Dvar Torah Outline

Ramchal on Reincarnation, Divine Justice, and Life's Circumstances

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explains Ramchal's presentation of reincarnation as an expression of divine mercy: an opportunity to repair earlier failures, without erasing responsibility for them. He distinguishes between the circumstances assigned to a person and the ultimate judgment of that person's choices, which accounts precisely for effort and freedom of choice. The discussion concludes by explaining how divine wisdom selects among the many possible causes of life's circumstances, rather than allowing conflicting purposes simply to cancel one another out.

I

Reincarnation as another opportunity for spiritual repair

A. *Continuing Ramchal's discussion*

- Rabbi Shulman resumes the discussion of reincarnation in section ו׳.
- Reincarnation provides another opportunity for someone who did not adequately fulfill his mission in an earlier lifetime.
- It is an expression of divine mercy, allowing further repair rather than treating an unsuccessful lifetime as the end of the process.

B. *Another opportunity does not erase the earlier record*

- Reincarnation is not a "free retake" in which only the best attempt counts.
- Earlier actions remain significant:
  - Previous merits can ease a person's circumstances.
  - Previous wrongdoing can contribute to greater difficulty.
- The new lifetime must therefore be understood in relation to what preceded it.

C. *Earlier actions can help explain present obstacles*

- A person may face serious obstacles to fulfilling the commandments even though nothing in his observable present life appears to explain them.
- Ramchal introduces reincarnation as another possible source of such circumstances.
- The person's present situation and responsibilities may reflect what requires repair from an earlier lifetime.

II

A person's assignment is not the same as his ultimate assessment

3:00

A. *Two distinct questions in divine providence*

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes the distinction between:
  - **What circumstances and responsibilities a person receives.**
  - **How successfully he fulfills those responsibilities.**
- The first determines a person's "job description" in this world.
- It does not, by itself, establish whether he will ultimately be judged righteous or otherwise.

B. *Different circumstances can lead to equally worthy outcomes*

- One person may receive favorable conditions, while another faces severe disadvantages.
- Both can ultimately achieve the same standing, depending on their effort and choices.
- External ease is not proof of greater righteousness, and hardship is not proof of ultimate failure.

C. *The miniature-golf analogy*

- Different courses present different levels of difficulty:
  - On an easy course, a low number of strokes is expected.
  - On a difficult course, a higher number may still represent excellent performance.
- Similarly, divine judgment evaluates achievement in relation to the actual difficulty of the assignment.

D. *An important clarification made later in the discussion*

- Rabbi Shulman initially reads Ramchal as saying that God will not assign a burden beyond a person's capacity.
- He subsequently corrects the reading:
  - The passage specifically guarantees that **ultimate judgment will not attribute guilt that is not truly the person's**.
  - Difficult or even seemingly impossible circumstances must be distinguished from culpability for choices made within them.
- The central assurance is perfectly calibrated accountability, not a promise that every situation will feel manageable.

III

God's extraordinary efforts to bring people to the World to Come

6:00

A. *Reincarnation is remedial, not a reward vacation*

- In the framework being studied, reincarnation addresses something that still requires repair.

- It is not a system in which someone who has completed his mission receives an especially pleasant additional earthly life.
- Successful completion instead leads onward to the soul's spiritual reward.

B. *The World to Come is the purpose, not an exclusive club*

- In response to a question, Rabbi Shulman stresses that God goes to extraordinary lengths to enable people to reach the World to Come.
- God created the world to bestow goodness; He is not looking for reasons to exclude people.

C. *The teaching that all Israel has a share*

- The Mishnah states:
  - **"כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא"** ("All Israel have a share in the World to Come.")
- Rabbi Shulman cites an interpretive teaching in Sanhedrin that extends this principle even to those apparently excluded later in the Mishnah.
- Such a share may be extraordinarily small:
  - Merely possessing some eventual share is not the same as attaining a desirable or substantial spiritual reward.

D. *The completeness of Israel's collective soul*

- Rabbi Shulman connects this teaching to the **600,000 root souls of Israel**.
- Each is a necessary component of the complete divine revelation associated with the World to Come.
- Different processes may be required to bring a soul to its ultimate place:
  - Reincarnation.
  - Purification after death.
  - An extremely diminished or subordinate spiritual standing.

E. *Qualifications concerning the mixed multitude*

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes this particular assurance from the status of the biblical **mixed multitude (ערב רב)**.
- He explains that lacking an unconditional assurance does **not** mean that a deserving person cannot receive the World to Come.
- When asked whether this distinction extends to contemporary converts, he does not resolve the question.
- The discussion should therefore not be read as a blanket statement denying converts a share in the World to Come.

IV

Root souls, branching souls, and partial reincarnation

12:34

A. *A soul's return need not involve the whole soul*

- Rabbi Shulman broadens the discussion beyond the image of one complete soul returning intact.
- Reincarnation may involve a particular component or aspect of a soul.

B. *Rabbi Tzadok's analogy from the letters of the Torah*

- Rabbi Shulman cites Rabbi Tzadok's use of the traditional correspondence between:
  - The letters of the Torah.
  - The 600,000 root souls of Israel.
- The existence of far more than 600,000 individual Jews requires distinguishing **roots** from their many **branches or components**.

C. *Letters themselves can contain smaller forms*

- Examples offered include:
  - ל understood as a כ with a ו above it.
  - צ understood as a נ with a י attached.
- The analogy illustrates how one root can contain multiple constituent elements.
- Similarly, a particular component of a root soul may have its own need for repair and return.

D. *The limits of a simple numerical correspondence*

- Questions arise concerning the number of Torah letters and how letters are counted or divided.
- Rabbi Shulman mentions issues of spelling, counting, and composite letter forms.
- The main purpose here is the conceptual distinction between **root souls** and their many individual expressions.

V

Reincarnation, perfect justice, and the limits of human understanding

15:00

A. *Not every reincarnation follows the same pattern*

- Ramchal describes many possible variations:
  - What occurred in a previous lifetime.
  - What now requires correction.
  - What circumstances are assigned.
  - How the person responds in the present lifetime.
- Each case must be judged in light of its complete history.

B. *The governing principle is perfect justice*

- **Devarim 32:4:**
  - **"הַצּוּר תָּמִים פָּעֳלוֹ כִּי כָל דְּרָכָיו מִשְׁפָּט אֵל אֱמוּנָה וְאֵין עָוֶל צַדִּיק וְיָשָׁר הוּא."**
  - ("The Rock—His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice; a faithful God, without injustice, righteous and upright is He.")
- Reincarnation does not compromise justice; it is administered within God's perfectly accurate judgment.

C. *Knowing a principle is not knowing an individual's explanation*

- Human beings cannot grasp the full depth of God's calculations.
- Knowing that reincarnation can affect circumstances does not authorize someone to declare:
  - Why a particular person suffers.
  - What that person did in a previous lifetime.
  - Which spiritual cause explains a specific event.
- The same restraint applies to other factors discussed in the chapter, such as ancestral merit and a person's assigned role.

D. *Recurring challenges may relate to earlier failures*

- Rabbi Shulman notes that traditional works describe a person being challenged again in an area requiring repair.
- A strong attraction or recurring struggle in a particular area may be relevant to that process.
- This remains a general teaching, not a reliable basis for diagnosing another person.

E. *The Vilna Gaon's commentary on Jonah*

- Rabbi Shulman recommends the Vilna Gaon's commentary on Jonah as an unusually accessible treatment of these ideas.
- The commentary reads the narrative allegorically as the story of:
  - A soul's mission.
  - Its failures.
  - Its return.
  - Its continuing process of correction.

VI

Responsibility depends on freedom of choice, not merely visible results

20:00

A. *Revisiting the correction about burdens*

- Rabbi Shulman clarifies that Ramchal's statement concerns the fairness of the final accounting.
- A person will not be charged with guilt beyond what he is genuinely responsible for.

- Conditions that severely limit awareness or freedom must be included in the judgment.

B. *Circumstances are assigned; choices are assessed*

- A person may be born into an environment that powerfully shapes his conduct before he understands any alternative.
- Divine judgment distinguishes:
  - The situation into which he was placed.
  - The degree of meaningful choice available to him.
  - What he actually did with that freedom.
- The decisive issue is not simply the visible outcome, but the effort and choice behind it.

C. *Only God can measure effort perfectly*

- Rabbi Shulman uses a discussion of fairness and public policy to highlight the limits of human assessment.
- People can recognize that equal outcomes may require unequal effort.
- Nevertheless, human institutions cannot fully know another person's inner struggle or accurately measure effort.
- God alone possesses the knowledge needed for perfectly individualized judgment.

D. *Distinguishing the present framework from other mystical teachings*

- A question is raised about reincarnation into animals.
- Rabbi Shulman does not establish such a teaching from the passage being studied.
- He distinguishes:
  - **The basic remedial framework:** a soul returns to repair an unfulfilled mission.
  - **More nuanced teachings:** a particular spark, component, or expression of one soul may appear in another setting.
- Likewise, identifying a later righteous person with an earlier righteous soul does not necessarily mean that the earlier person failed and had to return.

VII

Multiple possible causes do not simply average together

26:00

A. *The next section gathers the chapter's different explanations*

- Rabbi Shulman introduces section ד"י by reviewing possible causes of a person's circumstances:
  - Ancestral merit.
  - The needs or condition of the generation.
  - A person's assigned role in creation.
  - Spiritual responsibility for others.

  - Personal merits and wrongdoing.
  - Reincarnation.

B. *The problem of conflicting purposes*

- Suppose a person's assigned role requires wealth:
  - His test is generosity, compassion, or responsible use of resources.
- At the same time, another consideration may call for financial loss.
- Do these forces simply cancel, leaving him with an average income?

C. *Why cancellation would miss the point*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that a neutral result may accomplish neither intended purpose:
  - The person has not experienced the intended test of wealth.
  - Nor has he experienced the intended hardship or loss.
- Providence is purposeful, not merely an arithmetic balance of competing influences.

D. *Different purposes may be fulfilled at different times*

- A person might first become wealthy and later lose that wealth.
- Each stage could then accomplish its intended purpose.
- The important point is that the particular event expresses an operative cause rather than a meaningless cancellation of opposing causes.

E. *The hot-water and cold-water analogy*

- Mixing hot and cold water produces lukewarm water.
- But lukewarm water is neither:
  - A hot bath.
  - Nor a cold shower.
- Similarly, averaging two providential purposes may fail to accomplish either one.

VIII

Divine wisdom determines which cause governs each circumstance

32:00

A. *God weighs every consideration*

- Divine wisdom sees what is appropriate for the repair and completion of creation as a whole.
- It determines:
  - Which consideration should operate now.
  - Which should be delayed.
  - Which should not produce its otherwise expected result.

B. *Conflicts can arise between different categories*

- Ancestral merit might call for wealth.
- A person's own conduct might call for poverty.
- His assigned role in the larger plan may introduce another consideration.
- These cannot always produce their respective outcomes simultaneously.

C. *Conflicts can arise even within a person's own actions*

- One action may warrant a particular benefit.
- Another action may warrant the loss of that same benefit.
- The resolution requires divine judgment, not a mechanical formula.

D. *Different circumstances may express different causes*

- The operative cause may differ:
  - From one person to another.
  - From one period of a person's life to another.
  - From one aspect of that person's circumstances to another.
- Rabbi Shulman's emphasis is that each particular circumstance has an appropriate governing cause; the entire list does not act as one blended equation.

E. *The chapter supplies categories, not personal diagnoses*

- Ramchal concludes that events fall within the causes and their details described in the chapter.
- Human beings cannot identify every detail of how those causes operate.
- Nevertheless, understanding the general categories is already substantial knowledge:
  - We can understand something meaningful about divine governance without knowing why a particular event happened to a particular person.

IX

In Summary

- **Reincarnation expresses divine mercy:** it offers further opportunity for repair without erasing responsibility for earlier actions.
- **An assignment is not a verdict:** favorable or difficult circumstances do not themselves determine a person's ultimate spiritual standing.
- **Judgment is precisely individualized:** God assesses genuine responsibility, effort, and freedom of choice—not merely visible results.
- **Souls can have roots and components:** the discussion allows for partial aspects of a soul requiring further repair.

- **General principles do not justify personal diagnoses:** knowing that reincarnation can affect circumstances does not reveal why a particular person suffers.
- **Providential causes do not merely cancel out:** divine wisdom determines which cause should govern each circumstance so that its intended purpose can be fulfilled.