

Dvar Torah Outline — *Derech Hashem* (Chelek 1, Perek 5, Halachah 4): Two Directions of “Movement,” Bechirah, and How Mitzvot Affect the Worlds

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explains the Ramchal's model that most events originate “above” in the higher, spiritual powers and descend into the physical world as cause-and-effect. The major exception is human free will: through bechirah a person can initiate change from below to above, impacting the higher realms by acting in the physical world. Rabbi Shulman concludes that this framework is crucial for avodat Hashem because it turns mitzvot and tefillah from generic “good deeds” into targeted spiritual actions that actively reshape reality, not merely trigger reward like a vending machine.

I. The default rule: beginnings are above, outcomes are below

A. “Root and branch” as cause and effect

- Rabbi Shulman reads the Ramchal: events start “**למעלה בכחות עליונים**” (in the supernal powers) and end “**למטה בשפלים**” (down in the lowly/physical realm).
- Not only “events,” but even **newly emerging matters** (“ענינים המתחדשים”) begin in the higher, “separate” forces (**כחות הנבדלים**) and then unfold down here.

B. Why Hashem designed it this way

- The descending structure is a “step-down ladder” enabling us to:
 - trace reality upward conceptually,
 - relate “branch” to “root,”
 - and get closer to Hashem by understanding the system.
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II. The exception: human bechirah breaks the one-way flow (2:00)

A. The “one פרט” outside the rule

- Rabbi Shulman identifies the exception as: **what pertains to human free will**.
- Clarification:
 - Not everything about a person is bechirah-driven.
 - Some aspects of human life operate like the rest of nature (determined “top-down”).

B. What “predetermined” means in this context

- Not merely “Hashem knows the future,” but a structural claim:
 - changes in higher realms necessarily translate into outcomes below
 - (e.g., drought, rain season, tornado—Rabbi Shulman’s examples).
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III. How can man be free if everything is a ladder? Man spans worlds via neshamah (5:00)

A. The student’s “pictorial” problem

- If everything flows down through levels, where does man’s free will “sit”?
 - Is there a “void” above him?
 - Is he disconnected from the higher worlds?

B. Rabbi Shulman’s resolution: no vacuum—man has a spiritual root

- Man is not merely physical; his נשמה is fundamentally from the spiritual realms.
 - Therefore, man **spreads across multiple worlds** and is the “ladder” that unites upper and lower realms.
 - The struggle of bechirah:
 - whether a person follows the **higher self** (neshamah) or **lower self** (body-driven).
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IV. The chiddush: man can move the world; two opposite “motions” exist (9:00)

A. Ramchal's key line as Rabbi Shulman frames it

- “ואדרבה נתנו לו כח להיות מניע לעולם עצמו... כפי מה שיבחר בחפצו”
 - Man can be a “mover” that changes the world and its creations according to his choices.

B. Two global directions of movement

- “ונמצאו בעולם שתי תנועות כלליות הפכיות”
 1. **Natural / determined (מוכרחת)**: from above to below
 2. **Free will (בחירה)**: from below to above

C. Defining the “determined” motion

- The lower realms are “moved” (affected/changed) by the higher powers:
 - “תנועתם מלמעלה למטה”
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V. Why bechirah works “bottom-up”: man acts physically, and the connection carries the effect upward (11:30)

A. A grounding principle: man's direct impact is on the physical

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes the Ramchal's “standing fact”:
 - “מה שהוא מניע אי אפשר שיהיה אלא גשם מן הגשמים”
 - because “כי האדם גשמי ומעשיו גשמיים”
- Implication for mitzvot and tefillah:
 - spirituality must be expressed through bodily action (speech, movement, objects), not only inward meditation.

B. Because all levels are interconnected, physical motion reverberates upward

- Since higher and lower are linked (“הקשר וההצטרפות”), movement below triggers “continued impact” upward:
 - “בתנועה הגשמית... יגיע בהמשך ההתפעלות אל הכוח העליון שלו”

- Result:
 - “ונמצאת התנועה הזאת מלמטה למעלה”—a true bottom-up motion, opposite the natural flow.

C. Rabbi Shulman’s illustrative analogies

- **Bell-tower rope:** pull the rope below; the bell rings above.
- “**Inverse marionette**”: a puppet that moves actively can pull the strings and affect the handler’s hands above.

D. The system-wide consequence

- Once a person’s action “rearranges” something in the upper realm,
 - the upper realm then resumes its normal role of sending influence downward,
 - potentially opening channels of blessing (Rabbi Shulman’s example: removing a “blockage” to allow rain/berachah).

VI. Not all human actions are bechirah: some are decreed from above (18:30)

A. Rabbi Shulman’s framing of mixed human reality

- A person is an animal nature “superimposed” with a neshamah:
 - therefore not everything is fully free-willed.

B. Two categories of human actions

1. **From bechirah:** move bottom-up
2. **From a divine decree (גזירה עליונה):** come top-down
 - for reward or punishment (“לשכרו או לענשו”)
 - further details will appear later in the Ramchal’s structure.

C. Example from Chazal: an angel “pushing” an event

- Rabbi Shulman references Yehudah turning toward Tamar and cites the idea (via Rashi) that an angel guided/pushed the situation—an instance of top-down orchestration.
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VII. Why this matters in avodat Hashem: mitzvot as “avodah l'tzorech gavoha,” not generic goodness (23:00)

A. The question: why care whether it's “bottom-up” or “top-down”?

- A student asks: if Hashem ultimately runs everything anyway, why does it matter whether my mitzvah “causes changes above” versus “Hashem rewards me from above”?

B. Rabbi Shulman's answer: it changes motivation and seriousness

- When you understand *what* your action affects, mitzvot become:
 - concrete spiritual work,
 - part of fixing the world,
 - not just “I did a nice thing.”

C. “Sophisticated” understanding: alignment with spiritual channels

- Rabbi Shulman describes an advanced layer:
 - specific mitzvot and words of Torah align with specific spiritual forces/structures,
 - producing specific תיקונים.
- This is called “עבודה לצורך גבוה”:
 - Hashem sets us up as His “army”/messengers to act on His behalf to repair reality.

D. Mashal: taking responsibility for a specific soldier/hostage (26:00)

- Rabbi Shulman compares this to pairing one's learning/tefillah with a particular soldier for protection:
 - the concreteness makes it emotionally impossible to “skip.”
- Personal story: helping his daughter overcome anger by imagining the stakes—your inner victory could save a life.

E. The *Nefesh HaChaim* principle

- If we truly grasped the significance of each action, we would never sin:
 - sin thrives on the illusion that “nothing important is happening here.”
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VIII. The Ramchal's broader project: mapping the system because it is dynamic, not a vending machine (29:30)

A. Question: does the Ramchal explain the “powers above” in detail?

- A student notes: to understand effects, you need a grasp of what those powers are.

B. Rabbi Shulman: that's why the Ramchal builds the structure first

- The earlier parts of *Derech Hashem* describe the architecture so we can understand:
 - how prayer and mitzvot are effective,
 - and how the system is designed to be influenced.

C. Rejecting the “vending machine” model

- Rabbi Shulman stresses:
 - the system is **dynamic**, not static,
 - mitzvot do not merely “ring a bell” for a reward,
 - they **change relationships among forces in the upper worlds**, which then reshapes what descends into our world.
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IX. In Summary

- Rabbi Shulman outlines the Ramchal's rule: reality generally begins in higher powers and descends into the physical world as cause-and-effect.
- Human bechirah is the key exception, creating a second “motion” that goes from below to above.
- Because man acts through the physical, mitzvot and tefillah are the concrete means by which human choices reverberate upward and reshape the system.
- This framework transforms avodat Hashem: mitzvot are not generic goodness or a reward vending machine, but targeted spiritual work—“עבודה לצורך גבוה”—within a dynamic, responsive universe.