YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Thought of the Maharal of Prague**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur 22: The Concept of Order**

**The Order of the Maharal's Books**

Continuing our examination of the thought and teachings of the Maharal, we will now consider a concept that recurs more than a thousand times in his writings – the idea of "order." The frequency with which this concept is mentioned by the Maharal indicates that it is a central element in his thought. We will examine two important places where the Maharal deals with this concept, and through them, try to understand what the concept of order means and why it is so central.

The first place we will examine is the introduction to *Gevurot Hashem*, which is an important source since this introduction lays out the general plan for the Maharal’s works. *Gevurot Hashem* was preceded by *Gur Aryeh*, the Maharal’s commentary on Rashi's Torah commentary, which was not such a novelty in the world of Torah as there were already commentaries on Rashi (such as the commentary of Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi) – though of course, when one studies the work, one can appreciate the uniqueness of the Maharal's commentary. *Gevurot Hashem*, on the other hand, opens a series of books that are unique to the Maharal. The book has three introductions, and at the end of the third introduction, the Maharal lays out his plan for the rest of the books:

"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the might, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:11)…

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*). (*Gevurot Hashem –* third introduction)

The Maharal enumerates six books here and attaches them to 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 heaven and in earth is Yours." All six books deal with sanctified days, and he uses the term "order" in their regard: the Book of Greatness on the *order* of Shabbat, the Book of Might on the *order* of Pesach, the Book of the Glory of Israel on the *order* of the giving of the Torah, the Book of Victory on the *order* of Tisha be-Av, the Book of Majesty on the *order* of Sukkot, and the Book of Heaven and Earth on the *order* of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Of the six books that were planned, three of them have come down to us – *Gevurot Hashem, Netzach Yisrael*, and *Tiferet Yisrael* – and it appears the Maharal never completed the others.[[1]](#footnote-1) What is the significance of the Maharal's presentation of six books as a single program? One might have suggested that he wanted to write a series of books on the festivals, and homiletically wove all the titles of the books into one verse. However, attention should be paid to several points that require us to delve deeper into this series.

One point is the recurring concept of "order" in the list. Each book in the planned series is called *seder*, "order." This is understandable in the context of Pesach – we are of course familiar with the night of the *seder* – but it is not clear why that term should be used for a book on Shavuot or Tisha be-Av.

Second, the number of orders is six, which brings to mind the six orders of the Mishna. The planned series seems to have been a *Shas* (= *shisha sedarim*,six orders) of faith, as the topics mentioned here in connection with the holidays are faith-related issues – the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah, exile and redemption, and so on. The connection to the holidays, according to this understanding, is secondary; for his own reasons, the Maharal chose to link his books of faith to the seasons of the year.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the Maharal defines the work as a whole as one that "includes the order of what exists." This is the theme of the entire six-volume treatise. What does the phrase "the order of what exists" mean? Up to this point, we could have debated whether the subject of the series is the holidays (and it deals with matters of faith merely incidentally), or whether the subject of the series is faith (and it happens to follow the order of the holidays). But now we can see that the subject is "the order of what exists." Has there ever been a book on such a subject?

To understand the Maharal’s intent, let us consider his remarks on the earlier series of six books, mentioned above – the six orders of the Mishna:

*Chazal* divided all of existence in the six orders of the Mishna, and while it may seem to a person that they are very light matters, this is not so. And [this division was done] because reality in general is divided into these parts: the first part is the reality of the corporeals; the second, of the corporeals and the non-corporeals together, as if they were compounded; the third, the reality of the non-corporeals…. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 10)

We also find the expression here: "They divided all of existence." The Maharal explains the organization of the Mishna into six orders as a substantive division, not simply a convenient system. *Chazal* divided the Mishna into these orders not because it was difficult to fit all the laws into one book, but with the intention of dividing reality into its essential parts. There is an inner order to existence that must be identified.

What is the significance of the desire to divide reality into orders, which themselves constitute an overarching order? In fact, this division arises from the perception of reality as a single entity. As an example, a human being can be defined as an aggregate of organs, and then the question arises as to how those organs should be classified – according to their shape, according to their external structure, and so on. But it is clear that man is a single organic system, and therefore each organ is located within him in accordance with its function: there are parts designed to convey the brain's commands to the various parts of the body, so that it will function; there are blood vessels designed to circulate blood in him; and so on. This is how the Maharal perceives all of reality; it is a single system with an all-encompassing internal logic, and each detail of the system is subsequently arranged in accordance with that logic.

The Maharal understands the entire corpus of laws that are arranged in the orders of the Mishna as deriving from a single order that underlies all of existence, and it seems that he seeks to uncover a similar order in the world of faith. Why does he hang the various elements on the verse: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness"? This verse unfolds a series of different revelations of God, which together comprise His total manifestation in reality, and the Maharal identifies six aspects in it. The six aspects correspond to the six sides of any material body; as the Maharal explains elsewhere, matter is composed of six sides and a center. Similarly, the holidays together build a full complex of God's manifestation within the sanctification of time; the calendar is not merely a disconnected assemblage of sacred times, each standing on its own, but a meaningful framework. The Maharal identifies a six-part complex in this order of holidays – including Tisha be-Av, which is destined to become a holiday. The verse teaches that there is a fundamental division in the realms of reality, and the Maharal adds that each part of the general order is also endowed with an internal order of its own; therefore, each book is called an "order." With regard to the festival of Sukkot, for example, we know that there are various components – the *sukka*, the four species, the *Simchat Beit ha-Sho'eiva*, and more – and it stands to reason that these components are all part of a single order that is designed to build a complete spiritual foundation.

The order of the books, and the corresponding order of the holidays, is thus not a random sorting based on technical considerations; rather, it expresses a true arrangement, based on identifying the proper place of each part within the overall framework and of each area of faith within a general faith-based understanding of the world.

**The Torah – The Order of the World**

The concept of order also receives significant attention in the first chapter of *Netiv ha-Torah*:

"And He taught me: Let My words support your heart; keep My commandments and live" (*Mishlei* 4:4). King Shlomo, peace be upon him, wanted to caution man about the Torah, and said that when God gave the Torah to man, He said to him: “Let My words support your heart"; that is, the Torah, which is the word of God, will support your heart.

For the heart of man is where life is found, and the Torah will strengthen your heart and give you life, and you will “keep My commandments and live.” For the words of the Torah support and confirm the whole world; how then would they not support and confirm a person himself, who is engaged in Torah and it is with him? And that the Torah upholds the whole world – this is learned from the words of the Sages who said (*Shabbat* 88a) that for this reason the letter *heh* was added to the sixth day (*ha-shishi*, *Bereishit* 1:31), to say that all the works of creation were hanging in the balance until the sixth of Sivan: if Israel would accept the Torah, all would be well; but if not, the world would turn back into emptiness and formlessness. Thus, the words of the Torah strengthen and support everything, such that the world has existence – and all this because the Torah is the order of man, [determining] which action he should practice, and how he should be engaged in it, and how he should be arranged (*mesudar*)in his actions. This is the essence of the Torah. (*Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Torah*, chap. 1)

The plain meaning of the verse, "Keep My commandments and live," is that as long as a person follows the Torah and the commandments, God will decree a good life for him. This statement encourages observance of commandments in accordance with the simple conception of reward and punishment. But the Maharal reminds us that *Mishlei* is a book of wisdom and should be seen as teaching fundamental principles, not merely as a source of moral admonitions. According to him, Torah truly sustains and vivifies man. It is the very existence of man and of the entire world; without it, the world would have no stability.

Here we see the concept of order as a definition of Torah: "The Torah is the order of man." On the simple level, this means the Torah tells man what to do. This understanding does not necessarily relate the Torah to man’s soul and personality, nor see it as deriving from an overarching idea; it would be possible to view it as an external system of precepts. But according to the Maharal, the *mitzvot* accord both with the format of man, and with the format of the world:

Just as the Torah is the order of man, so the Torah is the order of the world, to the extent that the Torah is the order of everything – only that the order of man is revealed and explained in the Torah, for it would be impossible otherwise; it is incumbent upon man to maintain the proper order for himself, and therefore this is revealed explicitly to man. But the order of the entire world is also in the Torah, for the Torah is nothing but the order of the existence of the world in general.

And that which is stated in the *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 1), that God looked into the Torah and created the world, means that the Torah itself is the order of everything, and therefore, when God wanted to create the world and to arrange it, He looked into the Torah, which is the order of everything, and created the world. And since the Torah is the order of the whole world, everything that is ordered, it is one thing connected. (Ibid.)

In what sense is the Torah "the order of man," and furthermore, in what way is it "the order of the world"?

The Maharal cites the *midrash* that says God looked into the Torah and created the world. One might have thought that God created the world, including man among His creations, and later gave him the Torah so he would know how to get along in the world. The *midrash* teaches that the truth is just the opposite: the Torah preceded the world, and the entire world was built in accordance with it.

Here we find the Maharal’s definition of the concept of order: "Every thing that is ordered, it is one thing connected." The concept of order pertains to a situation in which there is a multiplicity of things and a general principle organizes it all so the state of multiplicity does not result in chaos. This general principle is order. For example: Imagine a messy warehouse containing many chairs, tables, posters, and a blackboard lying about in no particular order. In contrast, when all these objects are arranged so that each table has two chairs, the board is hung on the wall facing the tables, and a table is set beneath the board facing the other tables, we instantly understand that there is a whole here – a classroom. The single idea of fashioning a classroom determines the place of each and every component and turns all the objects into "one thing connected," a unified aggregate. If we refine the concept of order, we can say that order is what brings unity out of the multiplicity of things; order is "the one in the many."

If we began our inquiry into the concept of order by conceiving of it as a comprehensive, internally coherent sorting system, it now becomes apparent that it also creates and reflects connection. Once every part has its place, it becomes clear that all the parts constitute one great project – just as each holiday, as we saw in the introduction to *Gevurot Hahem*, reveals a facet of a single whole. The order among components also allows a person to identify the commonalities between them, and see that they are indeed related to and in dialogue with each other.

It is not simple to find the one order in reality. On the face of it, the world appears as a collection of myriad creatures, as details that do not relate to one another. One might choose to classify them according to various categories – by continents, by climates, by animal and plant species, and so on – but all these are *our* classifications. The world itself is a random aggregate of particulars. Yet in truth, the world has a single source; it was created by one God, for one all-encompassing purpose, and it is the Torah that reveals to us the one order of creation, the comprehensive purpose whereby and for which the entire world, with all its manifold parts, was created. The Torah reveals that there is one God who created the world – it tells us already in the first verse that there is one source for heaven and earth – and that hidden in its overall plan is the meaning of each component of the whole and the part it plays in the overall purpose behind creation. Only through deep study of the Torah can the order of the world be identified. In the future, it will be manifestly clear in the visible reality as well – when God will be One and His name One.

Let us return from "the order of the world" to "the order of man." A person might conceive of himself as a haphazard collection of inclinations, emotions, thoughts, and more, but the Torah teaches he has a single spine. All of a person’s components are part of one trend; all of them have one purpose. Through Torah, man can connect all his powers, feelings, and thoughts to the purpose for which he was created, and reveal the inner unity within himself.

And he said: "Keep My commandments and live" corresponding to the action of *mitzvot*; when a person keeps them, there is life in them. And he said: "And He taught me (*vayoreini*)" – using the term *hora'a* (teaching, or instruction), from which is also derived the word "Torah." The Torah is not called *chokhma*, "wisdom," a term used in reference to other fields of study, because there is a difference, for the Torah teaches man the path by which he can reach his ultimate purpose, what will enable him to arrive at the world to come. And this is no wisdom, for it is by way of the Torah that a person reaches the world to come, and therefore it is fitting for the Torah to be called a "teaching," for it teaches a person his ultimate purpose, which the person should strive to reach. And He said "your heart" – "and He taught me: let My words support your heart" – God taught a person his ultimate purpose, how to bring a person to the world to come. When “My words support your heart,” then the person will cling to the Torah, which will lead him to his purpose, which is the world to come. For just as the Torah is the order of this world, so the Torah is the order of the world to come, for everything was created with the Torah – both this world and the world to come. And for this reason, God said: “Let My words support your heart,” [because] with this, man clings to the world to come, to reach his ultimate purpose. This is clear. (Ibid.)

The Maharal adds here that the Torah is also the order of the world to come; this is the full destiny to which the order of man leads, and it has its own order as well. The Torah outlines the progression of a person, of this world, and of the world to come, and thus it reveals the full unity of the world. From a comprehensive perspective, creation includes both this world and the world to come, to which this world leads. The orders of the world to come are also embedded in the Torah; it directs our path in accordance with the full ideal that encompasses the destiny of life in the world to come, not only a proper life in this world.

The Maharal sums up the concept of the order of the world in *Tiferet Yisr*ael (chap. 43): "For the Torah is the order of the world, and every order connects one thing to another until everything is made one." This concept of order goes back to the ideas we saw in the previous *shiur* regarding the principle of unity. We saw there that, contrary to the philosophical view that multiplicity *cannot* come from a single source, the Maharal teaches that it is *precisely* through multiplicity that the unity of God is revealed. Now it becomes apparent that the main way unity becomes manifest in a world of multiplicity is through the concept of order, which is the unity in multiplicity, the overarching idea that decodes how all the many parts are connected to each other. The spiritual order reveals a great deal: the unity of God, through the foundations of faith throughout the yearly cycle; the laws, through the orders of the Mishna; and human capabilities and the parts of all of reality, through the Torah’s guidance.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. There is some evidence of the existence of a book on Shabbat, but it is difficult to accept it. The Maharal cross-references his various books and there is no reference that would indicate the other books laid out here were written; thus, it would seem that they were not. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that many of the explanations of the *aggadot* in tractate *Shabbat*, which deal with matters pertaining to Shabbat, were intended to be part of the book on Shabbat. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)