

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH PROJECT

The Noahide Laws - God



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God

Introduction

This week's lesson will begin our parallel series of lessons on Noahide belief and thought. We will begin with where all things began: God.

God: The Transcendent and Immanent

God is easy and simple – utterly uncomplicated in any way.¹ However, our ability to comprehend Him is another matter. Anything we can say about God is more about how we perceive Him than about God himself. This is because God, as we shall see, is entirely transcendental. His essence is utterly beyond all comprehension. In fact, God is indescribable and ultimately unknowable.² However, God is also immanent and involved with His creation. From this feature of God we can learn a lot about Him, deriving His desires and values. This is perhaps the most famous example of God's essence versus our perception of God: although God is ultimately simple, we perceive Him as both transcendent and immanent. This idea is at the heart of much Torah theology and a good starting point for our discussion.

The Transcendent Aspect of God

The prayer Shema states: “Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is one!” This declaration of God's unity is not merely about the mathematics of faith. It is more correctly understood as a qualitative rather than quantitative idea. God is

¹ See *Derech HaShem* I: 1. Although God is entirely simple and in no way possesses any plurality, we describe his influence upon creation using a variety of attributes (mercy, justice, love, etc.). These relate to our understanding, however, not to God's actual essence. See also *Ohr HaShem* I: 3:4; *Sbnei Luchos HaBris* (in the Bris Dovid) I: 42; *Mishnah Torab Yesodei HaTorab* 2:10.

² *Shomer Emunim* 2:11. See also *Mishnah Torab Hil. Teshuva* 5:5 and *Emunos Ve-Deos* II.

not simply “one.” Instead he is “oneness,” the ultimate unity.³ The problem with ultimate one-ness is that its nature precludes two-ness. For that matter, it precludes three-ness, four-ness, or anything-else-ness at all! If that is the case, then how do we exist? The answer is an important concept called *tzimtzum*: constriction. Before God could create anything at all, He had to create a space in which creation could take place. In order to do so, He “constricted” his presence, creating a space in which the essence of one-ness was diluted enough to allow creation to endure. This empty space is known as the *Chalal ha-Penui* (or *Chalal*, for short), the vacated space. Between God’s eternal, unified essence and the *Chalal* a barrier called the *Pargod*, the veil, or partition.⁴

The *Chalal* is the canvas upon which all creation took place. Anything that is not-God exists as a created entity within the *Chalal*. As God Himself said: “I am God; I make all things.”⁵

This distinct separation between God and His creation yields a number of conclusions about God:

- As creator of all things, God must therefore be, in essence, entirely separate from all things.⁶ There is nothing in the created world that can represent or approximate Him. As it states in Isaiah: “To whom will you then liken God?”⁷ Similarly: “There is none like you among the heavenly powers...”⁸ Since God must be distinct from the creation, Judaism and Noahism must reject any concept of pantheism.
- Since God created all things, his existence can in no way be predicated upon anything in creation. We cannot therefore define God as love,

³ See Rambam *13 Principles of Faith* and *Peirusba al HaMishnayos* Sanhedrin 10:1.

⁴ This entire paragraph is a summary of the initial creation as explained by the Zohar and early mystics.

⁵ Isaiah 44:24.

⁶ *Shomer Emunim* 2:11.

⁷ 40:18.

⁸ Psalms 86:8.

morality, or any kind ethical force.⁹ God may have those attributes, but they are not God and vice versa.¹⁰

- Since He created all matter, God must not be made of matter.¹¹ Similarly, since God created space and time, He cannot exist within space and time.¹²

What emerges from the above is a picture of a God who is entirely transcendent and beyond is creation. The danger of such a conception, however, is the erroneous conclusion that God is absent from His creation. To the contrary - God is intimately involved with His creation.

The Immanent Aspect of God

Tzimtzum does not mean that God totally removed Himself from the *Chalal*. It only means that he restricted his essence to a degree necessary for creation to endure. Yet, God's presence still permeates and fills the *Chalal*.

How do we know this?

In Nechemiah 9:6 we are told:

You have made the heavens... the earth and all that is on it... you give life to them all.

The last clause is in the present tense: God gives life and is continuously giving life. There are many other references to God as the perpetual creator throughout the Tanakh.¹³

⁹ *Pardes Rimonim* III: 1; *Yesodei HaTorah* 1:4; *Zohar* I: 22a.

¹⁰ *Kuzari* II: 2; *Ikkarim* II: 22.

¹¹ See *Kuzari* 4:3. Because of His complete detachment from any element of the physical world he is called "pure" and "holy" in many places in Tanakh.

¹² *Emunos VeDeyos* II: 11 & 12 and *Shvil Emunah* ad loc.; *Ikkarim* II: 18; *Asara Maamaros Choker Din* I: 16. This is the Torah's answer to the famous paradox of free will vs. fore-knowledge. If God knows all things before they occur, then how do we have free will? The paradox arises from the assumption is that our choice is a result of God's fore-knowing. However, this cause and effect relationship only exists from our perspective. From God's perspective, in which time is irrelevant, cause does not precede nor follow effect. Our choice and God's knowledge have no temporal relationship to one-another and, therefore, there is no paradox.

Since creation's continued existence depends constantly upon God's will, then His will must extend into the *Chalal*. However, since God is an absolute unity, then his will and his essence must be one in the same. Therefore, God's essence must extend into the *Chalal*.

In this sense, God is immanent: He is continuously and intimately involved with His creation. He directs and sustains it, He hears and answers the prayers of His people; He gives it life and deals with it in kindness and justice. We see this on every page of the Tanakh.

The Experience of God vs. the Reality of God

We must be reminded, however, that this is a dual perception of God, and not relevant to God himself. It is a product of the finite mind's striking against an infinite reality. It is not a perception limited only to humans, however. This dual experience of God is alluded to in the song of the angels in Isaiah 6:3. The angels sing:

Holy, Holy, Holy us the God of hosts, the whole world is filled with his glory.

This verse refers to the immanent experience of God. However, the angels also sing

Blessed is God's glory from His place.¹⁴

Here the angels refer to God in the transcendental sense, as occupying a place that is His, only His, and that of none other.

Similarly, we say in the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Before declaring that God is an unknowable and transcendent unity ("the Lord is One"), we first declare that he is "the Lord our God," both imminent and ruling.

Furthermore, in every blessing we open with the words: *Blessed are you, our God, king of the universe*. We declare God as both *our God*, imminent and close, and as a king who is transcendent and lofty.

¹³ Perpetual creation is fundamental and intrinsic to all Torah theology. See *Kuzari* 4:26; *Ibn Ezra Shemos* 3:2; *Ramban Bereshis* 1:4; *Yesodei HaTorah* 2:9; *Zohar* III:31a; *Pardes Rimonim* 6:8; *Reishis Chochmah Shaar HaYirah* I; there are too many sources to list here – this is only a sampling.

¹⁴ Ezekiel 3:12.

The moving prayer *Ovinu Malkeinu*, recited several times during the year, repeats the refrain *Ovinu Malkeinu* – *Our father, our King!*, referring to God as both our imminent father and our transcendent king.

For Discussion

In the live class we will discuss the following questions: if we know that God is the ultimately one, then why do we seem to focus this dual perception in our prayers and other sacred writings? For that matter, why do we speak of God as “angry” or “loving” if these are all only facets of our perception? Isn’t there a better way to approach God?

God’s Incorporeality

As mentioned above, since God is the creator of all matter and all space, he cannot be made of matter or subject to space. This fact precludes God having any material manifestation. God himself warns us to never think of him corporeally, saying:

*Take heed of yourselves for you saw no matter of form on that day that God spoke to you at Horeb...*¹⁵

Nevertheless, the Torah often speaks of God using anthropomorphism – describing Him as if he had physical qualities. For example, in many places we find reference to the hand of God¹⁶ or the eyes of God.¹⁷ In all such situations the Torah is not telling us that God has a body. Rather, the Torah is borrowing from the language of man in order to express something about His relationship to His creation.¹⁸

Similarly, when the Torah describes God’s voice, it is referring to a prophetic voice within the mind, but not to an actual divine voice in the sense that we understand voice.¹⁹

You wonder then why man is described as being created in God’s image if God has no actual “image?”

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 4:15.

¹⁶ Exodus 9:15.

¹⁷ Psalms 15:3.

¹⁸ See *Ramban* to Genesis 46:1;

¹⁹ *Kuzari* I: 89; *Emunos VeDeyos* 2:12.

This is not a description of the physical attributes of man – rather it means that man can affect and interact with the world using many of the same attributes perceived in God.²⁰ For example, Man and God both share free will and creative ability.

Other Issues

Any descriptor for God must be qualified and considered carefully. For example, God is often referred to as “He,” in the masculine. However, this is merely an effect of the Hebrew language which has no neuter grammatical gender.

In the same vein, even terms that seem accurate must be kept in perspective. For example, God is often described as “eternal.” As apropos as this may appear, it is still a limited description. Not being bound by time, the human concept of “eternity” doesn’t even fit properly. “Eternal” is only the closest term we can use to describe God-in-time.

Overview

Although God is utterly beyond any description, comprehension, or corollary in the created universe, he is nevertheless intimately involved in it.

We see His impact upon reality at every turn, which informs us as to his will and attributes.

Nevertheless, these attributes are only products of our perception of God’s action and not intrinsic to God Himself. We can only understand God’s essence by knowing what it is not. In this sense, Torah theology is called “negative theology.”

²⁰ *Nefesh HaChaim* I: 1; *Avodas HaKodesh*, *HaYichud* 18; *Mechilta Shemos* 14:29; *Hilchos Teshuva* 5:1.

Summary of the Lesson

1. God is beyond any words, description, form, or comprehension.
2. Since God created time, space, and matter, He is not subject to any of them.
3. Although God is entirely transcendent, he is also completely immanent and involved with the world.
4. This dual perception of God is only a perception and is not the reality of God. We are limited in our ability to perceive the infinite.
5. God is incorporeal and without form. Anthropomorphism is used by the Torah, however, to convey by way of allegory God's attributes in this world.
6. Any positive description of God is only a description of God's actions and influence, not of God himself. The essence of God can only be truly communicated by contemplating what God is not.