

Dvar Torah Outline — Ramchal on Hishtalshelut: Roots and Branches, Angels as “Maintenance,” and Translating Physical Actions into Spiritual Realities

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman continues the Ramchal's discussion of how Hashem structured reality as a system of “roots and branches,” where higher spiritual powers are the roots and the physical world is their downstream expression. He explains the metaphor of **השתלשלות** as a chain of worlds in which the “lowest” aspect of a higher realm becomes the “highest” entry-point into the realm beneath it, and he clarifies the role of **מלאכים** as intermediaries who ensure the correct execution of divine influence. Rabbi Shulman then emphasizes a key interpretive principle: whatever exists “up there” corresponds to what we see “down here,” but only after stripping away physical form to identify the underlying essence—allowing us to relate to Hashem's hanhagah through tangible mashalim.

I. Framing: the world as “roots, trunk, and branches”

A. The basic model Rabbi Shulman is building from the Ramchal

- Reality is structured as **שורשים וענפים** (roots and branches).
- The “roots” are what the Ramchal calls **כוחות הנבדלים**—disembodied spiritual powers.
- The “branches” are the concrete realities and events of the physical world.
- **מלאכים** (angels) are presented as an **intermediary layer** between roots and branches.

B. Hishtalshelut as a “step-by-step transformer”

- Rabbi Shulman explains **השתלשלות** as a gradual “stepping down,” like electricity passing through successive transformers until it becomes usable at the lowest level.
 - The process is not a single jump from “highest” to “lowest,” but many stages of translated expression.
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II. “Chain links” and the overlap between worlds (2:00)

A. Why the Ramchal compares hishtalshelut to a chain (שלשלת)

- Rabbi Shulman explains the image: each “ring” links into the next.
- The **bottom of the upper ring** enters into the **top of the lower ring**.

B. Nefesh HaChaim / Arizal framework: the lowest of the upper becomes the highest of the lower

- Rabbi Shulman cites the concept (via Zohar, explained in Nefesh HaChaim) that:
 - the most “external/coarse” aspect of a higher realm becomes the “inner/root” of the realm beneath it.
- Illustrative mashal:
 - Even when describing something like *neshamah relating to body*, one can picture (imperfectly) that what is “lower” in the upper realm becomes what is “higher” in the lower realm.

C. Clarifying: angels are not “every link”

- Rabbi Shulman stresses that **many realms are above angels**.
- Angels appear at certain levels, but they are not identical with the entire chain itself.

III. Finishing ב א ו ת: tradition that every thing and every event has angelic supervisors (9:35)

A. Rabbi Shulman reads the Ramchal’s key line

- “...עוד מסורת בידינו שכל עצם וכל מקרה ... הופקדו פקידים מן הסוג המלאכי”
 - (Rabbi Shulman’s explanation: every *entity* and every *occurrence* in the lower world has an angelic “פקידה”—an appointed supervisory force.)

B. Defining the categories: nouns and verbs

- Rabbi Shulman frames the Ramchal as describing:
 - **עצם** = a “thing” (entity / noun)
 - **מקרה** = an “event” (happening / verb)

C. What angels do: intermediaries who ensure the flow is executed

- Rabbi Shulman describes angels as:
 - “maintenance crews” ensuring the system runs properly,
 - ensuring the **שפע** (influence) is carried out as intended,
 - not the originators of the process and not the “end-point,” but **in-between messengers**.

D. Why they're called מלאכים

- Rabbi Shulman highlights that **מלאכים = messengers**, i.e., beings defined by their intermediary function between sender and recipient.

E. Examples and clarifications from discussion

- Rabbi Shulman addresses the question: isn't “hitting each blade of grass” more than supervision?
 - He answers: that too is part of ensuring execution—directing the influence so the decree is concretely realized.
 - Example of “mission” as implementation of higher will:
 - A מלאך preventing harm in a specific situation is an instance of higher רצון manifesting through an intermediary.
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IV. Opening גאות: the “real state” of the world is determined above (17:39)

A. The Ramchal's claim: the essential reality is in the higher powers

- Rabbi Shulman reads/explains:
 - “...ואמנם עיקר מציאות העולם ומצבו האמיתי הוא בכחות ההם העליונים”
- Meaning:
 - The true determinants of existence and events are in the **כוחות עליונים**.
 - What we see below is an outgrowth of what is real above.

B. This applies to:

- Things that exist since **בריאת העולם** (the start of creation),
- and things that **arise over time** (“בהתחלפות הזמן”)—new events and developments.

C. A major inference Rabbi Shulman draws: change below implies change above

- If everything below is rooted above, then:
 - observable changes in the lower world indicate that **something is changing in the roots** as well.
 - This becomes an important foundation for later implications (Avodah, kavanos, mitzvos).
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V. Dynamic roots vs. a “static puppet-master” model (20:31)

A. Rabbi Shulman contrasts two possible models

1. **Static roots / variable outputs:**
 - Higher powers stay unchanged; only “signals” fluctuate downward.
2. **Root-branch identity** (Ramchal's model as Rabbi Shulman presents it):
 - If the branch changes, the root has changed—realignment is occurring above.

B. The consequence: the upper worlds are “alive”

- Rabbi Shulman describes the upper reality as:
 - dynamic and interactive,
 - capable of shifts, rearrangements, “breakages,” or emergence of new structures,
 - not merely a fixed system sending different doses.
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VI. Key principle: the same “concept” exists above and below—only in a form appropriate to each realm (25:31)

A. Rabbi Shulman identifies this as a crucial line

- The Ramchal distinguishes:
 - the **סדר, מצב, מציאות** (existence, state, organization/interaction) “up there” *as appropriate to that realm*,
 - and the corresponding **מקרים בשפלים** (happenings below) as they are “copied/translated” downward.

B. “נעתק” — not duplication of form, but translation of essence

- Rabbi Shulman explains נעתק as “copied over,” but not literally duplicated:
 - the *same inner content* appears in each layer,
 - expressed according to the capacities and “rules” of that world.
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VII. Removing physical clothing: how to think about “actions” above (27:00)

A. The common mistake Rabbi Shulman warns against

- If we see hugging below, we might imagine “hugging” above as literal arms and bodies.
- Rabbi Shulman ties this to earlier discussion of דביקות:
 - דביקות is not a physical “bear hug,” but **becoming similar to Hashem** in qualities and orientation.

B. Mashal from computer science (raised in class, used by Rabbi Shulman)

- Two variables can be “tied” such that changes in one propagate to the other:
 - not a physical attachment,
 - but a functional/conceptual linkage.

C. Rabbi Shulman quotes the Ramchal’s clarification (כללים הראשונים)

- He explains the Ramchal’s point:
 - when earlier sources speak of “speech” or “interaction” between ספירות,
 - it does not mean physical bodies speaking with sound.
- Instead:
 - “speech” describes a form of influence—something from one enters the “domain” of another and alters its illumination,
 - analogous to human speech affecting another’s mind and actions.

D. Practical takeaway: extract the essence of each physical act

- Rabbi Shulman formulates the method:
 - identify what the action *really is* (its inner meaning),
 - then understand that this essence exists in higher worlds in a non-physical mode.
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VIII. Why Hashem built a stepped world: enabling “והלכת בדרכיו” through mashal (34:30)

A. The purpose of הדרגה (step-by-step)

- Rabbi Shulman explains:
 - without intermediate layers, we could not grasp, contain, or relate to divine hanhagah.
 - each step allows us to relate to one level higher, building upward.

B. The function of משל

- A משל is a coarse, relatable phenomenon that lets us grasp something higher and subtler.
- Rabbi Shulman connects this to the very notion of השתלשלות / שלשלת:
 - “this is from that” (של... של... של).

C. Example: rethinking תודת by abstracting it

- Rabbi Shulman suggests:
 - תודת is not only “bringing a sandwich,” but an abstract dynamic of **drawing independent beings closer**,
 - comparable to a “gravity-like” attraction (as a conceptual image),
 - and this abstraction helps connect the physical act to its higher spiritual root.

IX. In Summary

- Rabbi Shulman presents the Ramchal’s framework of reality as **roots and branches**, where the physical world expresses higher **כוחות הנבדלים** through a process of השתלשלות.
- The “chain” model means the lowest aspect of a higher realm becomes the entry-point for the realm beneath, producing continuity without identity of physical form.
- **מלאכים** function as intermediaries—“messengers/maintenance”—ensuring divine influence is executed in the lower worlds.
- The key interpretive rule is to **strip away physical imagery** and identify the **essence** of actions and relationships, using the lower world as a משל to relate upward and fulfill והלכת בדרכיו.