

INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There are a number of basic things we'd have to clear up about the stuff and substance of the Torah's world-view if we're ever to understand what's expected of us. And it's all here in Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's Ma'amar Hikkurim ("Fundamentals of the Jewish Faith"). It's one of those rare Hebrew works that many Torah scholars term "brief but substantive" since it manages to cover a world (and beyond) of ideas in short order and to avoid the extraneous.

Like Ramchal's "The Way of G-d" which discusses some of the same themes, this work also follows in a logical sequence, beginning with the belief in G-d. So let's try to follow the flow of ideas presented in Ma'amar Hikkurim.

What do we know about G-d after all? Is He in fact the huge, long-bearded "Ancient of Days ... whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool" who sits Up Above on a throne as depicted in the prophetic vision (Daniel 7: 9) which so many take literally? Does He speak, see, hear, think out loud, react, and act as He's often depicted in the Torah as doing? If we say that all of those are merely poetic portrayals of the Creator, then is He even knowable as He is? Or is He merely the sort of nebulous Force for Goodness or Higher Power somewhere out there that many submit He is?

But even if we come to understand the Torah perspective on G-d we'd still need to explore the spiritual forces there are in the Great Beyond and even in our midst that carry out His intentions. What are they made of and how do they function? Do we have anything in common with those forces?

We're said to have been created to carry out G-d's intentions ourselves and to do even more. What does that mean and what in fact is expected of us? And to what end? What are we capable of in the big picture after all? Can we get close to G-d or even draw away from Him (G-d forbid), and how so?

Are we humans free to do as we see fit in general, or are we bound by certain limitations? Must we answer for what we do, given those limitations? Is that to be done here in our lifetimes, or in an Afterlife? What's the Afterlife like? Is it one blanket experience for all, or is each person's afterlife unique?

If we're assumedly responsible for our actions, how then does G-d interact with us on a day-to-day basis? What role does He play in the actions and interactions of other species and entities? And is He aware of everything going on between each being, and perhaps even within it?

If we're indeed responsible and G-d does in fact interact with us, then how are we to know what He requires of us? Does he elect people to communicate His wishes to us, and if so, what sorts of people are they? What sets them apart from each other? What distinguishes the greatest of them from the others, and what are the limitations of his abilities?

What sets our people apart from others? Is it a racial distinction, a spiritual one, a physical one or what? What are we meant to do if we're set apart? How can we ever accomplish it and exactly what does it entail? Is there a time limit? Will someone lead us in it? And how will we know when we'd accomplished it? Will others go through the experience with us? What will we have achieved in the end?

We're told that a lot of miracles will occur in the process, but what's a miracle? Is it something like a "glitch" in the ordinary way of the world or more substantive? And why would G-d resort to miracles after all? Are there mystical implications to all this, and what are they?

We're taught that what we accomplish in our everyday, non-miraculous lives is vitally important. What system does the Torah provide us with to fill our lives with intentionality? And how does that connect us to G-d and His system of interacting with us, with the Jewish tradition at large, and most especially, with our role in the world as Jews?

There's clearly a lot to explore, and we'll touch upon each in sequence.

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