

Lecture 3: Answering Important Questions in Life

I wasn't really sure where I was.

The last thing I remembered was a meeting with my family for an outing, and now, here I was waking up, opening my eyes. I was surrounded by a group of people who looked a bit strange, and I didn't understand a word of what they were saying... It is very frustrating to look around and not to understand what's going on. And if we add to all of this a feeling of solitude, it can be quite uncomfortable, to put it mildly.

There is nobody to talk to.

I said to myself, "Just don't panic."

How did I get here? What am I doing here? What is my role here? How can I get back to my family?

And what bothered me most was one question: Who can answer all my other questions?

In the meantime, all I could do was to talk to myself... What a weird and uncomfortable feeling...

Does that sound fantastic, like a figment of imagination? Does it sound like the plot of some adventure film or a horror movie? The answer is that we, each and every one of us, have experienced exactly what is described here! This is what happened to each and every one of us when we left our mother's womb!

We are pushed into a new world, one that is strange and unfamiliar, where everybody speaks a language we don't know.

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Just at that moment, we have a lot of questions to ask. What is the point of life? How can we figure this purpose out? Can we depend on some kind of Divine guidance? How can such guidance be reconciled with free choice that we feel is part of our internal makeup?

What is the significance of time? Why does time exist?

These are just a few of the many questions that come to us all the time.

And what solitude we feel! Who can answer all these questions? But we are lucky that we get used to the situation before we keep on asking too many questions...

Where can we find real answers to these questions? Who can give us comfort, how can we become calm and full of knowledge?

One solution might be to turn to the philosophers. Many philosophers appeared throughout history, from Thales, and on to Plato, Aristotle, and then Hume, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel – the list is very long.

In our search for answers, we must understand the way the philosopher approaches this problem. Who can the philosopher ask when he is trying to understand the goals of humanity? If the philosopher is a man of truth and especially if he is honest with himself, he is aware that no matter what he does he is merely looking for answers within his own self.

The philosopher doesn't ask anybody outside of himself, such as the Creator. Rather, the philosopher asks an impersonal concept which he calls "the truth." The philosopher is lonely and isolated, and he hesitates, as if in front of a blocked computer screen, and it is clear that he cannot achieve any level of confidence in what he says.

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In fact, the only thing that a philosopher can be sure of is that he himself is the one who answers all of his questions. And, the fact that in the end we will all die. The end result is that the philosopher who chooses to develop autonomous human thought is a clear person who knows that he has nobody else to talk to, a man who is tragic in some sense, since he is left with doubts about his unanswered questions.

This should remind us of the beginning of our story above: "I wasn't really sure where I was. The last thing I remembered was..."

What will be? Should we lose all hope? Will we remain forever in a disassociated world? Are we destined to remain distant from truth for our entire stay in this world?

No – absolutely not!

There are people in this world known as the Jews, who are aware of the traditions of Israel, which have been passed down from generation to generation through the wise masters of mysticism. These men have kept watch over the "chain of those who keep the secrets" which were given to the Nation of Israel through the prophets. The Jew had an encounter with the Master of the Universe at the time of the momentous events which took place on Mount Sinai.

There is indeed a Creator of the Universe! Moreover, this Creator speaks to man!!
What a joy this is for us!

The Five Books of Moses in particular and the Bible as a whole are the Word of God in the world. More than seventy times in the Torah it is written, "And God spoke to Moses, saying..." The contents are different each time, but the statement itself is very significant: Somebody is talking to us!!

We are not alone!



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And when we hear this, our hearts are filled with thanksgiving.

We can say that the main difference between the wise Jew and the philosopher is that they both know that they can never discover the answers to their questions on their own. But then, while the philosopher assumes that there is nobody to whom we can turn, the Jewish wise man, who is part of the nation of Israel, cannot ignore the collective memory of his people. He can never ignore the impact that the momentous events at Mount Sinai had on his own nation. Thus, his replies to the basic questions about life are presented to him by the Master of the Universe, who revealed Himself to the nation of Israel throughout history, ever since the events at Sinai!

I want to expand our discussion around a significant concept that appears in Jewish tradition, namely, the prophecy which consists of the "chain of those who guard the secrets." This principle leads to two truths which can help us improve our deeds.

The principle involved is **the unified ancestry of the human race**. Adam was the only one who was father of us all! Even our mother, Eve, was in fact created from Adam's body.

This fact, which was pointed out by prestigious literary figures, is the basis and the necessary condition for the **universal attitude of kindness**. Without such a viewpoint it would be impossible for even the most prominent philosophers of all generations to plant into the hearts of all humanity the love between brothers, always soft and full of pity. However, now that we know that we are all brothers we can legitimately talk about an approach showing compassion for all of mankind. Now, suddenly, we have a justification for sending relief teams when natural disasters occur all over the world. In essence, we are all brothers.

It should be emphasized that long before the concepts of equality and freedom became common topics the Jewish tradition made sure to prominently display its approach, full of love for others and based on a principle of equality and freedom for

all. "Here is the reason that only one man was created – to teach you to maintain the peace among all the creatures, since no man can say to another, my father was greater than your father..." [Sanhedrin 37a]. "The wise men added, this is related to the families, in order that families will not be able to challenge each other" [ibid 38a]. Can you imagine what might have been if every race among man would have been descended from a different ancestor?

This noble and exalted way of looking at man will always be considered as the most important part of the description of humanity as a whole! Out of all the many books of which humanity can be so rightly proud, the Book of Genesis alone presents this prestigious concept!

This concept of the single ancestor of mankind leads to other ideas aside from the mutual respect we should show each other. It also leads us to the understanding that **the Torah given to us by the Creator belongs equally to each and every person**. Since this concept is based on the covenant between the Creator and Noah, it includes all of humanity! This covenant includes seven categories of action, and acceptance of these concepts guarantees three basic rights to any person who comes to the Land of Israel, even if he or she is not a Jew:

(1) **Equality before the law**

(2) **Support from the Jewish community in case of need**

(3) **Above all, a special status of acceptance, as is written, "The righteous people of the other nations also receive a portion in the world to come" [Sanhedrin 10b].**

The seven commandments which everybody is obligated to perform include one that calls for positive action (to set up a just legal system) and six prohibitions.

There are many issues that can be discussed with respect to the central issues that confront mankind – related to such matters as ethical behavior, freedom of choice, such traits as kindness and humility, life issues such as good and evil in the world,

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where human history is heading, how we should react to such organizations as ISIS, and much more.

We will confront all of this and more in our weekly contact note and in other more detailed courses.

Shalom, and greetings from the Land of Israel.



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