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 #11: Moral instruction (6) – Peace**

In this *shiur*, we will deal with the concept of peace and its meaning. At its simplest definition, peace is a state in which people or nations get along with each other and do not fight against each other. According to this definition, the need for peace arises from the fact that there are many creatures in the world. Once there is more than one creature, they will all need to get along with each other and achieve peace. The existence of so many creatures creates a situation of mutual threat, especially if the creatures are different from each other and even antithetical to each other, or alternatively, if they are similar to one another and are therefore competing for the same niche in the world.

According to this definition, the simplest way to achieve peace is through a "cease-fire." If we can establish agreed-upon boundaries between the parties, we will have achieved peace between them. However, there can be a situation where the boundaries are agreed upon but one side attempts to violate the agreement. For example, it may have grown in strength since the time of the agreement and is now trying to use its strength to take resources from the other side. Hence, the border solution is temporary and fragile. It may be possible to safeguard the agreement by way of a higher authority, which will anchor the agreement and stabilize the peace; as our Sages said: "Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear thereof, one man would swallow up his fellow man" (*Avot* 3:2). The government is a supreme authority that has the power to enforce the boundaries that have been agreed upon and prevent a situation in which rivals might “swallow” each other up. But even when such an authority exists, there may still be underground ferment that threatens to disrupt the peace.

Another way to achieve peace is by creating a relationship of friendship between the parties. Such peace is no longer a technical solution based on agreement (plus fear of the government), but a solution with positive content. And yet, in a dynamic reality, where the needs and desires of each side may change, even friendship is liable to dissolve.

All of the above is according to the basic definition of peace, as a value in whose name people strive to maintain proper relations and to avoid breaching boundaries and finding themselves in a struggle for survival.

**God Encompasses Everything**

Let us now see how the Maharal defines peace:

It is stated in the first chapter of *Shabbat* (10b): "Rav Hamnuna said in the name of Ulla: A man must not extend a greeting of 'Peace' to his fellow in a bathhouse, because it is stated: 'And he called it, The Lord is peace' (*Shoftim* 6:24)." With this you see how great the virtue of peace is, for God's name is Peace. One is permitted to utter the word "truth" in a bathhouse, for while the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth, nevertheless Truth is not His *name*. But Peace is His name, and therefore it is forbidden to utter the word "peace" in a bathhouse. It certainly must be explained why the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, is Peace more so than Truth. This is because God makes peace between all beings. If He would not make peace between the opposites that are in the world, the world would not exist. For the beings have opposites among them, and He encompasses them all, and because God encompasses them all, there is peace between them. For He is the “ultimate form” (*tzura ha-acharona*)of the world, and with this, He completes all. This is the meaning of: "And he called it, The Lord is peace." That is to say, God is the ultimate form of the world, and with this, He encompasses everything, and connects and unites all. This is the essence of peace. And because peace is in the fact that God is the ultimate form, and this is not just a description like other descriptions, but rather this is the essence, and therefore His name is Peace. (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Shalom*, 1)

The Maharal cites the statement of *Chazal* that "Peace" is one of the names of God. Truth is His seal, but Peace is His name. This distinction has halakhic ramifications. The Gemara teaches that it is forbidden to utter the word "peace" in a bathhouse, whereas it is permitted to utter the word "truth" there. The Maharal explains that the world exists by virtue of God, because it is He who makes peace in existence. So far, his explanation of the concept of peace seems similar to the explanation offered above: peace is a solution to a state of mutual threat between different factors, and the solution is similar to the model of kingship; God is the King who prevents men from devouring one another. But on closer inspection of the Maharal's words, it becomes apparent that his intention is quite different and that he is revealing a deeper dimension of the concept of peace.

As we have seen, the government, without whose might “one man would swallow up his fellow man,” cannot be a complete solution to the need for peace. It too is a factor in reality, and though it may have the power to prevent private individuals from fighting, in certain circumstances it may itself fight against others. With God, however, the peace is real, and the Maharal explains why – because "He encompasses everything." God is the exalted source that includes all opposites. All of the factors in reality stem from one root, and become antithetical only in the terrestrial world; the closer they come to their point of origin, the more it becomes apparent that they are really complementary to each other and form a single picture.

The Maharal goes on to give an example from the realm of angels: "For Michael is in charge of water and Gavriel of fire, and if there were no peace, the one would be the negation of the other, but because of God, who encompasses everything, there is peace, for because of God, who completes all, they are one, and this is what is stated (*Iyov* 25:2): 'He makes peace in His high places.'" The knowledge that God is the source of all and encompasses everything is the guarantor of true peace. How so? This awareness leads to the realization that all sides can coexist, and must coexist, for that is how they were created. This is the root of the possibility of peace – from the one source of all forces.

The Maharal uses the term "ultimate form." The philosophical term *tzura*,"form," refers to the essence of a thing. I will try to explain what the Maharal means by "ultimate form" by means of a parable – about a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle whose pieces are all cut in uniform fashion. There are two ways to assemble such a puzzle. One possibility is to seek pieces that fit together without difficulty, so the protruding tabs of one piece are not in the way of those of the other piece. This option produces a state of boundaries, with each part in its place and not clashing with the other parts, but it does not necessarily produce a picture. If the goal is merely to prevent a mess and the scattering of the pieces, that is sufficient. The second possibility is to assemble the pieces according to the picture they compose. Originally there was one picture, and it was cut into a thousand pieces; the true purpose of the puzzle is not simply to find a place for each piece where it will not clash with other pieces, but to reveal the whole picture. The “ultimate form” of the puzzle is the exact picture of it when it is all put together in precise form. Similarly, the ultimate form of the world is its original essence, which can be revealed by peace between all the factors in the world.

We have here a good example of how in the Maharal's thought, *middot* are not merely good qualities or character traits, but are the product of a deep worldview, stemming from it and dependent upon it. The *midda* of peace is not merely a matter of moral behavior, but rather the outgrowth of a spiritual perception that reveals the implications of there being one Creator of the world. Since there is but one Creator of the world, the world itself in all its parts is also unified at its essence, and there is a real possibility of bringing about a state of peace in which each individual part finds its exact place, and all together form a harmonious whole.

Without faith in a single source, from which emanates a single world composed of many particulars, the world will be perceived as composed of innumerable conflicting forces, and peace will be unstable. A person may strive to live without quarreling with his friends and neighbors, in an atmosphere of easygoing affability, but this will remain on his own private level, while the fabric of reality remains at its essence fragmented and fissured. The essential quality of peace, as presented by the Maharal, derives from the perception that peace is inherent in reality by its very nature, for it is the detailed manifestation of the one source from which all emanates. Such peace has an anchor and a mooring.

**Kindness and Truth, Righteousness and Peace**

To conclude our discussion of the *middot* in the first part of *Netivot Olam*, let us examine the Maharal's explanation of the *midrash* regarding the dispute among the angels before the creation of man:

Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels divided into various factions and various groups. Some of them were saying: Let him not be created, and some of them were saying: Let him be created. That is what is written: "Kindness and truth met; righteousness and peace kissed" (*Tehillim* 85:11). Kindness said: Let him be created, as he performs acts of kindness. Truth said: Let him not be created, as he is fully lies. Righteousness said: Let him be created, as he performs acts of righteousness. Peace said: Let him not be created, as he is fully discord. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Truth and cast it down to earth. That is what is written: "You cast truth earthward" (*Daniel* 8:12). The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, why are You demeaning Your own seal? Let Truth ascend from the earth! That is what is written: "Truth will spring from the earth" (*Tehillim* 85:12). (*Bereishit Rabba* 8)

This *midrash* mentions four of the six paths of values in the first part of *Netivot Olam*: kindness and truth, righteousness and peace. (And we might say justice and truth are represented as well: in a certain sense, justice is included in truth, because it applies it to specific events between individuals, and faith is also connected to truth, because it is the ability to adhere to truth even when it is not revealed.) According to the *midrash*, the various values argued among themselves whether it was appropriate to create man: Kindness and righteousness supported man because he applies them, whereas truth and peace opposed him because he violates them. The Maharal uses this *midrash* to sketch the essential character of each of these traits, and to delineate their similarities and differences.

We saw in previous *shiurim* that there are broad *middot* and precise *middot*; there are *middot* that have no fixed limit, and *middot* that require exact application. Kindness and righteousness are broad: one can perform kindness and give charity, and if he decides once not to give, that does not constitute a violation of kindness and righteousness. On the other hand, any deviation from the truth is certainly falsehood, and one who is in a quarrel is obviously not following the path of peace. In the above-cited *midrash*, the values that allow for latitude are those that supported the creation of man, whereas the precise values (truth and peace) opposed it – because man by nature is liable to violate them, and they are impacted by *any* violation. The broad values suit humans, and the precise values are Divine.

The Maharal goes on to explain why two values are enumerated on each side, and distinguishes between kindness and truth, on the one hand, and righteousness and peace, on the other:

And when He came to create man, Kindness, which is of the upper world, which bestows bounty, said that it is fitting that man should be created, since he has an aspect of the upper world, namely, kindness, for you find kindness in the nature of man, that man does not stop with justice, but rather performs acts of kindness for others, as we have already explained that kindness is a quality of man. However, Truth said: Let him not be created, for it is a quality that is found in the upper world, where they are intellectual and knowledgeable and perceive the truth – they do not lie – and this aspect is not found in man, for man is full of lies and it is impossible that man will never prevaricate or lie, as Scripture states: "All people are false" (*Tehillim* 116:11). And therefore: From the standpoint that man is suited that there be in him [something] of the upper world, there are two aspects: On the one hand, it is necessary that he be created; that is, from the side of the kindness that is in man. On the other hand, creation is not appropriate for man; that is, from the side of truth, for he is entirely full of lies. And likewise, from the standpoint of the middle world: on the one hand, it is necessary that he be created, and on the other hand, it is necessary that he not be created. That is to say, from the side of charity, which is in the middle world, bestowing upon the lower world, and this is also found in man, just as kindness is found in him, But from the side of peace, which is the primary virtue of the middle world, just as truth is the level and virtue of the upper world, it is not appropriate that man be created, because peace is not in the lower world, because the lower beings oppose each other – and we have already explained this above; see there. Therefore, peace said that man should not be created, since he is full of quarrels. Thus, in man there is a side because of which he should be created and a side because of which he should not be created. Regarding this, it is fitting to say: "Let us make man in our image." The word *na'aseh*, "let us make," denotes consultation regarding a matter that has an aspect on each side, as was the case in the matter of the creation of man. (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Emet* 3)

The Maharal uses the structure of the worlds as described by philosophy – the upper world, the middle world, and the lower world – and translates them into the realm of the *middot*. The upper world only bestows; the middle world receives and bestows (receiving from the upper world and bestowing upon the lower world); and the lower world only receives. In the realm of the worlds, these concepts are lofty and abstract, but their translation into *middot* brings them closer to our comprehension. Truth and peace both belong to the Divine picture in its entirety, but truth is the absolute picture (= the upper world), while peace is the correct picture in relation to the various sides that exist in reality (= the middle world). Kindness and righteousness are similar, but as we saw in previous *shiurim*, kindness stems from a pure and lofty desire for absolute giving (= the upper world), whereas the giving of charity stems from the deficiency of the real world.

Kindness is pure beneficence, whereas the idea of charity is concern for the plight of the needy and the poor. Hence there is a mitzva of charity, but not of kindness. If one performs kindness only because he is commanded to do so, he loses the dimension of kindness, which must come from a free-will desire for absolute giving. Righteousness, on the other hand, stems from obligation. In *Netiv ha-Tzedaka*, the Maharal explains at length that part of a person's wealth is, as it were, not his own; rather, it is given to him by God to be passed on to the poor. A person's surplus resources are not his own. Therefore, giving charity is the performance of righteousness, the fulfillment of an obligation. Thus, kindness comes from the supreme free will, while righteousness derives from the necessities and deficiencies of reality.

In the Maharal's conception, all these *middot* stem from a spiritual perception. For example, kindness stems from the understanding that man has a desire to do good, and that its source is the Divine free will. A person who believes that there is such a source in the world is capable of discovering that source within himself. In contrast, a world with a polytheistic perception believes in many gods who are at odds with one another, and there is no room for kindness in such a world – for giving to another is a loss in the struggle for survival – and there is also no true peace – for the very foundation of the world is composed of conflicting elements, rather than a single source that provides a place for each thing. In conjunction with what we have seen in the preceding *shiurim*, we may say that all six of the *middot* we have seen – kindness, truth, justice, faith, righteousness, and peace – derive not only from moral traits, but from a fundamental worldview.

In the next *shiur*, we will move on to the qualities that open the second part of *Netivot Olam* and that relate more closely to the realm of Divine service – humility, love of God, and fear of God.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)