Dvar Torah Outline

Maharal's גבורות ה', Chapter 66: The Seven Noahide Commandments and the Return of God's Presence

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explains the Maharal's account of the seven Noahide commandments as a framework encompassing the intellect, the body, and the whole person. Seven generations of wrongdoing progressively distanced God's presence from the world, while seven righteous individuals—from Abraham through Moses—reversed that process by embodying the corresponding virtues. The central conclusion is that God's presence belongs in the earthly world; sin creates the separation, and righteousness restores the intended relationship.

I

The Noahide commandments as a map of the human person

A. *The framework: three, three, and one*

- Rabbi Shulman continues the Maharal's division of the seven Noahide commandments:
  - **Three govern the relationship between humanity and God.**
  - **Three govern relationships between people.**
  - **One addresses the underlying material impulse that demands immediate gratification.**
- Within each group of three, the commandments address:
  - The **intellect**.
  - The **body**.
  - The **whole person**.

B. *Theft parallels forbidden sexual relationships*

- Forbidden sexual relationships represent bodily corruption in the relationship with God.
- Theft represents bodily corruption in relationships with other people.
- Their common denominator is not that they involve precisely the same desire:
  - Sexual wrongdoing pursues bodily gratification.
  - Theft pursues wealth and material possessions.
- Both arise from a person's orientation toward physical acquisition and enjoyment.

C. *Distinguishing desire from the prohibition against coveting*

- The Maharal's discussion is not simply identifying theft and sexual wrongdoing with the prohibition against coveting.
- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes:
  - Fixation on obtaining a particular person's possessions.
  - The broader disposition of continually seeking physical pleasure and material wealth.
- The underlying question is what kind of human faculty or deficiency produces the wrongdoing.

D. *Murder corrupts the whole relationship with another person*

- Theft damages something belonging to another person.
- Murder eliminates the person altogether:
  - Body.
  - Intellect.
  - Spiritual life.
  - Every possible relationship with that individual.
- Rabbi Shulman explains that the murderer effectively declares that the other person has no existence.

E. *Murder parallels blasphemy*

- Blasphemy represents a comprehensive rejection of God, rather than a failure confined to one aspect of religious life.
- Murder similarly negates another human being's entire existence.
- The resulting structure is:
  - **Intellect:** idolatry ↔ the obligation to establish justice.
  - **Body:** forbidden sexual relationships ↔ theft.
  - **Whole person:** blasphemy ↔ murder.

II

The seventh commandment: mastering the demand for immediate gratification

9:00

A. *Eating flesh taken from a living animal*

- The seventh commandment addresses a still more basic material impulse.
- A person cannot even wait for the animal to be killed before eating from it.
- This is not merely a calculated pursuit of greater pleasure; it is an inability to restrain immediate appetite.

B. *Desire versus impulsive grabbing*

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes:
  - Stealing money to obtain good food or other comforts.

– Grabbing and consuming immediately, without reflection or restraint.

- Waiting might actually produce a better meal.
- The failure is therefore not primarily a mistaken calculation about pleasure, but the inability to wait at all.

C. *Material existence experiences itself as lacking*

- The Maharal describes materiality as continually seeking to fill a deficiency.
- Left ungoverned, that sense of lack becomes an urgent demand for gratification.
- This seventh commandment addresses the "animal within" that must be brought under human control.

III

Seven generations progressively distance God's presence

11:00

A. *Adam: uncontrolled desire*

- Adam's eating from the forbidden fruit expresses the same underlying failure addressed by the prohibition against eating from a living animal:
  – Reaching for what one desires rather than restraining oneself.
- This is a **thematic correspondence**, not an identification of the fruit with that particular prohibition.
- God's presence withdraws to the **first heaven**.

B. *Cain: murder*

- Cain's killing of Abel represents the comprehensive interpersonal corruption of murder.
- God's presence withdraws to the **second heaven**.

C. *The generation of Enosh: idolatry*

- **Genesis 4:26:** > וּלְשֵׁת גַּם־הוּא יֻלַּד־בֵּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אֱנוֹשׁ אָז הוּחַל לִקְרֹא בְּשֵׁם ה׳: > (A son was also born to Seth, and he named him Enosh; then people began to call upon the name of the Lord.)
- The rabbinic interpretation connects **הוּחַל** with profanation: God's name began to be misapplied through idolatry.
- Rabbi Shulman notes the Talmud's identification of Enosh's generation with idolatry; he leaves its related teaching about Shabbat for a separate discussion.
- God's presence withdraws to the **third heaven**.

D. *The generation of the Flood: theft*

- **Genesis 6:11:** > וַתִּשָּׁחֵת הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וַתִּמָּלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס: > (The earth became corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with robbery.)

- **Genesis 6:12:** > וַיַּ֤רְא אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶת־הָאָ֔רֶץ וְהִנֵּ֖ה נִשְׁחָתָ֑ה כִּֽי־הִשְׁחִ֥ית כָּל־בָּשָׂ֖ר אֶת־דַּרְכּ֥וֹ עַל־הָאָֽרֶץ׃ > (God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.)
- Although the generation also engaged in sexual corruption, robbery is stated explicitly.
- Rashi explains that robbery was the offense that sealed the generation's judgment.
- God's presence withdraws to the **fourth heaven**.

E. *The generation of the Tower of Babel: blasphemy*

- The Sages describe the builders as seeking to wage war against God.
- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes that this description is a **midrashic interpretation**, not a literal quotation from the verse.
- Their project expresses the claim:
  - Humanity is in charge.
  - Human achievement can resist God.
  - Divine authority can be displaced.
- This is the conceptual equivalent of blasphemy: negating God's sovereignty.
- God's presence withdraws to the **fifth heaven**.

F. *Sodom: the corruption of justice*

- Although Sodom also committed sexual wrongdoing, its defining failure here is its perversion of law.
- Its legal system institutionalized cruelty:
  - Charity was prohibited.
  - Hospitality was forbidden.
  - Courts rewarded aggressors and punished their victims.
- Rabbi Shulman illustrates this with the account of Eliezer:
  - After someone injured him, the judge ruled that Eliezer owed the attacker payment for bloodletting.
  - Eliezer then struck the judge and told him to transfer the resulting "payment" to the original attacker.
- The attack on Lot's guests likewise reflects a society determined to prevent outsiders from receiving hospitality.
- God's presence withdraws to the **sixth heaven**.

G. *Egypt in Abraham's time: forbidden sexual relationships*

- **Leviticus 18:3:** > כְּמַעֲשֵׂ֤ה אֶֽרֶץ־מִצְרַ֙יִם֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר יְשַׁבְתֶּ֣ם־בָּ֔הּ לֹ֥א תַעֲשׂ֖וּ וּכְמַעֲשֵׂ֣ה אֶֽרֶץ־כְּנַ֗עַן אֲשֶׁ֨ר אֲנִ֤י מֵבִיא֙ אֶתְכֶ֣ם שָׁ֔מָּה לֹ֥א תַעֲשׂ֖וּ וּבְחֻקֹּתֵיהֶ֥ם לֹא תֵלֵֽכוּ׃ > (You shall not act according to the practices of the land of Egypt, where you lived, nor according to the practices of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you; you shall not follow their statutes.)

- Rabbi Shulman connects this characterization with Rashi's explanation of Pharaoh's treatment of Abraham and Sarah:
  - Abimelech allowed them to remain in his land under royal protection.
  - Pharaoh sent them away because Egyptian sexual desire was so unrestrained that an edict would not adequately protect them.
- God's presence withdraws to the **seventh heaven**.
- Humanity has now produced the fullest separation described in this framework.

IV

Abraham reverses Egypt's sexual corruption

22:31

A. *Abraham's exceptional modesty*

- Abraham begins the reverse process by embodying the opposite of Egypt's sexual excess.
- **Genesis 12:11:** > וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לָבוֹא מִצְרָיְמָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה־נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אִשָּׁה יְפַת־מַרְאֶה אָתְּ: > (As he approached Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "Now I know that you are a beautiful woman.")
- Rashi, following the Sages, understands Abraham's words as reflecting extraordinary modesty: until then, he had not focused on Sarah's beauty.

B. *The comparison with Job*

- **Job 31:1:** > בְּרִית כָּרַתִּי לְעֵינָי וּמָה אֶתְבּוֹנֵן עַל־בְּתוּלָה: > (I made a covenant with my eyes; how, then, could I gaze at a maiden?)
- The Talmud contrasts Job's restraint toward other women with Abraham's restraint even regarding his own wife.
- Rabbi Shulman stresses that this does not deny Job's righteousness.
- Rather, Abraham represents an even higher degree of separation from bodily indulgence.

C. *The first stage of restoration*

- Abraham repairs the corruption associated with Egypt.
- He brings God's presence down from the seventh heaven to the **sixth heaven**.
- Rabbi Shulman also connects this quality with Abraham's receiving the covenant of circumcision.

V

Isaac reverses Sodom's corruption of justice

26:00

A. *Accepting judgment willingly*

- Isaac accepts God's judgment by offering himself at the binding.

- His acceptance "with love" means that he willingly submits, rather than merely being forced.
- He embodies fidelity to judgment, the opposite of Sodom's manipulation of it.

B. *The apparent mismatch*

- Rabbi Shulman raises a difficulty:
  - Sodom corrupted **human courts and interpersonal justice**.
  - Isaac accepted **divine judgment**.
- How can one repair the other?

C. *One underlying commitment to justice*

- The Maharal explains that divine judgment and human judgment share a common principle.
- Rabbi Shulman suggests that both require accepting what is rightfully demanded:
  - If property belongs to someone else, one must return it.
  - If life belongs to God, one must acknowledge His claim upon it.
- Isaac's greatness is not merely enduring what he cannot prevent.
- It is honestly recognizing God's ownership and willingly responding to it.

D. *The next stage of restoration*

- Isaac brings God's presence down to the **fifth heaven**.

VI

Jacob reverses the rebellion of Babel

30:00

A. *Sanctifying God's name*

- Babel sought to deny or displace God's sovereignty.
- Jacob embodies the opposite: making God's holiness manifest.
- **Isaiah 29:23:** > כִּי בְרְאֹתוֹ יְלָדָיו מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי בְּקִרְבּוֹ יַקְדִּישׁוּ שְׁמִי וְהִקְדִּישׁוּ אֶת־קְדוֹשׁ יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת־אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יַעֲרִיצוּ: > (When he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, they will sanctify My name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and stand in awe of the God of Israel.)

B. *Jacob and the third blessing of the Amidah*

- The first three blessings correspond to the patriarchs:
  - **Abraham:** God's protection of Abraham.
  - **Isaac:** resurrection, associated with his experience at the binding.
  - **Jacob:** God's holiness and the holiness of His name.
- The Maharal also associates the angels' sanctification of God with Jacob's name, Israel.

C. *The next stage of restoration*

- Jacob's sanctification reverses Babel's blasphemous rebellion.
- He brings God's presence down to the **fourth heaven**.

VII

Levi reverses the acquisitiveness of the Flood generation

32:00

A. *Contentment rather than pursuit of wealth*

- Theft means desiring and taking what is not one's own.
- Levi represents separation from the relentless pursuit of material possessions.
- His tribe receives:
  - No territorial inheritance.
  - No ordinary share in the spoils.
  - A life whose inheritance is service of God.

B. *Forgoing even a legitimate share*

- Levi's distinction goes beyond avoiding theft.
- His descendants forgo even the ordinary portion received by the other tribes.
- This expresses an orientation fundamentally different from acquisitiveness.

C. *Why the tribe's future reveals Levi's character*

- Rabbi Shulman notes that the tribal arrangements came long after Levi himself.
- The Maharal reasons that the tribe could not have received this role unless it possessed the corresponding character.
- That character was inherited from its ancestor:
  - Levi was content with what he had.
  - His descendants' vocation reveals his own defining quality.

D. *The next stage of restoration*

- Levi brings God's presence down to the **third heaven**.

VIII

Kohath reverses the idolatry of Enosh's generation

35:00

A. *Service directed entirely toward God*

- Kohath's descendants carry the sacred vessels of the Tabernacle.

- Their work is the direct opposite of idolatry:
  - Not service of another power.
  - Personal, bodily service of God.

B. *Carrying on the shoulder*

- **Numbers 7:9:** > וְלִבְנֵי קְהָת לֹא נָתָן כִּי־עֲבֹדַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֲלֵהֶם בַּכָּתֵף יִשָּׂאוּ: > (But to the sons of Kohath he gave none, because the service of the sacred objects was upon them; they were to carry them on the shoulder.)
- Unlike the families who transported their assigned materials in wagons, Kohath's descendants personally bore the sacred vessels.
- Their bodies were directly engaged in divine service.
- The priests, whose responsibilities include the sacrificial service, also descend from Kohath.

C. *An inherited fitness for service*

- As with Levi, the descendants' role reveals the ancestor's character.
- Kohath's family merited this responsibility because he embodied the corresponding devotion.

D. *The next stage of restoration*

- Kohath brings God's presence down to the **second heaven**.

IX

Amram reverses Cain's introduction of death

37:41

A. *Death without personal sin*

- The Talmud identifies Amram among those who died only because of the serpent's introduction of mortality.
- His death was not brought about by his own wrongdoing.

B. *Cain and Amram as opposites*

- Cain followed the serpent's pattern by bringing death to another person.
- Amram did not even bring death upon himself through sin.
- Rabbi Shulman explains the Maharal's contrast:
  - Cain represents the production of death.
  - Amram represents life uncorrupted by personal wrongdoing.

C. *The next stage of restoration*

- Amram brings God's presence down to the **first heaven**.

X

Moses reverses Adam's uncontrolled desire

39:39

A. *Moses' separation from bodily desire*

- Moses' separation from his wife reflects his exceptional prophetic condition and freedom from bodily craving.
- Rabbi Shulman explains that if desire had remained active, such separation could instead have produced distraction or susceptibility to sin.
- Its appropriateness for Moses therefore reveals his unique transcendence of those desires.

B. *The direct contrast with Adam*

- Adam reached for the fruit he desired.
- Moses was not governed by the material demand for gratification.
- He therefore repairs the first corruption in the sequence.

C. *The completion of the return*

- Moses brings God's presence down from the first heaven to **earth**.
- The divine presence returns to its original dwelling place.

XI

God's presence belongs in the earthly world

41:00

A. *The purpose of the entire sequence*

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes that the Maharal's discussion establishes where God's presence fundamentally belongs:
  - Not permanently removed from creation.
  - Not confined to the highest heavens.
  - **Here, in the lower world.**

B. *Sin creates the distance*

- Separation between created beings and God is not the intended baseline.
- Sin introduces the barrier.
- The seven righteous individuals remove, stage by stage, what the seven earlier generations introduced.

C. *Restoration rather than relocation*

- Moses does not bring God's presence to an alien setting.
- He restores it to its original place.

- The chapter concludes with the promise of further explanation of why the lower world merits this divine dwelling.

XII

In Summary

- **The Noahide commandments encompass the human person:** intellect, body, the whole self, and the underlying impulse toward immediate gratification.
- **The seven stages of withdrawal form a moral pattern:** each generation corrupts another foundational dimension of human life.
- **The seven righteous individuals reverse that pattern:** Abraham repairs sexual corruption; Isaac, corrupted judgment; Jacob, blasphemy; Levi, theft; Kohath, idolatry; Amram, murder; and Moses, uncontrolled desire.
- **The descendants' sacred roles reveal their ancestors' qualities:** Levi's contentment and Kohath's devotion become enduring family vocations.
- **The ultimate goal is God's presence on earth:** sin creates distance, while righteousness restores the relationship intended from creation.