Dvar Torah Outline

Derech Hashem: Israel, the Nations, and Humanity's Original Purpose

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explores the Ramchal's distinction between the shared humanity of Israel and the nations and their different capacities for spiritual connection. Drawing on the Maharal, he explains why Jewish identity cannot be reduced to national characteristics or intellectual accomplishments, while emphasizing the dignity of every human being. The discussion then turns to Adam's original purpose, proposing that his descendants could have inherited his spiritual perfection as extensions of one unified humanity.

I

Why the Relationship Between Israel and the Nations Is a "Deep Matter"

A. *What the Ramchal means by "deep"*

- Rabbi Shulman begins **Chapter 4 of Derech Hashem's second part**, concerning Israel and the nations.
- A "deep matter" is one whose underlying reality differs from its surface appearance:
  - Ordinary observation reveals one picture.
  - Deeper examination, sometimes guided by the sages or prophets, reveals another.
- The subject is not necessarily impossible to understand; its essential dimension is simply not immediately visible.

B. *Shared human nature*

- From the perspective of ordinary human nature, Jews and non-Jews appear fundamentally alike.
- Nations may possess distinctive temperaments or cultural characteristics, just as individuals differ from one another.
- Such differences do not, by themselves, establish a fundamentally different spiritual identity.

C. *The distinction concerns spiritual receptivity*

- The Ramchal nevertheless describes a profound difference from the Torah's perspective.
- Rabbi Shulman connects this to the Maharal's concept of **preparedness to receive a divine connection**.
- The Ramchal's strong comparison to different kinds or species concerns this spiritual distinction, rather than an observable difference in ordinary human functioning.

II

Prophecy as an Expression of Spiritual Preparedness

4:30

A. *The prophetic capacity of Israel*

- Rabbi Shulman presents prophecy as a central example of the distinction under discussion.
- Citing the Kuzari, he contrasts the extensive prophetic history of the Jewish people with the religious histories of other nations.
- Prophecy was not limited to isolated, unexpected experiences:
  - There were communities of prophetic disciples.
  - A person could deliberately pursue the spiritual preparation necessary for prophecy.
- Just as someone can aspire to become a Torah scholar, a person could aspire to prophecy—although God was never obligated to grant it.

B. *The "antenna" analogy*

- Rabbi Shulman compares spiritual preparedness to possessing an antenna capable of receiving a signal.
- Outwardly similar people may differ in their capacity to receive a particular form of divine communication.
- Preparation must also be sincere:
  - The pursuit cannot be driven by honor or arrogance.
  - Proper intention and spiritual development remain essential.

C. *Balaam and the present absence of prophecy*

- **Question:** How could Balaam possess prophecy if he was not Jewish?
- Rabbi Shulman cites the Ramban's distinction between ordinary, pure prophecy and Balaam's exceptional communication, associated with spiritual impurity.
- **Question:** Has prophecy not ceased?
- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes between:
  - An underlying spiritual capacity.
  - Whether historical circumstances allow that capacity to function.
- He connects prophecy's present absence to exile and the loss of the Temple, while explaining that forms of divine inspiration remain possible.
- He cites traditional accounts concerning:
  - The Ramchal's instruction from Elijah.
  - The Vilna Gaon's refusal to receive instruction from angels.
  - Rabbi Yosef Karo's recorded supernatural instruction.

III

Receiving the Torah: Spiritual Readiness Versus National Characteristics

9:00

A. *Reinterpreting the nations' refusal of the Torah*

- Rabbi Shulman discusses the rabbinic account of God offering the Torah to other nations.
- Following the Maharal, he cautions against reading their refusal merely as an admission of bad behavior.
- Their responses invoke their ancestral blessings, which describe their national spiritual capacities and orientation.

B. *Ishmael and Esau invoke their respective blessings*

- **Ishmael — Bereishit 16:12:** > וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פֶּרֶא אָדָם יָדוֹ בַכֹּל וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל אֶחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן: > (He will be a wild man; his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him, and he will dwell alongside all his brothers.)
  - In the rabbinic account, Ishmael's descendants view the prohibition against theft as incompatible with the national orientation expressed in this blessing.
- **Esau — Bereishit 27:40:** > וְעַל חַרְבְּךָ תִחְיֶה וְאֶת אָחִיךָ תַּעֲבֹד וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר תָּרִיד וּפָרַקְתָּ עֻלּוֹ מֵעַל צַוָּארֶךָ: > (By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you become restless, you shall break his yoke from your neck.)
  - Esau's descendants similarly invoke life by the sword when confronted with the prohibition against murder.
- Rabbi Shulman explains that these blessings describe a **spiritual blueprint**, not arbitrary predictions.
- Their responses therefore express a lack of preparedness for the particular divine relationship embodied in receiving the Torah.

C. *Jewish national traits serve the mission but do not define it*

- The Maharal explains that traits associated with Israel can be well suited to its spiritual task:
  - Strong-mindedness.
  - Persistence.
  - Boldness.
  - Energy and determination.
- These qualities can be used constructively or destructively.
- They are suitable instruments for Israel's mission, but they are **not themselves the essence of Jewish distinctiveness**.
- Rabbi Shulman therefore rejects intellectual achievement, scientific success, or Nobel Prize statistics as explanations of what makes the Jewish people spiritually distinctive.

IV

Universal Human Dignity and Israel's Particular Calling

13:30

A. *Every human being is created in God's image*

- Rabbi Shulman turns to the Mishnah in **Pirkei Avot**, which distinguishes between:
  - Humanity's beloved status as created in God's image.
  - Israel's additional beloved status through receiving the Torah.
- Following the Maharal, he emphasizes that the first teaching includes non-Jews.
- The spiritual distinction under discussion does not negate their humanity or dignity.
- Rabbi Shulman explicitly stresses the importance of respecting and loving other human beings.

B. *Why the distinction matters for Jewish continuity*

- If Jewish identity is understood only through ordinary human characteristics, assimilation and intermarriage become readily understandable:
  - On that level, Jews and non-Jews share the same human nature.
- The Torah instead gives Israel a particular sacred calling: **Shemot 19:6:** > וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: > (You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.)
- Rabbi Shulman explains that recognizing this vocation changes how one understands Jewish distinctiveness and the boundaries intended to preserve it.
- The "deep" dimension is the capacity for a relationship with God that cannot be captured by a description of natural human traits alone.

V

Adam's Original Stature and the Future Intended for Humanity

16:00

A. *Humanity before Adam's sin*

- The Ramchal now turns to humanity's beginnings to explain its later spiritual divisions.
- Before his sin, Adam occupied a far higher spiritual state than human beings do today.
- That original condition was already suited to an exalted, eternal existence.
- Had Adam chosen correctly, he would have risen still further toward perfection.

B. *Descendants born into that perfected condition*

- God intended Adam to have descendants: **Bereishit 1:28:** > וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁהָ וּרְדוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל הָאָרֶץ: > (God blessed them, and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and every living creature that moves upon the earth.)

- Had Adam first attained his intended perfection, his descendants would have entered existence within that elevated condition.
- Their number would have been determined by divine wisdom, according to the purpose of bestowing goodness.
- They would have shared with Adam in that ultimate good.

VI

Inherited Perfection and the Problem of Unearned Goodness

18:31

A. *The challenge from the Ramchal's earlier principles*

- Rabbi Shulman asks how Adam's descendants could enjoy a perfected existence they had not personally earned.
- Earlier chapters explain that complete goodness requires a person to acquire perfection through choice.
- Otherwise, the recipient experiences the shame of receiving an unearned gift:
  - The perfection does not feel like one's own.
  - The recipient consequently lacks the fullest resemblance to God's self-sufficient perfection.

B. *Rabbi Shulman's proposed answer: inheritance is different*

- Rabbi Shulman suggests that a child does not experience an inheritance in the same way as an unrelated handout.
- An unexpected gift from a stranger can feel disconnected from one's own identity and efforts.
- An inheritance naturally belongs to the child because the child understands himself as an extension of the parent.

C. *A child continues the parent's identity*

- The sages describe a son as the "legs" of his father:
  - He continues the father's place and role in the world.
- Rabbi Shulman connects this to Rabbeinu Bachya's explanation of inheritance.
- Applied to Adam's descendants:
  - Adam would have earned the perfection.
  - His descendants, as extensions of him, could belong to that perfected existence.
- On this proposed understanding, their participation would not carry the same problem as an unrelated recipient receiving unearned goodness.

VII

One Humanity Expressed Through Many Individuals

22:00

A. *Why create descendants at all?*

- The discussion raises a further question:
  - If Adam's descendants are extensions of him, why not leave humanity as a single individual?
- Rabbi Shulman suggests that distinct individuals allow human beings to experience **bestowing goodness upon one another**.

B. *Unity beneath individual separation*

- Rabbi Shulman returns to an earlier discussion:
  - God is one.
  - His will is one.
  - The creation receiving His ultimate goodness can likewise be understood as one unified entity.
- Adam and Eve, despite their distinct expression, were fundamentally one.
- Their descendants can similarly be understood as extensions of that original human unity.

C. *Many bodies, one underlying humanity*

- Humanity's division into separate bodies need not mean that its members are entirely disconnected beings.
- Their shared root preserves an underlying unity.
- Their individuality makes relationships and mutual giving possible.
- Rabbi Shulman presents this as a way to understand both the inheritance of Adam's potential perfection and the purpose of human plurality.

VIII

In Summary

- **Spiritual depth lies beyond appearances:** The Ramchal's distinction between Israel and the nations concerns preparedness for divine connection, not merely differences in natural characteristics.
- **Prophecy illustrates that preparedness:** Rabbi Shulman distinguishes Israel's underlying prophetic capacity from the historical conditions that permit its expression.
- **National traits are instruments, not the essence:** Persistence, boldness, and intellectual accomplishments do not themselves define Israel's sacred calling.
- **Shared humanity remains foundational:** Every human being possesses the dignity of being created in God's image, alongside Israel's particular Torah mission.

- **Adam's perfection was intended to benefit his descendants:** Rabbi Shulman proposes that they could have received it as his extensions, analogous to children inheriting from a parent.
- **Human plurality enables giving:** Many individuals can remain part of one underlying humanity while bestowing goodness upon one another.