may be said that he is a kind man. But a faithful man, who can find? One who has perfect faith in God, and is faithful in all his dealings and conduct – who can find this? This was already explained above, with respect to: "On the road (*orach*)of charity (*tzedaka*)is life, and in its path (*netiva*) there is no death" (*Mishlei* 12:28). Charity is called a road because it is broad and many walk along it, as explained in *Netiv Gemilut Chasidim*; see there. But faith involves not wavering in one's faith. With even a small change, he leaves his faith, and we have already explained this matter in *Gevurot Hashem* (chapter 9); Avraham, who was the foremost believer, departed somewhat from faith when he said: "Whereby shall I know?" (*Bereishit* 15:9), and regarding Moshe, it is stated: "Because you did not believe in Me" (*Bamidbar* 20:12). Therefore, he said: "But a faithful man who can find?" For he who has faith is called a "man (*ish*),” because a person of faith needs strength to stand firm in his faith, and therefore he is called a man of faith. But regarding kindness it is written: "Most men (*adam*).” (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Emuna* 1)

The man of faith is described in this verse as a rare phenomenon; there are many men of kindness, but few men of faith. The Maharal then takes the concept of faith in two different directions – faith in God and trustworthiness in interpersonal relationships and dealings. At first glance, these seem to be two different topics, each of which could warrant a *netiv* of its own. Why do they appear here together as a single issue? One might suggest that each is a possible interpretation of the verse, and since the verse is being interpreted, the Maharal mentions both. This, however, does not seem to be the Maharal's intention; he is not one to bring two interpretations incidentally, but does everything in a deliberate and intentional manner. The Maharal, then, is specifically defining the concept of faith by comparing faith in God to faithfulness between human beings, and the connection between these two phenomena is the key to understanding the matter.

Faith in God can be described as knowledge, as the Rambam writes at the beginning of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* (1:1): "To *know* that there is a Primary Being." But according to the Maharal, faith is placement of trust, and faith in God is placing one's trust in God. The first believer described in the Torah is Avraham Avinu: "And he believed in the Lord, and He counted it for him as righteousness" (*Bereishit* 15:6). God had promised Avraham offspring, and Avraham saw no prospect of this promise being fulfilled in the visible world. He knew that he was old, and that according to the laws of nature, Sara would presumably not be able to bear children. His attitude toward the Divine promise was not one of knowledge, but of trust. Faith in God is a recognition that is not based on information, and it remains in place even if the material reality seems to be at odds with it. Based on the same principle, a trustworthy person is one on whom one can rely absolutely, even without following him and checking up on him. He is known for his integrity and honesty, to such an extent that he can be trusted completely not to cheat or deceive. Thus, the two meanings of faith are interrelated and derive from the same principle.

A man of faith is called an *ish* because he "needs strength to stand firm in his faith." Faith requires a strong spiritual stance. A believer must raise himself up over the revealed material reality and cling to a spiritual perspective. One who lives only by the reality that surrounds him subjects himself to his earthly circumstances, and since external conditions are liable to change and affect a person's situation, he may also cling to his own interests and not be faithful in his words and deeds. He may promise something to another person at one moment, because it seems to him that he will gain thereby, and after seeing that the circumstances have changed, he will renege and break his promise. On the other hand, a person who succeeds in ascending to the spiritual perspective and places his trust in God is not affected by the reality that surrounds him. His actions are not based on constantly changing interests, and what he promised yesterday, he will certainly fulfill today. Therefore, there is a connection between being a believer and being trustworthy, between trusting God and being trustworthy in human relationships. Both require the power of faith, which involves freedom from dependence on external events and surrounding conditions. Faith is a mental attribute that requires cultivation. The true believer in God is also someone who is trusted by others.

Based on the same principle, that faith requires cultivation, the Maharal explains the statement of *Chazal*: "One who responds *'Amen'* with all his might has the gates of the Garden of Eden opened for him" (*Shabbat* 119b). According to the Maharal, "one who believes in God must do so *with all his might*, for faith requires strength and vigor." *Chazal* are not referring here to a person who shouts "*Amen*" with all his might, but to one who concentrates the full might of his faith in God and believes in Him completely and absolutely. Such a person rises above the transient material reality to the upper world.

**The Value of Faithfulness**

Let us broaden our examination of the quality of faith. For a person to be trustworthy, and for him to stand by his word and his promises even in changing circumstances, he must have a strong backbone. By nature, a person living in the material world must be concerned with the resources necessary for his survival. The reality around him can change, and it is sometimes necessary to modify his modus operandi in accordance with the changes; otherwise, he will not succeed in the struggle of survival. Oftentimes, a person's very willingness to commit and promise something stems from a particular material need, such as in the case of a loan. A person does not wish to bind himself financially to another, but in order to cope with economic difficulties, he is forced to borrow money. As long as the sole factor motivating him is his material need, he may evade the debt and even deny its existence, if that is what the situation dictates.

It follows that from the material side of a person, it is more likely that he will be unfaithful. One who is motivated only by concern for his material existence will use his human talents and attributes to serve his lower dimensions, his material stature.

In contrast, one whose material stature serves his spiritual stature sees truth as a value, and adheres to it. What is the relationship between truth and faith? A person’s adherence to truth is the faculty of faithfulness – the uncompromising pursuit of what is right and essential, rather than what is transient and ephemeral.

True faithfulness, according to the Maharal, derives from a moral-ethical world, not merely from naive simplicity or an inability to deceive. A truly faithful person is one who is aware of the alternative possibility of disloyalty, who knows that from a material perspective it would be more profitable (from a short-term, earthly view) to act craftily, who nevertheless chooses to conduct himself in a faithful manner based on an inner value system and out of adherence to the truth.

**The Meaning of Faith in God**

As noted, the Maharal's definition of faith as stemming from trust deepens the concept of faith in God. Faith in God is not the expression of a correct piece of information that God exists, but describes a relationship and a psychological bond of reliance upon and trust in Him. Throughout the ages, the Jewish people were more in need of faith than any other nation, for all their stable assets in the world had been lost. They lost their city and their temple and were exiled from their land and scattered in all directions. They had nothing left but Torah and prophecy – which are of no value without faith in them. On the surface, there was no solid and tangible information on which to base their continued existence, but the Jewish people placed their trust in God. Thus they remained steadfast in their existence and in their Torah across time.

The concept of faith for the Jewish people differs from the concept of faith in the world at large. In the world at large, faith involves questions such as whether or not the world has a Creator. Among the Jewish people, faith is trust. The question is not whether God is all-powerful, but what relationship we have with Him. Therefore, the Maharal goes on to say that faith is also connected to the concept of *deveikut*, cleaving and adhering to God. So long as faith is merely thought about whether or not some information is true, there can be faith without *deveikut.* There are people who profess to believe in the existence of God without any effect on their lives. But if we place our trust in God, it is not merely a recognition, but a relationship with God that leads to *deveikut.*

In this light, the opposite of faith is not denial (*kefira*). The opposite of trust is a lack of trust. In other spiritual streams, the recognition of a supreme power at work in the universe does not necessarily entail trust in it. This is most clearly expressed in the world of paganism. We see throughout Scripture that the central struggle of faith is not against denial – a concept almost non-existent in the Bible – but against idolatry. The heathen's service is based on his personal interests; man is at the center, but since he has needs such as rain and crops, he must, as it were, placate the gods. Placating the gods will bring them to realize his human interests. He has no faith in the idol, for he perceives that the idol is not genuinely interested in mankind. Just as the idolater acts from personal motives, so does the idol, in his perspective, act from its own egocentric motives; it will respond to the idolater only if he takes action to placate it and make it think he worships it and acts on its behalf. Indeed, in the pagan writings that have come down to us, the gods are depicted as struggling with one another, each defending itself and acting for its own personal good.

In contrast, the believing man places his trust in God's faithfulness and truly leans on Him. Thus we see in the first believer, Avraham Avinu. It is not by chance that Avraham was a man of faith and also a man of kindness. Where there is faith, there is kindness. If one maintains that the world is but a jungle of self-interest, with each creature concerned only about itself, practicing kindness for them is a form of suicide. In a world that is entirely a battle for survival, one who gives of himself to others becomes a sitting duck for the other self-interested creatures. Free giving can exist only in a world of faith.

In a pagan world, there is no faith, only a struggle between conflicting interests. In contrast, in a world of faith in one God, who is the source of all, where all come from one source and share a single destiny, there is no room for conflict between opposing parties, and in truth no one threatens the other. Thus, it follows that it is wrong to act out of personal interests; rather, we must all cleave to the one Source of all, to His *middot* and values.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)