



## LECTURE #3:

"THE HOLY ONE, BLESSED BE HE, HAS NOTHING IN HIS WORLD  
BUT THE FOUR CUBITS OF THE LAW"

Rabbi Eli Hadad

In the previous lecture, we raised the question: Why did Maimonides, who defined man's ultimate objective in life as the intellectual comprehension of God, nevertheless devote most of his life to the writing of practical halakhic texts? In order to answer this question, we must first clarify Maimonides's understanding of the role of Halakhah. Only after we elucidate this matter will we perhaps be able to understand why Maimonides devoted so much of his time to his halakhic writings.

Maimonides already related to this question in his *Introduction to the Mishnah*. In the framework of his explanation of Rav Ashi's intentions when he set out to compile the Babylonian Talmud, Maimonides found it necessary to clarify that matter of *derashot*, that is, the *midrashim* that at first glance appear so strange to us.<sup>1</sup> His basic position is that one should not understand the rabbinic *midrashim* in their literal sense, but rather one should interpret them as parables and riddles, the esoteric meaning of which one can appreciate only after diligent and extensive contemplation. Maimonides chose to illustrate this idea by clarifying the rabbinic dictum (*Berakhot* 8a): "**The Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in this world but the four cubits of the Law.**"

This statement, which many contemporary, traditional Jews would view as a fitting expression of their own position and certainly not consider astonishing in any way, was included by Maimonides in the category of *midrashim* that arouse great bewilderment.

One should delve discerningly into this matter, because if one examines it superficially, one would find it **far from the truth**, as if the four cubits of Halakhah alone represent

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<sup>1</sup> A topic that Maimonides will greatly develop in his introduction to chapter *Chelek*.

the ultimate objective, and the other sciences and bodies of knowledge are to be cast away. And it would follow that during the time of Shem and Eber and after them, when there was no Halakhah, the Holy One, blessed be He, had no part in the world at all! If one delves discerningly into this matter, however, one would observe therein wondrous wisdom and one would find that it comprises a collection of eternal truths. I will explain this for you so that it may serve as an example for you in all other matters that you come across. Therefore, pay close attention thereto as is proper.<sup>2</sup>

By way of this dictum, which at first glance appears to have been cited incidentally in order to illustrate the proper attitude that one should adopt towards the rabbinic *midrashim*, but in truth was quoted with careful forethought, Maimonides wishes to clarify a very fundamental issue.<sup>3</sup> On the face of it, the statement was cited to demonstrate how one is to deal with a rabbinic *midrash* which on the superficial level appears astonishing. In fact, however, it was chosen to serve as a vehicle through which to clarify the place of Halakhah in man's life. There is no more appropriate place to discuss this issue than in the *Introduction to the Mishnah*, for the Mishnah, certainly according to Maimonides, was the most comprehensive halakhic code written to his day. It is not enough then for us to understand all the particular laws, but rather we must first clarify the significance of Halakhah in general.

Maimonides's difficulty with this rabbinic dictum is based on a simple assumption that comes through in many of his writings: It is impossible that the study of the other sciences and bodies of knowledge is not part of the ultimate objective of man's life. To illustrate his position, Maimonides takes us to a world in which there was no Halakhah, namely, to the days of Shem and Eber who lived before the Torah was revealed at Mount Sinai. It cannot be that in those days, during which there was no Halakhah, God had nothing at all in His world. This argument appears to be based on the assumption that there can never have been a time that the world existed without realizing its purpose. When the world realizes its purpose, God has something in His world, and when it does not realize its purpose, there is no justification for its existence, and therefore it cannot possibly exist. It is, therefore, clear that this rabbinic dictum cannot be interpreted according to its literal sense, namely, that the

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<sup>2</sup> *Introduction to the Mishnah*, ed. Y. Shilat, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> In several places, Maimonides comments that one must relate seriously even to what appears to have been stated incidentally. See, for example, *Guide*, section entitled "Instruction with respect to this treatise."

goal of man's life exhausts itself in the performance of the practical *mitzvot* of the Halakhah. Rather, it must be understood in a different manner. As we shall see, Maimonides resolves his difficulty by expanding the concept of Halakhah beyond its practical definition, that is to say, he argues that Halakhah includes much more than the practical laws alone.

#### A WISE AND GOOD MAN

Maimonides begins by establishing his argument that the purpose of man's life is the contemplation of intellectual truths, the climax of which is knowledge of God. We already analyzed parts of this argument in our first lecture. Following this assertion, Maimonides continues:

However, through grasping the verities, [man realizes that] he is obligated to spare himself from most physical pleasures, for it will be self-evident that the destruction of the soul results from the improvement of the body, and perfection of the soul through destruction of the body. Thus when man chases after lusts, and when sensual [desires]<sup>4</sup> prevail over the intellectual ones, and make his intelligence subservient to his lusts, so that he resembles the beast which conceives only eating, drinking and copulation - then the Divine capacity, I mean to say, the intellect, will not be recognized in him. Then he will be as a stunted creature stooping in the primeval sea.<sup>5</sup>

In every rational process, establishing any type of **aim** for man's life leads perforce to necessary conclusions regarding the **means** to be used to achieve that aim. If man's ultimate objective is the development of his intellect and knowledge, it follows then that a person should limit his physical pleasures to those that are absolutely essential. This passage clearly establishes the relationship between perfecting one's body and perfecting one's soul. In this context, as in other places in Maimonides's writings, the term "soul" (*nefesh*) refers to the intellect and not to the totality of man's spiritual qualities. It is self-evident that destruction of the body is the means to achieve perfection of the intellect, through which a person will reach his ultimate objective, that is, comprehension of the essential truths.

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<sup>4</sup> I.e., the senses.

<sup>5</sup> It seems that Maimonides is alluding here to the fact that this situation will prevent a person from acquiring eternality of the soul following his death.

Maimonides mentions here the most basic physical functions, "eating, drinking, and copulation," namely, functions that follow from man's **craving for food** and his **sexual desire**, the two basic human lusts that are essential for his survival. Eating ensures a person's **personal** survival, whereas sexual relations secure the survival of the human **species**. Man's fundamental desire to survive, common to him and the beast, stands in conflict with his ultimate objective, the comprehension of the essential truths.

This description portrays man as being caught between two elementary forces, one that pushes him to take steps to ensure his survival, as if he were a beast, and another that inspires him to realize his ultimate objective as a man. This struggle between the mighty forces, radically formulated by the words, "the destruction of the soul results from the improvement of the body, and perfection of the soul through destruction of the body," must come to its conclusion with the soul on top and in control of the body. A lifestyle that sets survival as the ultimate objective, giving priority to the elementary urges over man's thirst for knowledge, will perforce lead a person to miss the true objective of his life. Excessive immersion in the world of the **senses** will bring a person to relate to everything in the world from its material aspect, whereas true scientific knowledge penetrates the material aspect of the world and reaches the abstract essence comprehensible to the intellect. The correct shaping of man's encounter with the material world will, therefore, lead him to his objective. This shaping must define man's lifestyle and practical conduct so that he should be able to realize his objective.

From here Maimonides arrives at his fundamental formulation of man's purpose, which is also the purpose of the sublunar - i.e., material - world:

The purpose of this world, and all that is contained therein, is [to help make] **a wise and good man**.

Maimonides immediately explains that the term "**wise**" refers to man's speculative knowledge that includes knowledge of all the verities, and the term "**good**" relates to the molding of his actions, which also includes the perfection of his character traits. Thus, the perfect man "embraces wisdom and good deeds," i.e., knowledge and ethics, theoretical wisdom and practical Halakhah.

It is clear from what has been said thus far that the perfection of man's morals and character traits, which is part of the perfection of his body, precedes the perfection of his soul, and serves as a means to perfect the intellect. In other words, a person must be good in order

to be wise. We shall see also in the continuation of the passage that a wise man with imperfect character traits "is not truly wise." On the other hand, a person who has acquired virtuous character traits, even if he has not attained wisdom, has nevertheless achieved a certain perfection. This conclusion follows also from other passages in the writings of Maimonides, that ethical behavior precedes wisdom and is a condition for its attainment.

It might be argued: We certainly know people who are corrupt in their ways, hedonistic and driven by their lusts, but nevertheless have reached great intellectual achievements. Maimonides will answer: "They are not truly wise." First of all, there is no true and profound wisdom that does not obligate a person who has attained it to conduct himself with restraint. There is no serious man of science who does not abstain in some way from excessive pleasure, out of a great intellectual effort that robs him of his time and energy. This, however, is not the entire answer. True wisdom is not limited to an understanding of matter and its components, which, it may be said, is the objective of modern science. True wisdom must rise above the understanding of the structure of matter and its processes to an understanding of the world of the spirit, and from there to comprehension of the world of the intellect, at the very pinnacle of which stands the knowledge of God. Such comprehension is not possible without virtuous character traits.

Nevertheless, the continuation of Maimonides's words leaves us with a certain lack of clarity regarding the relationship between wisdom and good deeds. Maimonides interprets the verse (Deuteronomy 5:1): "That you may learn them, and keep, and do them," as teaching that "wisdom comes before action, for wisdom leads to action, but action does not lead to wisdom. This is what [the Sages] said, may they rest in peace: 'Study leads to action.'" This passages seems to imply that the study of wisdom should be given precedence over action, in contrast to what was stated above. It is clear, however, that the wisdom that Maimonides is talking about here, is the study of Halakhah in order to serve as a guide for action, and not theoretical study that leads to an understanding of abstract truths.<sup>6</sup>

Maimonides summarizes the discussion with the following:

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<sup>6</sup> Some wish to learn from here and from the end of the *Guide* (a source that we shall deal with in one of the upcoming lectures), that Maimonides changed his position regarding the relationship between wisdom and good deeds. Their argument is not convincing.

Therefore, from all that we have said, it becomes clear that the purpose in the creation of everything in this existing imperfect world is [that they serve] a perfect man full of wisdom and good deeds, as we have stated. If you delve into and learn these two things, namely, wisdom and good deeds, from the explicit or only alluded to teachings of the Sages, of blessed memory, then you will know the correctness of their statement that "the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His world but the four cubits of the Law."

Thus, we see that the Halakhah is not merely man's practical conduct; rather, it includes both wisdom and good deeds, both theoretical speculation and practical behavior. "The four cubits of the Law" embrace the entirety of man's life, and in them is reflected the objective of the material world. Maimonides, in light of this approach and in contrast to the other halakhic codes familiar to us, included in his halakhic code, the *Mishneh Torah*, the "Book of Knowledge," which contains the essence of the speculative truths that a person is required to know. This teaches us that Halakhah is comprised of both speculation and action.

#### PERFECTION OF THE SOUL AND PERFECTION OF THE BODY

Over the course of his life, Maimonides refined this outlook, but its fundamental essence remained the same. In his *Guide* (III, 27), Maimonides defines the Torah's objective in a sharp and concise manner:

**The Law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body.**

First of all, it should be noted that instead of "destruction of the body," which is required for the "perfection of the soul," now Maimonides speaks of the "perfection of the body" as one of the aims of the Torah. The Torah then is not interested in containing the body, but rather in perfecting it. It is clear from Maimonides's other writings as well<sup>7</sup> that he did not view the destruction of the body as an objective. Moreover, he came out against mortification of the body and asceticism that comes to suppress the body. It is, however, necessary to temper the body's passions and lusts, so that a person should be able to realize his destiny by way of his intellect. Maimonides is known for maintaining a position that obligates walking on "the golden path" with respect to character traits, a position that rejects

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the Introduction to Avot, known as the *Shemoneh Perakim*, "Eight Chapters."

both extremes, radical asceticism as well as uncontrolled hedonism. The appropriate path involves establishing the proper trait for each and every human need, when in most cases that trait is found in the middle.

Maimonides continues with a definition of these two aims:

As for the welfare of the soul, it consists in the multitude's acquiring correct opinions corresponding to their respective capacity.... As for the welfare of the body, it comes about by the improvement of their ways of living one with another.

"Perfection of the soul" remains the same; that is, it consists in man's acquiring correct opinions. "Perfection of the body," however, does not focus here on shaping the individual person, but on the network of relationships within **society**. It seems as if a person's body is not his own personal property, but rather that all of society constitutes one grand human body. In the continuation, Maimonides divides "perfection of the body" into two:

**One** of them is the abolition of their wrongdoing each other. This is tantamount to every individual among the people not being permitted to act according to his will and up to the limits of his power, but being forced to do that which is useful to the whole. The **second** thing consists in the acquisition by every human individual of moral qualities that are useful for life in society so that the affairs of the city may be ordered.

We see then that the perfection of the soul involves the acquisition of correct **opinions**, whereas the perfection of the body divides into two realms: 1) Perfecting the social system by way of restraining **practical** conduct. 2) Perfecting the character of each individual by shaping his **moral qualities**. The common denominator of the two is that their objective is the perfection of the state, i.e., the organized social body.

In the continuation, Maimonides clarifies the relationship between perfection of the soul and perfection of the body:

Know that as between these two aims, one is indubitably **greater in nobility**, namely, **the welfare of the soul** – I mean the procuring of correct opinions – while the second aim – I mean **the welfare of the body** – **is prior in nature and time**. The latter aim consists in the governance of the city and the well-being of the states of all its people according to their capacity.

Here Maimonides clearly returns to the basic model that he had already established in his *Introduction to the Mishnah*. Man's aim in life is the perfection of his intellect, and the necessary means to achieve perfection of the intellect is perfection of the body, and therefore the latter is given precedence. As opposed to what we find in the *Introduction to the Mishnah*, here the author makes no mention of "destruction of the body," but rather it's perfection. Similarly, "perfection of the body" does not relate solely to the individual, but rather to the perfection of the entire state.

#### FROM MOSES TO MOSES

This does not seem to resolve our original difficulty, why did Maimonides invest so much time and energy in his halakhic enterprise, which relates to perfection of the body, and not of the soul, despite the fact that the objective of man is the perfection of his intellect. It seems that in the following passage, Maimonides relates somewhat to this question:

This second aim is the **more certain one, and it is the one regarding which every effort has been made precisely to expound it and all its particulars**. For the first aim can only be achieved after achieving this second one.

From here we see that the Torah also acted in this manner, emphasizing the second aim of perfecting the body, and expanding upon the details of the *mitzvot* connected to that aim. Moreover, it is precisely with respect to the *mitzvot* connected to the first aim of perfecting the intellect that Maimonides states explicitly that the Torah "made a call to believe in them in a summary way." This refers to the *mitzvot* which obligate a person to believe "in the existence of God, may He be exalted, His unity, His knowledge, His power, His will, and His eternity."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, "all the other correct opinions concerning the whole of being – opinions that constitute the numerous kinds of **theoretical sciences** through which the opinions forming the ultimate end are validated – the Law, albeit it does not make a call to direct attention toward them in detail as it does with regard to [the opinions forming ultimate ends], does do this **in summary fashion**<sup>9</sup> by saying: "To love the Lord."

It turns out, then, that Maimonides followed the Torah's path when he dedicated most of his writings to the practical halakhic realm, which is connected to the Torah's second aim, namely, the aim of perfecting the body. Maimonides's halakhic code, the *Mishneh Torah*, is

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<sup>8</sup> *Guide* III, 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, in the continuation of the passage.

also written in such a proportion, one book alone being dedicated to the realm of speculative ideas, the "Book of Knowledge," whereas the other thirteen books are dedicated to the realm of the practical *mitzvot*.

Maimonides might be alluding here to a certain resolution, when he says that precisely because the *mitzvot* connected to the second aim are the necessary means to achieve the first objective, therefore they must be emphasized and spelled out in detail. It seems to follow from this that it is precisely the means that require more reinforcement and emphasis than the ends themselves. The question, however, remains – why?

The question that we raised against R. Moses the son of Maimon may now be directed against Moses our Master, "master of the Sages." Why was Moses commanded by God to spell out at length the *mitzvot* connected to the second aim, and not those connected to the first aim? Why did he not write a philosophical text, but only a halakhic code, namely, the Torah of Moses?