

Lesson 1.1 – The Creator

Ramchal, following the methodology he established in his Introduction to Derech Hashem, starts with a general principle which he will expand in future chapters. In this case, it is the most "general topic" of all -- "God" -- as all else there is to study and learn comes from God. This is no easy task of course, as Ramchal himself says, and will take some work on our part, going one step at a time.

To cite from another work of his:

*For this is the way of wisdom -- to acquire ideas one after another until, in the end, there emerges one complete concept for which all of the prefaces were necessary.*¹

1:1:1 – The Ten Commandments are enumerated differently in Judaism as compared to the way they have been divided in Christianity. The first commandment as taught in Judaism is "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."² This is the beginning of God's "formal" introduction of Himself to all of Israel (and also to the world). This first commandment is not a prologue as often taught, but a vital foundation for all of the following commands. If Israel did not know that there was a God or who had delivered them from the bonds of slavery (remember, they came from Pagan polytheistic Egypt) here was a clear reminder.

1:1:2-4 – One of the first "points of contention" for some of those reading this chapter may be Ramchal's statement that: "God's true nature cannot be understood at all..." This may seem to contradict what many of us have been taught (i.e., that we can "know God.") Before aiming our weapons at the author, we have to clarify terms and keep certain things in mind.

First, this is only Chapter One, and not everything Ramchal has to say about "us" and "God" is fully revealed at this point. Like a good lawyer, he builds his case, point by point. There is (a lot) more to come.

Second, we need to better understand what Ramchal means by "God" in the context of this chapter.

Third, we need to realize that there may be more to "God" than what we've been taught.

GOD BEFORE GENESIS 1

Genesis 1:1 states: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. That's how our Bibles start, but what about before "the beginning?" The phrase "In the beginning ..." does not refer to the "beginning" of God. The God of Genesis did not "show up on the scene" with this first verse.

¹ From Da'ath Tevunoth (The Knowing Heart), by Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto

² Exodus 20:2

Although existence as we can know it, ("creation") started at Genesis 1:1, prior to this there was a level of existence that included God, and "nothing but God." (From our point of view, this can also be called "non-existence.") This is "God" as Ramchal is discussing at this point.

Words such as "infinite" and "indefinable" are as close as we can come to "describing" God before creation. We cannot apply attributes to the infinite God as such, because attributes can only manifest within creation and creation is finite. To put it succinctly, if we ascribe any quality to the "infinite God," then God is no longer infinite.

In this sense God cannot be compared to any "thing" as "things" only exist in creation. As Ramchal states, "God is absolutely simple, having no parts to Him." The Hebrew term *Ayin* applies to God as being "no thing" (i.e., nothing that we can conceive of).

However, just as God was and is "no thing," God also encompassed "everything there was" prior to creation. The term *Ayin Sof*, meaning "without end," is applied to God as we "view God" before Genesis 1. *Ayin Sof* represents the absolute and perfect "all," without attempting to apply any specific attributes. Another way to compare/contrast the two terms is by saying that *Ayin* is to *Ayin Sof* as zero is to one. Both are true at the same time. (Simple, right?)

GOD AS WE CAN UNDERSTAND GOD

Ramchal does not address the idea of God as we can understand God in this chapter. That comes later. However, we will briefly touch on this subject at this time, as it may help in understanding what is being said in Chapter One.

Beginning with Creation, we have understandable levels of existence that are "separate" from God as *Ayin Sof*. How and why God caused creation to be, will be discussed later. Time and space were created. Spiritual forces, angelic beings, and mankind (including both soul and physical body) all took their place in these levels of reality, which are also referred to as different "worlds" of existence in Hebraic writings.

(See Sidebar on "Four Worlds of Existence.")

As Ramchal explains, nothing in creation, including man, is equal to the Creator. Thus, it is not possible for man to understand God as *Ayin Sof*. However, God does reveal "aspects" (or "emanations") of "Himself" within creation, that we are capable of understanding. A clear example of this is found in the book of Exodus, where we see God giving Moses the following piece of information:

Exodus 6:2-3 - And God spoke to Moses, and said to him, I am the Lord; And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, by the name of El Shaddai, but by my name YHVH was I not known to them.

Here God informs Moses that he has been given a greater level of understanding (of God) than was given to the Patriarchs. As God Himself states, He revealed Himself to Moses at a ("higher") level associated with the name "YHVH," whereas the others knew Him at a level associated with the name "El Shaddai" (God Almighty).

Evidence of this can be seen in the miracles associated with Moses and the Israelites in Egypt and in the Wilderness. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not experience such dramatic, nature-defying events on a regular basis.

Although there was, is, and always will be but "One God," we have a differentiation between God as *Ayin Sof* (who is barely mentioned in Scripture), and the "knowable God," who is revealed in different ways throughout the pages of the Bible and who human beings can relate to.

(See the comments on www.torah.org - paragraph 2 for more on this subject.)

As Ramchal mentions in paragraph 2, all we can know about God at the "level" of *Ayin Sof*, is that God exists and is perfect.

1:1:5 – The last major point made by Ramchal in this chapter concerns the "unity" of God. Every quality exists in perfection "within God" as a unified One. He is not "carved up" in any way, as the human mind is. This creates a problem for us in understanding God. We simply do not have the capacity to grasp God as *Ayin Sof*.

According to Ramchal, we can only understand things (within creation) that our senses can detect and communicate to our minds, and the true nature of God is beyond this. As stated in the Ramchal commentary on Torah.org, "... we haven't any more capacity to fully grasp the spiritual than fish have the ability to grasp the notion of fire!"

Ramchal states that the Torah explains that there is a perfect Creator. This understanding preceded Mount Sinai, and beginning with Adam, was passed along from individual to individual (i.e., Adam, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah, Shem, Eber, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, the Elders of the Twelve Tribes in Egypt.) Beginning with Moses in Egypt, the unbroken chain of transmission continued, through the time of Yeshua, and until today.

Ramchal further explains that not only does Torah attest to the Creator, but nature and science do as well. This parallels what another rabbi wrote:

Romans 1:20-23 - For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

The challenge before us is understanding a God who is both "beyond understanding" as well as revealed in Scripture and in our lives. This task is not as convenient as putting "God in a box," as is often done. The latter may seem to make life a little easier, but it isn't what we are here for. Our purpose in this life is to learn of the "image of God" through being "hearers and doers" of the Torah³, and becoming conformed to this image⁴. This by the way is the true essence of teshuvah (repentance).

³ Romans 2:13; James 1:22-25

⁴ Romans 8:29, 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:4; Colossians 1:15, 3:10; Hebrews 1:3