

RAMCHAL BIOGRAPHY: PART 4 - DA'AT TEVUNOT (KNOWING THE REASONS)

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Part Four: Da'at Tevunot ("Knowing the Reasons")

1.

Imagine sitting knee to knee with someone very wise, with the chance to ask anything you'd like. Well, that's the setting to Ramchal's Da'at Tevunot, which serves as a dialogue between a seeker and a sage ... actually between a soul and reason itself. (Ramchal wrote other books in a dialogue format, but Da'at Tevunot was the best of them by far.)

The soul asked reason to explain a few things about the most important themes in Jewish Thought known as the Thirteen Principles of the Jewish Faith. For as he put it, "While I certainly accept all of them as true without hesitation, some of them I accept indeed and understand as well, while others of them I simply accept on faith without really understanding them". And he was hoping that reason would spell them out.

It's important for our purposes here to know that Rambam (Rabbi Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204) listed thirteen fundamental things about the Jewish religion we'd need to accept in order to claim to be believing Jews in all honesty: That G-d exists, is the only G-d, is wholly spiritual and incorporeal, is eternal, and that He alone should be worshipped; that He revealed His wishes to us through the prophets, and that Moses was the greatest among them; that G-d's Torah was given on Mount Sinai and is absolute; that G-d is omniscient, and rewards all good deeds and punishes all wrongful ones; and that the Messiah will come and the dead will eventually be resurrected.

But as the soul explained, he needed to have G-d's omniscience, reward and punishment, the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead explained to him, since he doesn't quite understand them. And therein lies the premise of the book.

We'll come back to that shortly, but let's first dabble into the response to Da'at Tevunot in the Jewish world.

2.

Like all spectacular works of revelation, deep insight, and overarching truth, Da'at Tevunot seemed

destined to be adored by those exposed to Jewish Thought and Kabbalah, and to go about unnoticed by others. And that indeed was what happened for the longest time.

Some of the greatest Jewish thinkers took to it right away, including but certainly not restricted to the Great Maggid (the successor to the Ba'al Shem Tov) and The Gaon of Vilna (it should be said that though it would seem awkward to many to cite the two of them side by side, the fact that these "warring" giants both revered this work speaks to the greatness and universality of Ramchal); Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (a distant cousin of the Ramchal, who was a great scholar in his own right), Rabbi Shlomo Eliyashav (1841 to 1925, known as The Leshem, in commemoration of his great series of Kabbalah works), and others. But many other learned Jews knew nothing of this vital work until Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (the mashgiach of the Ponevezh Yeshiva, who was a student of Rabbi E. Dessler) offered it to the Jewish world in the 1980's.

Rabbi Friedlander examined various manuscript versions of Da'at Tevunot in libraries and private collections throughout the world, and presented us with the most accurate edition to date. He then set the book in a more readable type, positioned whole sections of it as independent units, explained the difficulties, and elucidated many of the more elusive, erudite points.

He also connected Da'at Tevunot with certain shorter works of Ramchal's (the Klallim) that connected to it on an arcane level. For as we'd explained, Ramchal contended that the Ari's works were to be read symbolically rather than literally. So, Ramchal encapsulated the Ari's thoughts in Klallim (and elsewhere), and then "translated" the symbols into terms more easily grasped in Da'at Tevunot. Rabbi Friedlander connected the works in one edition, showed how one reflected the other, and thus allowed readers to follow both the esoteric and exoteric perspectives. (Rabbi Friedlander edited and made many of Ramchal's works readily available as well, and did very much to make him accessible to all of us in his relatively short life, and we all owe him a great deal.)

Da'at Tevunot was then translated into English by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein (and termed "The Knowing Heart" which, though inexact, served to transmit the main thoughts of the work), and several commentaries were written to it, including those of Rabbi Mordechai Shriki, Rabbi Avraham Goldblatt, and Binyamin Efrati of late (we ourselves are in the midst of preparing an English language adaptation with comments to Da'at Tevunot as well). As such, many who would never have access to this masterpiece of Jewish Thought now do.

3.

Though Da'at Tevunot does indeed expound upon the great themes of G-d's omniscience, reward and punishment, the coming of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead as we'd said, it actually uses them to express some of Ramchal's own greatest ideas (though he does offer cogent explanations of the cited themes, to be sure). We'll treat them one at a time, but in fact they come to G-d's sovereignty, the role of evil and wrong in the world, the meaning of life, and G-d's plans for the cosmos. Ramchal explained many other vital, overarching themes as well in this work, but space will

not allow us to delve into them as well. So we'll concentrate on the ones just cited and present Ramchal's ideas about them in our own words.

One of the things we most often misconstrue about G-d is the extent of His reach. Most of us who believe in Him -- including many who have experienced honest and even profound apprehensions of His presence in the world -- certainly accept the fact of His existence. But while some of us accept His presence in the Heavens, or perhaps even on earth as well, few of us though accept the idea that He's everywhere, throughout the cosmos. And that He's not only present everywhere, but He's also in command throughout the cosmos as well.

That's to say that G-d not only created everything and sustains everything as well -- He also holds ultimate and exclusive sway over everything! For G-d's sovereignty and rule is absolute and can never ever be thwarted. There is nothing that can get in His way, nothing that can challenge His intentions.

"Hey, but wait a minute!," you're bound to say. "Didn't He grant us the freedom to do what we will; and don't many, many people use that to go against His will all the time?" -- and you'd be right. So let's use the opportunity to explain Ramchal's view on the next subject at hand, the role of evil and wrong in the world.

Only the most innocent and pure-hearted among us can say with aplomb that everything is for the good as it should be. Yet we're taught outright that "G-d is good to all and merciful unto all His handiwork" (Psalms 145:9) ... so why don't the rest of see that all around us? Ramchal would offer that we simply don't know what we're looking at when we catch sight of things, and that everything is indeed for the good. Because bad and wrongfulness only serve as vehicles for the ultimate good much the way fever serves to burn away infection, and surgery often carves out cancerous growths. His point is that wrong and misfortune -- while certainly painful and daunting -- serves as a means to an end that's far greater than the pain involved. And thus while we're indeed free to do as we will, at the end of the day, nothing can ever truly go against G-d's will, despite appearances; everything serves His purposes.

And finally, that brings us to the meaning of life and G-d's ultimate plans for the cosmos, as Ramchal reveals them to us in this astounding work. At bottom, we're taught here, what's expected of us is to draw as close to G-d as we can by following His will. The irony however is that we'll all manage to do that in the (ultimate) end -- either directly, by adhering to His expectations for us, or by enduring the sort of remedial "surgery" we alluded to above. Our having arrived at that juncture will then enable us to experience G-d's full, rich, and overarching omnipresence. And our having come to that point will serve to have been the fulfillment of G-d's ultimate plans for the cosmos.

May the merits of the righteous Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato of blessed memory draw us close to G-d Almighty!

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