

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 1: CHAPTER 2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1.

Now that we know that G-d wants us to perfect both ourselves and the universe in its entirety, we'll need to unravel this next series of mysteries: What exactly is defective about us that needs to be rectified anyway? What are the consequences of our defects? Just what would we need to do to perfect ourselves? And what would be the consequences of our actually doing it?

Well, there are several traditional and some more ancillary sources that we could cull from to depict what perfection itself would be like, which we could then draw upon to understand just what's imperfect and flawed about us now in the interim ¹. The resources include various Torah verses, quotes from our sages, and some conclusions we can arrive at logically.

As such, Ramchal informs us that at bottom perfection comes down to "cleaving onto G-d's Presence" ² meaning to say, drawing as closely and as completely to Him as one can; and to "grasping His Glory without impediments" in his words, which is to say, understanding all the implications of G-d's Being (as we'll illustrate later on).

Ramchal acknowledges that "we don't really have the ability to understand just what this 'cleaving' and 'grasping' is" at this point in our development, "as long as we're imperfect" (much the way a four year old couldn't be expected to fathom being forty). But we've been granted allusions to it.

2.

As such, we're told that this phenomenon is depicted in the following verses: "Then you will delight in the L-rd, and I will have you ride on the heights of the earth" (Isaiah 58:14), "The upright will dwell in Your presence" (Psalms 140:13), and "In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalms 16:11). It's spoken of in the Talmudic statement that "In the World to Come there is neither eating nor drinking, nor procreation of children or business transactions, no envy or hatred or rivalry; but the righteous sit enthroned, their crowns on their heads, and enjoy the luster of the Divine Splendor" (*Berachot* 17a). And we can understand it to some degree by virtue of the fact that given that the soul "is a portion of G-d Above", that as a consequence it's clear that all it wants to do is to "return to and cleave onto its Source and to grasp it", since it's "the nature of each artifact to yearn for its Artisan" and to "not rest until it achieves that" ³.

That's to say that the perfection we're capable of achieving is to be understood as a state in which we'd dwell and delight in G-d's lustrous presence joyfully as we soar upward above all human concerns, don "crowns" (signs of nobility), and ultimately realize our metaphysical dream of grasping G-d and cleaving onto His being ⁴.

3.

Nonetheless as long as we don't cleave onto G-d's presence and grasp His being, we're yet imperfect, and the fact remains that we were created to achieve just that, and we've been charged by G-d to set out to do it.

Thus to answer the questions we raised at the top, what is defective about us that needs to be rectified is our separation from G-d; the consequences of that is our toxic sense of purposelessness; and the consequences of our actually perfecting ourselves would be the sort of unalloyed joy that comes upon the soul when it realizes its full potential ⁵. But there are a couple of other things we'd need to understand now that are rather mystifying before we can go forward.

4.

First off, it's clear that G-d could have created us and the universe as utterly perfect to begin with, so why didn't He? In fact we'd have expected Him to have fashioned everything that way, given His omnipotence.

The answer, we're taught, lies in the fact that rather than create worlds and things in accordance with His own needs and abilities, G-d created them to fit our needs and abilities. As such, G-d could be said to have purposefully "held Himself back", if you will; to have stifled His infinite abilities to create the universe and ourselves. (And it's here where Ramchal alludes to how little of G-d's being has to do with creation, which is such an astounding notion!)

And so, He didn't create us perfect to begin with simply because He deemed it necessary for us to perfect ourselves (and the universe with us) by ourselves. And that was so that we'd be able to achieve His goal for us to be self-actualized perfection ⁶.

Another legitimate question we could then ask is this: Given that we're indeed imperfect, what then can we draw on to perfect ourselves ⁷? We'll have to wait till we can answer that one, though.

5.

So to sum up the last chapter and this one (and we'll be summing up a lot as we go along, for good reasons), we learn that G-d calls upon us to perfect ourselves and the universe at large, and that we're to be richly recompensed for doing that; that the reward, in fact, will be an experience of G-d Himself, which we sorely lack now; and that there's something within us that allows for so bold and otherworldly a phenomenon on our parts.

Notes:

¹ We're taught that G-d warned Moses, who was about to experience G-d's Presence as no one ever had to then that despite that, "no man can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Yet isn't it also said "And they saw the G-d of Israel" (Exodus 24:10, "G-d our L-rd has showed us His glory and greatness" (Deuteronomy 5:24), "and "my eyes have seen the King, the L-rd of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

The point is that while some have experienced one or more aspect of G-d presence (or a corrupted and imperfect appearance of it), nonetheless the point remains that no man can see G-d fully and yet live. The implication is of course that one can "see" G-d in the World to Come to a significant degree, which will prove to be Ramchal's argument later on.

² See Derech Hashem 1:2:3 and Messilat Yesharim Ch. 1 where Ramchal directly equates perfection with attaching oneself to G-d.

³ The idea that all "parts" (i.e., elements) naturally long to return to their "source" is classical. It was used for example by the ancients to explain why fire flickers upward -- to return to the source of fire in the heavens, etc.

While the concept no longer rings true on a scientific level, the basic abstract notion behind it is still valid on a human level and helps to explain many things, including why children cling to their mothers, why individuals tend to stay close to their people, or to be drawn to others from their hometown or alma mater, why our minds often draw upon archetypal ideas and longings, why people often regress into childhood patterns when they grow old, and most significantly (as Ramchal indicates) why we would want to draw close to G-d.

The model is found in many Kabbalistic sources, including the early twentieth century masterpiece Leshem Shevo v'Achlamah which states that "the goal of everything is to return to its Exalted Source" (Chelek HaBiurim 1, p. 83), and "a lower light always longs to rise upward and to attach itself up above, so as to garner more and more light and blessings from the Infinite Light on high" (Ibid. 2, p. 14).

⁴ But as we'll learn in the next chapter, we won't be fully grasping G-d or cleaving onto His presence unto itself, but rather only a segment of it. It's important to understand this distinction.

⁵ Though Ramchal doesn't address what would happen to the universe when we perfect ourselves and it (spoken of in the first section), the implication is that it too would be perfected and would reach its own potential of being the sort of fit and full receptacle of G-d's presence alluded to by the verse "Holy! Holy! Holy! ... The whole world is full of His Glory!" (Isaiah 6:3).

⁶ This refers to the Kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum. See Ramchal's Klallim Rishonim 2 and Klallot

Ha'ilan 1, and Klallei Sefer Milchamot Hashem 2. See Friedlander p. 8 iyyun 6 and the other references cited there; Goldblatt pp. 26, 473; Shriki p. 16, note 9.

⁷ This won't be fully explained until much later on (#'s 70, 72, 158). See Goldblatt pp. 28, 473 where he addresses the role of the "kav" in this phenomenon.

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.