

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 3: CHAPTER 13

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Section 3, Chapter 13

1.

Let's touch now on the personal effects of wrongdoing, which is to say, on what happens to us when we do harm. Ramchal concentrates on two different things: the fact that we're personally cheapened and demeaned by the wrong things we do [1], and that we suffer as a result of them [2]. We'll concentrate on the former for a while then turn to the latter afterwards.

Understand that every individual person, place, or thing has a unique standing in relation to everything else; no two things are equal. In fact, even the angels are unequal, with some higher and loftier than others or lesser than they, even though angels are inherently exalted and lofty [3]. But while they differ from each other in nuance and essence, we differ from each other in often coarser, blunter ways since, unlike them, we're of this world.

2.

That having been said, it's still necessary to understand that we're capable of being especially lower than they when we're not the individuals we're capable of being by going off the mark. That is, while angels can never grow, as they're not free to make lofty decisions, and they're only lesser or higher than other angels by design and designation [4], we can grow.

The overarching implication, though, is that each one of us is lowered by our wrongdoings.

In point of fact, our lowering ourselves wouldn't be all that tragic if we were simple creatures from the first who'd somehow gone off, much as it's not such a tragedy if someone more humble to begin with stays there if he's nonetheless fulfilling his life's purpose [5]. "The real shame and disgrace," Ramchal asserts, "comes about when someone who's perfectly capable and worthy of being exalted becomes lowly" instead.

There are two points being made here, though: first, that we all need to be aware of just how much we matter; and second, that some individuals (people, angels, etc.) matter more than others.

3.

As Ramchal words it in his own inimitable way, there is a basic tenet of Jewish Thought to the effect

that "each and every single move a person makes ... stirs many great and mighty things in the heavens and on earth" as a consequence [6]. And that includes "material and spiritual things, as well as G-d's Transcendental Forces, and His bestowance upon them" [7]. That's to say that everything we do -- holy and profane, silly and profound, right and wrong -- matters, has consequence, changes the course of the world and history ... and more.

But not everything that every single person does has the same outcome, of course. "The effects of the actions of two different people sitting at the very same table talking, eating, and drinking," Ramchal declares, could be radically different. "The actions of one might affect the highest heights" while those of the other "might not ascend whatsoever and wouldn't even be close to the first" in effect [8].

Not only does the quality of the person doing something have effect, but the quality and character of the act itself matters too, as well as the intentions of the person doing the actions [9]. After all, the actions of a well-intended but less than lofty person is nowhere as consequential as those of the lofty, whose deeds are superseded by the deeds of the especially pious and holy, and all the more so by the deeds of someone of the caliber of Moses.

[1] One's very self is besmirched by whatever wrong he did, and he's no longer the person he'd once been ethically, psychologically, spiritually, or inwardly.

See Klallim Rishonim 13-14 for the kabbalistic themes relevant to this chapter and the next few, and R' Shriki's note 86. R' Goldblatt's note 8 here as well as his note 55 on p. 483 of his edition only address Kabbalistic issues relevant to this particular chapter, while he'll have more to address in later notes, as we'll indicate.

[2] He not only becomes ethically, psychologically, spiritually, or inwardly lessened as we'd indicated, which is an existential experience, he also suffers actual disgrace as a result of palpable physical, financial, or social harm as a consequence.

[3] That is while all angels are towering beings, there are still and all shades of difference between them much the way there are shades of difference between geniuses though each is brilliant.

[4] Each angel has his mission and is so equipped; looking askance at any one of them for happening to be more lowly than another one is like thinking less of one flower for being less effulgent than another.

[5] There are two fundamental phenomena at play in our lives: our personal growth and our living out our life's purpose. Ramchal's ironic point here is that one might very well not grow spiritually his whole life, which would seem to deem him "unsuccessful", and yet manage to achieve his life's goal (which only G-d could determine) and paradoxically be "successful" in the end.

[6] The popular depiction of Newton's Third Law of Motion reads, "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction". Ramchal isn't saying that either an "equal" or an "opposite" reaction comes about by every action we take here, but the push-pull, action-reaction principle certainly holds true in Ramchal's statement (though Newton is referring to two physical entities acting upon each other while Ramchal is referring to physical and metaphysical entities interacting).

[7] See 1:14:3 (and note 7 there) for reference to this.

[8] Ramchal cites the example of Rabbi Yonatan Ben Uzziel, whose Torah-study was so powerful that birds flying overhead at the time would burn to a crisp (Sukkah 28a).

[9] He cites the example of Kodshim versus Chullin (i.e., animals specifically slaughtered for sacrifices and then eaten versus those slaughtered for mere consumption). While eating Kodshim is a mitzvah, eating Chullin isn't one per se, even though both are consumed the same way. And he also cites the principle that "one who's charged with doing a mitzvah who does it is greater than one who's not charged with doing it who does it nonetheless" (Avodah Zara 3a) which indicates that the individual who'd been charged to do the mitzvah and does accomplishes all sorts of important things in the cosmos as a consequence, whereas the other one doesn't (though he's certainly rewarded for his deed); yet they're both doing the same thing. The point again is that deeds depend on context and the person doing them.

See the stories of Choni HaMaagal in Ta'anit 23a for examples of the preparations and effects of pious individuals.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.