

Dvar Torah Outline — Derech Hashem (Chelek I, Perek 4, Ot 10–11): How Mitzvot Perfect a Person Through Closeness to Hashem

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explains the Ramchal's step-by-step "mechanism" of spiritual growth: a mitzvah brings a person closer to Hashem, that closeness yields greater גילוי (revelation/"הארת פנים"), and that revelation produces human perfection—because Hashem is the source of all שלמות. He contrasts this with philosophical models that locate perfection in abstract thought, drawing on the Maharal's argument that true human connection to the Infinite comes specifically through Hashem's revealed will in Torah and mitzvot. Rabbi Shulman then clarifies a potential misunderstanding: the goal in doing mitzvot is not self-serving spiritual gain, but sincerely fulfilling Hashem's will—while acknowledging that using "reward" calculations can legitimately motivate action.

I. Re-reading the Ramchal: "Whoever does what Hashem commanded"

A. Setting and text being learned

- Rabbi Shulman continues clarifying ("והנה גזר החכמה העליונה..."), "השם חלק א פרק ד אות י", what the Ramchal means by "doing what Hashem commanded."

B. Not "all 613 at once," but any commanded act

- Rabbi Shulman addresses confusion about whether the Ramchal means **all** mitzvot or **any** mitzvah-action.
- Key clarification:
 - The Ramchal's language includes **any act** that constitutes fulfillment of a mitzvah.
 - Additionally, actions done **in order to enable continued avodat Hashem** can also be subsumed into mitzvah-life, expanding beyond a simplistic "613-count" framing.

C. Each mitzvah has a unique spiritual effect ("segulah" model)

- Every mitzvah brings a person closer to Hashem, but in **distinct ways and degrees**.

- Rabbi Shulman's analogy:
 - Just as different foods (protein, carbs, fats, vegetables) contribute differently to the body, different mitzvot contribute differently to the soul.
-

II. The Ramchal's four-step process: mitzvah → closeness → revelation → perfection (4:34)

A. Step 1: Mitzvah generates closeness

- "יהיה מתקרב על ידו מדרגה מה ממדרגות הקרבה אליו יתברך"
 - (He is brought closer to Hashem on some level.)

B. Step 2: Closeness yields "הארת פנים" (divine radiance)

- "ותגיע לו על ידי זה מדרגה מה ממדרגות הארת פנים"
 - (He receives a level of divine illumination.)

C. Step 3: Revelation produces inner perfection

- "ויעצם בו מדרגה מן השלמות"
 - (A degree of perfection is integrated into him.)

D. The guiding principle

- Rabbi Shulman ties it back to earlier foundations in Derech Hashem:
 - **Hashem is the מקור השלמות**; therefore any genuine revelation/connection to Him becomes a conduit of human perfection.

E. Parallel "inverse" track for עבירות

- Rabbi Shulman notes the Ramchal's mirror-image process:
 - Sin → distance from Hashem → greater concealment → inner deficiency.
-

III. Why the Ramchal doesn't just say "mitzvot make you perfect" (8:30)

A. Rabbi Shulman's question: why the extended mechanism?

- Why list stages instead of a shortcut conclusion?
 - Because the Ramchal is describing **how** perfection happens, not merely **that** it happens.

B. Maharal's critique of the philosophical model (Tiferet Yisrael, ch. 10)

- Rabbi Shulman summarizes the claim of "the philosophers":
 - Human eternity/perfection is achieved via **perfection of the mind** and abstract thought.
- Maharal's rejection (as presented by Rabbi Shulman):
 - Hashem's essence and "infinite thought" are **beyond human grasp**.
 - Either thoughts aren't "me" (so they don't grant *my* eternity), or if they are "me," they still cannot merge with Hashem's infinity.

C. Torah as the practical interface with the Infinite

- Rabbi Shulman's central Maharal-based point:
 - We connect to Hashem through **His revealed will**, expressed in mitzvot.
 - When Hashem wills "sit in a sukkah," and a Jew learns the halachot and fulfills them, he is aligning with that revealed גזון.

D. Concrete halachah as the "intersection point"

- Examples Rabbi Shulman uses:
 - Damages: "If my cow gored your cow... who pays whom?"
 - Sukkah details: walls, measurements, halachic structures.
 - The mechanism:
 - Torah/mitzvot create a **real, concrete handle** by which finite humans relate to the Infinite Creator.
-

IV. “How do we know we’re being perfected?”— post-sin humanity and hidden growth (16:01)

A. Yaakov’s question

- If mitzvot perfect us, why don’t we *feel* or see it?

B. Pre- and post-חטא אדם הראשון

- Rabbi Shulman contrasts:
 - **Before the sin:** spiritual elevation/refinement would have been immediate and palpable.
 - **After the sin:** perfection is not experienced so transparently.

C. What we do have: moments of connection and “יכוך בכוחז”

- During mitzvah performance/learning there is an experiential **moment of connection** worth “savoring.”
- ברכות קל: help
 - They function as an attention mechanism: “perk up your antennas.”
- Long-term:
 - Spiritual refinement remains **in potential** until it is fully expressed at (“יכוך בכוח”) **תחיית המתים**.

V. Action, intention, and understanding: what matters in mitzvot vs. Torah study (18:30)

A. Doing the mitzvah is indispensable

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes:
 - Intention without action is “worthless,” except in cases of genuine אונס (prevented circumstances).

B. Two distinct inner components

- **(intention) כוונה** of the heart
 - The highest level: “because Hashem commanded me.”
- **Understanding:** belongs to תלמוד תורה
 - Thinking about the relevant פסוקים, concepts, and reasons can “ride on top” of the mitzvah.

C. Ramchal's point in Maamar Vikuach: learning can motivate intention

- Since humans are physical and easily unmotivated, Torah thought can help the heart feel the significance of what it's doing.
 - Bottom line:
 - For the mitzvah-act, what's essential is **action + intention**, while understanding is central in its own mitzvah (Torah study) and supportive for motivation.
-

VI. "Hashem doesn't 'need' the act"—mitzvot as and closeness as reward (21:30) "גזירת המלך"

A. Tanchuma: the act itself isn't the "point"

- Rabbi Shulman cites the idea:
 - "וכי מה אכפת לו לקדוש ברוך הוא בין ששחט את הבהמה ואכל או אם נחר ואכל"
 - (What does Hashem care whether one slaughtered properly and ate, or stabbed and ate?)
- Meaning:
 - The core power of mitzvah is **obedience to the King's command**, producing closeness to the King.

B. Gemara: don't reduce mitzvot to human ethical sentiment

- Rabbi Shulman references:
 - "כל האומר לקן צפור יגיעו רחמיו... משתקין אותו"
 - (One who says "Your mercy reaches the bird's nest"... we silence him.)
- Lesson:
 - The mitzvah is primarily a **divine decree**, not a projection of our moral reasoning.

C. "שכר מצוה" and why it can't be paid in this world

- Rabbi Shulman cites:
 - "שכר מצוה בהאי עלמא ליכא"
 - (There is no true reward for a mitzvah in this world.)
- And the line:
 - "שכר מצוה מצוה"
 - (The reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah.)

- Rabbi Shulman's explanation:
 - The "reward" is the **closeness to Hashem** itself—something this world is not built to deliver fully.

D. World-as-training, not world-as-reward

- Rabbi Shulman's framing:
 - This world is "a gym, not a spa"; it is an obstacle course designed for avodah, not for full spiritual payout.
-

VII. Why spell out the "sin track" too? qualitative relationship, not arithmetic (25:00)

A. Ross's question: why isn't "the opposite" enough?

- Rabbi Shulman answers:
 - The Ramchal is giving an exact mechanism, like a structured logical argument.
 - The "opposite" needs its own description: distance, concealment, deficiency are real categories.

B. A student's point: mitzvot and עבירות don't cancel out like a ledger

- Rabbi Shulman endorses:
 - They're not one quantitative track where you net out totals.
 - They are **qualitative**, like different facets of a relationship.

C. Relationship analogy

- Rabbi Shulman compares spiritual life to relationship dynamics:
 - You can strengthen one aspect and weaken another; they don't "cancel," they reshape the relationship.
-

VIII. Ot 11 summary: the true intention in mitzvot and avoidance of עבירות (28:00)

A. The Ramchal's concluding formulation

- Rabbi Shulman reads Ot 11 as a summary:
 - Intention in mitzvot should be directed to Hashem—clinging to His will, drawing close, and “enjoying” illumination of His presence.
 - Avoiding עבירות is to avoid what causes distance from Hashem—this is the true purpose embedded in the system.

B. Each mitzvah contains great depth in its particulars

- Rabbi Shulman notes Ramchal's caveat:
 - Each mitzvah has profound depth tied to human nature and the structure of creation.
 - Further discussion appears later (including in a later section on mitzvot and מועדים).
-

IX. “Beware the selfish misread”: serving Hashem vs. serving for “spiritual profit” (31:00)

A. The potential misunderstanding

- Rabbi Shulman flags a dangerous reading:
 - “I do mitzvot so I can get closeness, illumination, and self-perfection.”
- His correction:
 - The perfection is an outcome, not the purpose we should be aiming at.

B. Pirkei Avot: serving not for reward

- Rabbi Shulman cites the teaching:
 - “אל תהיו כעבדים המשמשים את הרב לקבל פרס...”
 - (Don't be like servants who serve the master to receive reward...)
- Proper orientation:
 - Do mitzvot to fulfill the will of “אבינו שבשמים,” giving נחת רוח לבורא.

C. Hashem's will includes our closeness

- Rabbi Shulman connects back to earlier in Derech Hashem:
 - Creation's purpose involves Hashem's good, but also the revelation of His honor—“דירה בתחתונים”.
 - Therefore:
 - Seeking closeness is not “selfish” when framed as fulfilling **what Hashem wants**.
-

X. Practical motivation: using “reward calculations” is legitimate (36:30)

A. When pure לשמה isn't motivating

- Rabbi Shulman acknowledges human reality:
 - Many people need motivators to overcome the יצר הרע.

B. Mishnah: “הוי מחשב שכר מצוה כנגד הפסדה” as an approved tool

- Rabbi Shulman explains:
 - The Mishnah recommends calculating:
 - What the mitzvah “costs” versus its reward.
 - What the עבירה “gives” versus its loss.
- This is not a contradiction to serving without expectation of reward:
 - It is a practical strategy for ensuring performance and restraint.

C. Individuality of motivation

- Rabbi Shulman concludes this discussion:
 - People differ; intentions vary.
 - The ideal remains: doing mitzvot solely to fulfill Hashem's will, even while using secondary motivators when needed.
-

In Summary

- Rabbi Shulman presents the Ramchal's structured pathway: **mitzvah** → **closeness to Hashem** → **greater divine revelation (“הארת פנים”)** → **human perfection**.
- Using the Maharal, Rabbi Shulman argues that Judaism rejects “perfection through abstract thought” and locates true connection in **Hashem's revealed will** embodied in Torah and mitzvot.

- Spiritual growth post-חטא is less immediately felt; we experience moments of connection now and carry refinement “בכוח” until its full expression later.
- The correct aim in mitzvot is not self-serving gain but **fulfilling Hashem’s will** and giving Him נחת רוח. of reward/loss remain valid tools to motivate action and avoid “חשבונות” while—רוח.