

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 1: CHAPTER 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Da'at Tevunot 1:1 (#'s 12-19)

1.

It's hard coming upon the secrets of the universe. You have to unpack one bag after another, lay their contents out next to each other, then compare and contrast them all until the whole picture comes through. That's exactly what we're cautioned about here, since we're going to be exposed to some of life's deepest mysteries in the course of this work by degrees. So we'll all need to have patience as we follow "the bouncing ball" as it goes from point to point. Let this serve as a word of warning.

We'll start off with what we hope to learn over-all in *Da'at Tevunot*, and what Ramchal will offer in response to the question about the four principles of our faith discussed in the introductory chapters, and go on from there. As Reason puts it, we hope to uncover man's makeup, what's incumbent upon him in this world, and the aim of his life ¹. So we'll clearly be touching upon some core human -- and several specifically *Jewish* -- issues, and we'll need to proceed step by step.

2.

As Reason puts it, "The primary principle upon which the entire edifice stands" -- bottom line -- is the fact that G-d wants us to perfect ourselves and to perfect all of creation along with us ². Understand of course that we're referring to perfecting ourselves spiritually ³ -- that is, achieving the greatest and most exalted degree of humanity possible and elevating the world along with us, while drawing both ourselves and all of creation close to G-d in the process ⁴.

But there's another element to our having to perfect ourselves (rather than be perfected externally, as we'll soon see). For by doing it on our own we'll be rewarded for our efforts (which will foster a whole other level of perfection that we couldn't come to if we didn't do it on our own), and we'll have earned perfection rather than just enjoyed it as a gift outright (which would sully the effect, as we'll also see).

But why would G-d have wanted us to perfect ourselves? asks the Soul. In order to understand that, we're told, we'd first have to know why G-d wanted to create the universe in the first place (another very, very weighty question!), as we now will.

3.

As best as we can determine -- because we're neither as wise nor as knowledgeable as we like to think we are, nor are we as privy to G-d's plans as we'd like to be -- it comes to this.

G-d is characterized as "The Benevolent Being" par excellence⁵. And given that it's simply the way of one such as He to do good things, G-d thus set out to create entities to do good for, i.e., ourselves and the world at large. But in order for His goodness to be as beneficial as it could be, He needed to contend with one very human foible: the fact that we seem to need to do things on our own rather than accept handouts, given that "one who eats what's not his own is ashamed to look (his benefactor) in the face" (Jerusalem Talmud, *Orlah* 1:3). That means to say that we find it hard to just take things⁶.

His point is that if G-d didn't make allowances for that, we'd be held back from achieving perfection, and His ultimate plan would thus have been thwarted; so He did indeed allow for it and has us strive for our own perfection rather than granting it to us outright⁷.

Footnotes:

¹ "Man's makeup" refers to the fact that we're ironically and so notably comprised of both a body and a soul, "what's incumbent upon him in this world" refers to our moral and spiritual obligation to have our soul govern our body, and "the aim of his life" refers to the ominous notion that we were created to attach onto G-d's presence. All of this will be discussed in the course of the book.

Ramchal offered in his introduction to *Klach Pitchei Chochma* that the best way to fight the *yetzer hara*, in fact, is to dwell on fundamental questions like this. Apparently because doing so keeps one on course and it reminds him of what his life's about and how to direct one's energies and proclivities. Sadly, our generation doesn't dwell on these sorts of questions and we suffer deeply in our hearts and souls as a consequence.

² As Ramchal put it elsewhere, "If we master ourselves, cleave onto our Creator, and make use of the world's things to help us in our Divine service, both we and the world with us will be elevated" (*Messilat Yesharim* Ch. 1). Also see *Derech Hashem* 1:4:6-7, *Iggerot Pitchei Chochma v'Da'at* 18, *Adir Bamarom* p. 37, Ramchal's own introduction to *Ma'amar Havikuach*, and *Sefer Kitzur Hakavanot* p. 1.

³ See *Derech Hashem* 1:2:2.

⁴ From the first let it be said that this is a daunting and stunning thought that should both humble and bolster us -- humble us because it lays an enormous responsibility on our shoulders, and bolster us because it indicates that G-d apparently knows we're capable of realizing it.

⁵ See *Derech Hashem* 1:2:1, *Klach Pitchei Chochma* 3, 92, and *Adir Bamarom* p. 393.

⁶ This is the element within us that what would have sullied the effect of our being perfected externally we cited above.

See *Tosephot* in *Kiddushin* 36b, "*Kol Mitzvah*"; *Maggid Maisharim* (*Breishit*, "*Ohr Layom Shabbat 14 Tevet*"); HaRav m'Fano's *Yonat Elim* (beginning); and *Orchot Tzaddikim*, *Sha'ar Habusha* for this concept. Also see *Klach Pitchei Chochma* 4.

⁷ In short, G-d is benevolent to be sure, but He shapes His benevolence to the needs of human nature: we cannot easily accept "charity" outright so He tempers His kindness with some hesitance and allows us to "earn" it.

Without getting into too much detail, this is an illustration of the Kabbalistic notion of *Tzimtzum* -- of G-d having had to limit His full presence with the creation of the universe in order to accommodate its nature and needs. See Ramchal's *Klallim Rishonim* 2 and *Klallot Ha'ilan*¹, and *Klallei Sefer Milchamot Moshe* 2 for discussions of *Tzimtzum*.

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.