

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 3: CHAPTER 9

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1.

"Man's being is rooted in deep and infinite wisdom", we're told here. Yet we're each capable of terrible wrongs, of acts of horrendous injustice, and of unnatural wickedness. So, what has gone wrong, so to speak? How could G-d have allowed for that in His greatest creation? We'll begin to explore all that now.

Allow us though to directly quote Ramchal's rhapsodic account of humankind's place in the universe here [1].

"G-d created many and great entities ... each with its own task, and there is nothing (in the universe) without purpose. And yet it all stands upon this underlying reality which is G-d's charge to mankind - that he correct all the flaws in the universe and elevate himself by degrees until he (ultimately) attaches himself onto G-d's holy presence" [2].

That's to say that everything in the cosmos matters greatly, primarily because it was created by G-d when it could very well not have been, but also because it has a distinct role to play in the great design. It's also true to say that everything still and all stands and falls on whether we humans achieve our grand charge of repairing everything broken and off-kilter here (ourselves included) and we come to cling onto G-d.

(I ask you now: is there a soul out there who can help but be stirred by so lofty a goal, so sacred a charge?)

2.

And yet while some of us -- a few in each generation -- draw close to that end in their lives, most of us fail ... either miserably by being cruel, selfish and deceptive, or mundanely by being base here and there or unjust.

It's our place in that ethical continuum that sets us apart from each other, as well as what draws us apart from or close to G-d. In any event, everything and everyone "stands to play a part in the (ultimate) universal state of perfection".

Again, the central theme here, though, is that mankind is to be a major factor in all of this, to the point where everything is set in motion and affected deeply and essentially by what we do or don't do here.

As Ramchal depicts it in the text, everything in this world functions like a particular piece of a great and mighty clock -- from dials, to gears, to screws, to pendulums, etc., all connected, in contact with each other piece, and all functioning in tandem. And while it was G-d alone who "built" it, it is man alone who "winds" and adjusts it according to its needs [3].

[1] Mankind's mission has been discussed before in this work: see 1:1:2 (also see note 1 there), 1:2, 1:10:1, 2:1:2, and 2:3:1-2.

[2] See Messilat Yesarim Ch. 1 as well Derech Hashem 1:5:2-4 and 2:7:1-2 for more on these ideas and their wide-ranging implications.

Like so much else in this work and others of Ramchal's writings, this paragraph follows the teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as The Ari. Rather than delve into all of the technical facets of these ideas, as our role here is not to explain Kabbalah but rather to point to the Kabbalistic sources as we'd been doing all along and to suggest connections, we'll offer this brief synopsis of a lot of what's being referred to here, since it's so central to the point at hand.

According to The Ari, the ten numinous "vessels" that were originally meant to contain the emanation of G-d's light in the primal mix were unable to contain that light and were "broken" as a result, and the world is now comprised of the bits left behind. It thus needs to be "repaired", and that is humankind's monumental task. The mystical underpinnings of the cosmos all have a role in that without which man cannot do his work, but it's he who is the central character throughout the process. And his ultimate "payment" and "reward" in the end is the promise of an unimaginable sort of mystic knowledge and intimacy with the Creator.

[3] As is well known, the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650) also posited the idea that the world and all its parts acted as one huge clock. But whereas his view of a clockwork universe was decidedly materialistic (albeit it with an eye toward G-d's involvement in it), Ramchal's vision is far broader. He alludes to the actions of "parts" of that clock that are far higher, deeper, and more primordial than this physical universe as well as to G-d's everlasting and ever-present role in it, but most especially to humankind's ethical role, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the clock's mechanism per se.

See Klallim Rishonim 12 for Kabbalistic references to this chapter (as well as the next).

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.