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 17: The Confrontation with Philosophy (1)**

This *shiur* will continue to explore *Tiferet Yisrael,* one of the most systematic and orderly of the Maharal's books, which we have so far discussed with respect to the topic of the Torah and its essence. The main subject of *Tiferet Yisrael* is the Torah, but it opens with a comprehensive discussion of the nature of the soul; we saw how the Maharal’s understanding of the soul is anchored in Torah verses ("And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life") and noted its source in the mystical tradition, according to which the soul is "a part of God from above."

After five chapters (1-5) about the *mitzvot* as an internal Jewish issue, the Maharal engages in a frontal assault on the philosophical approach, from chapter 6 until the end of chapter 16. In this *shiur*, we will explore the Maharal's confrontation with the philosophers regarding the *mitzvot*, and in the following *shiurim*, we will see other issues regarding which the Maharal presents an alternative to philosophy. Of course, the Maharal's approach is not only a response to philosophy; as noted at the beginning of this series, the Maharal strives to draw the Torah perspective from its sources in the words of *Chazal*, while adding his own formulations and conceptualizations.

The confrontation with philosophy is a fundamental issue in the study of the Maharal. One who enters the Maharal's *beit midrash* hears many philosophical terms: matter and form, potentiality and actuality, cause and effect, and many more. These are concepts that originated in Greek philosophy and were later adopted by the Arab philosophers, and from them, by medieval Jewish thinkers such as Rabbi Saadya Gaon, the Rambam, and their successors. The Maharal uses the language and concepts of philosophy to explain his teachings, and the encounter with these concepts gives the student the feeling that he is in a philosophical space. However, we often see the Maharal clashing with the philosophical perspective. On which side, then, does the Maharal stand? And if he indeed opposes the philosophers, why does he use their concepts?

As a preliminary response, I will say that the Maharal seeks depth, and philosophical language allows for this. There is philosophical language, and there is philosophical content; the Maharal adopts the language, but he vigorously disputes the content. In essence, the Maharal and the philosophers are similar in their questions and inquiries but different in their answers. Throughout our study, we have seen that the Maharal is always seeking depth and essence; this is also the object of the philosophers' search, but their results differ, mainly because the tools they employ are different. The philosophers conduct their search by way of the intellect, whereas the Maharal uses the Torah, even when he strives to clarify its contents with rational language.

The Maharal does not mention names in these disputes. His arguments are levelled to some extent against Greek philosophy, and to a lesser extent against the Jewish sages who adopted parts of it – depending on the degree of their adoption. I will also not distinguish in this *shiur* between Greek philosophy and those among the Jewish sages who adopted it, to some degree or another; rather, we will address the fundamental dispute.

**The Concept of *Mitzvot***

Regarding *mitzvot,* we will first note a point of agreement between the Maharal and the philosophers, and we will proceed from there to elucidate the dispute.

Some might understand the relationship between commandments and their reward as follows: Every commandment that a person fulfills is recorded somewhere up above ("in a ledger," to use the descriptive phrase of *Chazal*), and he is rewarded at the end of his life in proportion to the sum total of the commandments he has fulfilled. The Maharal and the philosophers agree in opposing this conception. They agree that performance of *mitzvot* is not merely the accumulation of merit points, but a process whose goal is to build up the stature of the individual, and that the reward is the fruit of this meaningful process, not just the result of the accumulation of points in some external ledger. A person is not given reward as payment for the deeds he performed, but as a result of whom he has become by virtue of those deeds.

Thus, the Maharal and the philosophers agree that *mitzvot* build and shape the individual in such a way that he draws closer to the Divine in his personality. At that point, however, a profound divergence develops between them.

Let us consider the Maharal’s position as it is presented in *Tiferet Yisrael*. We touched on the first chapters, in which the Maharal begins to present his approach without argument. Chapter 6 begins the confrontation, and chapter 9 summarizes the three chapters preceding it, so that many elements pertaining to the subject are found there. Let us examine the beginning of chapter 6:

There are some people, who are inquisitive of heart and walk in the ways of the philosophers, who inquire into all things based on their own understanding and intellect. The idea of the practical commandments is a great wonder to them, that a person should merit eternal success in the separate world by way of the performance of a commandment which is corporeal. They ask: How does a corporeal act help the soul acquire eternal life in the separate world, a place where there is no corporeal act? And more than this they are perplexed; for if the commandments were all good qualities in the human soul, like the commandment of charity (*Devarim* 15:8), and the commandment, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (*Vayikra* 19:17), and "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (*Vayikra* 19:16), and the like among the good qualities, which are good qualities in the soul of the doer – it would be possible to say that in any case, the person acquires good qualities through them, and distances himself from evil. And we would say that God gives good reward to one who has good in him, and pays evil to one who does evil. But the prohibition of *shatnez* (*Vayikra* 19:19), and the prohibition of mixing seeds (ibid.), and the mitzva of slaughtering from the throat rather than from the back of the neck, and in the Temple, the mitzva of slitting from the back rather than from the throat (*Chullin* 19b) – if slitting from the back is a bad thing, why is slaughtering from the throat forbidden in the Temple (ibid.)? And if slaughtering from the throat is good, then why in the Temple do we find the opposite? They have sought many ways to give a reason and a cause according to their perspective, which is far from the ways of the Torah and the ways of the Sages. And those who know the Torah, to them alone have the secrets of wisdom and truth been revealed. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chapter 6)

The argument against the philosophers in this chapter revolves around commandments which are fulfilled by way of material acts and objects. Those who "inquire into all things based on their own understanding and intellect" ask how these acts can lead to *deveikut* – spiritual adhesion or connection to God. The Maharal disagrees with the very perspective from which philosophers approach the issue:

Although it would be fitting not to answer their question at all. For that which they desire, to give a compelling reason for all things – if we were to see that they gave us a reason for all the very base natural things, it would be incumbent upon us to give thought to their question. And even though there is a difference as high as the heavens above the earth, for the natural things are in the earth and the Torah is not even in the heavens, but rather in the upper world – nevertheless, we would be obligated to consider the question.

But this is not the case. Because [even] for the natural things, such as animals, and even plants, they do not give us a cause or a reason. For how could it occur to a person that they would give a satisfactory reason for each animal – for the number of its tendons and organs, a reason for each one and its special form – and so too for plants. And pay no mind to the physicians and the natural philosophers, for if they give a reason, it is for one of a thousand. And even what they give is not the true reason, as is known to anyone who studies their writings. And if this is so regarding natural things, how much more so regarding Divine things, namely, the Divine commandments which man is obliged to perform, why he should perform this action and not that action. Just as we do not understand one’s body and form – which is his existence in this world – so we do not understand his perfection. And if he had not been created with this form, he would not have the physical vitality and perfection that sustains him. And all the more so regarding the Divine actions that bring man to eternal life, even if we do not know in what way or why in that way, this is no wonder. Behold, this would not be a question of scholars that we are obligated to answer, unless they were to give us reasons for all the natural phenomena in man and plants, and this is not the case. But the ways of those who know the Torah and its secrets are not hidden, and with that you will understand the ways of the Torah. (Ibid.)

The Maharal contends that this topic cannot be viewed through a human lens. The intellect cannot even fully analyze physical nature, and even less so can it understand Divine matters. The Maharal disputes here the very premise that human reason can pose a question to the Torah, and criticizes the presumptuousness of approaching the issue from a rational perspective.

Philosophers sense the power of the human mind, and it leads them to concentrate on it, to develop it, and to work with it. Indeed, the mind has truly useful and important power, but it entices the philosophers to see it as the sole criterion. When a person sees reason as the standard, he perforce sees himself as the sole measurer, for it is he who examines matters with his mind. This human presumption, to judge all reality by one’s own standards and to draw absolute conclusions, is akin to the serpent's enticement: "And you will be as God, knowing good and evil" (*Bereishit* 3:5).

(It should be noted that mankind has come a very long way, to the point that in recent centuries, philosophy itself has reached the conclusion that human reason cannot prove anything with certainty. But the temptation to place man and his intellect at the center as an absolute standard still exists, from the time of Adam's sin until our own day.)

**The *Mitzvot* – Do they have reasons or are they royal decrees?**

After making this fundamental observation, the Maharal proceeds to discuss the question of reasons for the commandments, in light of the words of *Chazal* concerning the mitzva of sending away a mother bird before taking her eggs. He challenges both the Rambam and the Ramban, who explained the words of *Chazal* in different ways, and brings his own approach:

We learned in a *mishna* in chapter *Ein omdim*: "If one says [in prayer] 'Your mercies extend to a bird's nest,' ‘Let Your name be mentioned for good,' or '*Modim modim* (we give thanks, we give thanks),' he is silenced" (Mishna *Berakhot* 5:3).

And the Gemara says: "We understand that one is silenced if he says: '*Modim modim*,' because he seems to be acknowledging two powers; and 'Let Your name be mentioned for good,' because this implies [only] for the good and not for the bad, while we have learned in the *mishna*: 'A person must bless God for the evil as he blesses Him for the good' [Mishna *Berakhot* 9:5]. But what is the reason for [silencing him if he says]: 'Your mercies extend to the bird's nest'? Two *Amoraim* in the West, Rabbi Yose bar Avin and Rabbi Yose bar Zevida, disagree about this: one says it is because he brings jealousy among [God's] creatures; and one says it is because he renders God's measures as [a matter of] compassion, and they are [in fact] nothing but decrees" (*Berakhot* 33b).

What this means is that one should not say: "Your mercies extend to the bird's nest," which implies that God commanded this mitzva because He has mercy on the bird's nest, and with this, he introduces division and separation between God's creatures, so that the world is not one. For why should He have mercy on the nest of a bird, and not have mercy on other species? For certainly, if [the *mitzvot*] are decrees that God decreed in His wisdom, there is no difficulty, for that is the nature of a decree, that He decreed about this and not about that. Just as the species are distinct among themselves, that this is this species, and that is that species, so too we can say that regarding this species, the practice is such, and regarding another species, the practice is something else. But as for the quality of mercy, all of His creatures are worthy of the same mercy, and if so, why does He show mercy to this one in particular? And this leads to division and separation between the species, that God has something for this species but not for other species.

And according to the one who says: "Because he renders God's measures as [a matter of] compassion, and they are [in fact] nothing but decrees" – this means that it is not fitting that the attributes of God, through which He continuously governs the world, should be mercy, but rather they should be justice and decree. For a decree is according to His wisdom, and this is appropriate for a king who rules over all, to govern with truth and uprightness. But mercy is not an attribute of truth, for He is merciful even to the unworthy. And though He certainly performs acts of mercy for His creatures, nevertheless, the attribute which should be constant is that of justice, by which He governs His world. And therefore you find throughout the works of creation (*Bereishit* 1) the name "E-lohim," for He created the world with justice, and governs it with justice. It is only [because] He saw that the world could not endure with [pure] justice that He combined the attribute of mercy with justice (Rashi, *Bereishit* 1:1). Nevertheless, the consistent governance is by justice, for it is honorable, and this is fitting. And one who says: "Your mercies extend to the bird's nest" renders God's attributes – by which He governs His world – as compassion, that He governs His world constantly with mercy. This would be a departure from what is honorable, which is not fitting. (Ibid.)

The Maharal relies on *Chazal*’s portrayal of the *mitzvot* as "decrees." At first glance, this implies the *mitzvot* are arbitrary Divine dictates that have no reason. According to this understanding, it is best to understand the *mitzvot* simply as Divine decrees because once a rational reason is offered, that reason*,* and not the Divine will, would seem to be the cause of the mitzva. This approach stands in contrast to the Rambam's position that the *mitzvot* do have reasons, and to the many chapters in his *Guide for the Perplexed* in which he presents a full array of reasons for the *mitzvot*.

However, in chapter 7, the Maharal once again disagrees with the Rambam – from the opposite direction. He cites a *midrash* regarding another of the *mitzvot* referenced above: "What does it matter to the Holy One, blessed be He, if one slaughters an animal from the throat or slaughters it from the back of the neck? Thus [we see] that the *mitzvot* were given only to refine people through them" (*Bereishit Rabba* 44, 1). The Rambam, who advocates offering reasons for the *mitzvot*, addresses this apparently conflicting statement in his *Guide* (III, 26); he explains that the *mitzvot* themselves have reasons, but the specific details (such as whether to slaughter from the throat or from the back of the neck, or how many animals to bring for a particular sacrifice) have no reason, and were decided because *some* place must be established for slaughter, and *some* specific number of animals must be established for each sacrifice.

The Maharal disagrees with the Rambam and maintains that even the minutiae of the *mitzvot* have reasons – but then, are the *mitzvot* arbitrary in his view, or do they have rational reasons? Let us carefully examine the Maharal's earlier words: "For a decree is according to His wisdom, and this is appropriate for a king who rules over all, to govern truly and justly." This sentence seems to contain contradictory terms – are we dealing with decrees, i.e., with arbitrary fiats, or with wisdom that is true and just?

To be precise, the Maharal does not say that there is no wisdom behind the *mitzvot* at all, but that they emanate from the wisdom of God. He adds that the *mitzvot* are according to "Divine intellect." They are of a world altogether different from our earthly realm and our limited intellect, and their purpose is not a matter of addressing our needs or solving our problems in this world. The *mitzvot* are not for us, but we are called upon to rise up to them, and to live by Divine norms. This is what it means that they are royal decrees; there is logic in them, but logic that belongs to a dimension that is higher than the limited, human, rational dimension.

Until the Maharal, it seemed that there were two possible approaches to the reasons for the *mitzvot.* According to one, the *mitzvot* are intended purely as decrees, and we are to observe them as slaves. According to the other, the *mitzvot* are rational, and we are to observe them because of the rational or moral reasons that stand behind them. One could also distinguish between the commandments, as Rabbi Saadya Gaon distinguished between the "rational" commandments and the "received" commandments: rational commandments are observed because of their content, and received commandments are observed out of obedience to the King. The Maharal offers a third approach: he rejects seeing the commandments as arbitrary, but he also rejects seeing them as derived from human logic. Instead, the *mitzvot* belong to another world. They emanate from an entirely different wisdom – Divine wisdom – and are intended to actualize the Divine aspect of man. A mitzva is a decree not because it is an arbitrary fiat, but because it is dictated to us from a dimension transcending our ordinary life, and has the force of Divine wisdom rather than human reason.

**To Restore the Soul to a State of *Deveikut***

What is the relationship between this assertion and the preceding chapters of *Tiferet Yisrael*, which we discussed in the previous *shiurim*? We have seen that *Tiferet Yisrael* opens with an understanding of the soul and its essence and an understanding of the *mitzvot* as actions that are appropriate for the soul. The *mitzvot* do not express absolute good, but rather the good that is right for the human soul. That is why there is a difference between Israel and the gentiles, for the same *mitzvot* are not suited for all souls. If the *mitzvot* were derived from an absolute value, there would be no reason why a gentile should be exempt from them, and it would be inconceivable that he should be liable to death for observing Shabbat. The Maharal explains that the gentile soul has a character and needs that are different from those of the Jewish soul; observance of Shabbat is not suited to the former's needs and is even antithetical to them. He compares the difference between Jew and non-Jew to the difference between the seeds of two different trees; each tree must realize the potential inherent in its own seed. Thus, the commandments cultivate what is latent in the soul of the Jew, and actualize that potential. The obligation in *mitzvot* is not absolutely objective, but is intimately bound up with the soul of the person.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Are the *mitzvot* suited for the soul, as the Maharal argues at the beginning of the book, or are they dictated to us from the Divine dimension that transcends us? We will complete the picture to answer this question.

The Maharal explains that the ultimate purpose of the *mitzvot* is *deveikut*, adhesion to God. Such a connection is possible because of the Divine source of the soul; the various *mitzvot* free the soul from its mundane and human dimension and allow it to realize its Divine nature. The philosophers, on the other hand, do not believe in the Divine origin of the soul, and therefore hold that man cannot achieve *deveikut* through deeds. They hold that only the intellect can adhere to the spiritual, and therefore only it can associate man with eternity. The Maharal challenges them: If the intellect is what cleaves to God, what remains after death – the person, or only his intellect? Perhaps only the truths remain, because truth is eternal, and nothing of the person remains? The philosophers tried to grapple with this question in various ways, but the Maharal presents a wholly different approach: the human soul is inherently Divine, and therefore it has the capacity to cleave to God. It only needs to be freed from the constraints of matter and allowed to reach Him, and this is accomplished by actions that emanate from the Divine dimension rather than the earthly dimension – i.e., the *mitzvot.*

According to the Jewish thinkers who take the philosophers’ approach, the practical commandments (or at least some of them) do not actually bring about adhesion to God, but only build a foundation upon which true intellectual *deveikut* can be built. According to the Rambam, as we have seen in previous *shiurim*, man must attain knowledge of God through his intellect, but the distractions of society impede that process; therefore, there are *mitzvot* that regulate society. In contrast, according to the Maharal, the earthly commandments are capable of bringing man to actual *deveikut*, for they are not meant to create a spiritual reality out of nothing, but to restore the soul to its original state.

In other words, the Torah is truly dictated to us from a Divine plane, but since the soul also comes from a Divine source, this dictation is tailored to its innate nature.

It should further be noted that the dispute regarding the soul also pertains to the body. According to the philosophers, who hold that the soul is not Divine, the body is even farther removed from spirituality. The Maharal, on the other hand, maintains that even the body must have a Divine element, for the Torah states that man was created in the image of God.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, by means of acts performed by the body, the Divine soul can return to being what it truly is, and draw near again to the God from whom it emanated.

This is the gist of the Maharal's position vis-a-vis the philosophers on the subject of the *mitzvot*, as expressed in *Tiferet Yisrael*. In the next *shiur*, we will see the confrontation between the two on other issues and in other books.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. The roots of this explanation are found already in the *Kuzari*, which explains the difference between the 613 *mitzvot* and the seven Noachide commandments through the concept of *segula*, "specialness." A non-Jew is not obligated in the 613 *mitzvot* because they are suited for the Divine specialness, which is not found among the nations of the world. It is only Israel who are obligated in the *mitzvot*, in accordance with their inner character. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Tiferet Yisrael*, chapter 4. The issue of the image of God is a very profound issue in the writings of the Maharal, which we may address in a future *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)