



ATTRIBUTE UNDERSTANDINGS

Understanding RATZON HASHEM: The Divine Will of Ein Sof

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The Essence of RATZON (רצון)

RATZON (רצון) — Divine Will — stands as perhaps the most fundamental and primordial force in Jewish mystical thought. Before creation, before wisdom, before any attribute or emanation, there was first Ratzon — the pure will of Ein Sof (the Infinite Divine) to create and relate to something other than Itself. In Kabbalah, the Hebrew letters of רצון (reish-tzadik-vav-nun) reveal its profound essence:

- ר (Reish) represents beginning, the “head” (rosh) of all processes
- צ (Tzadik) suggests righteousness and the channel through which divine flow descends
- ו (Vav) represents connection and the vertical channel linking higher and lower realms
- ן (Nun) in its final form represents the descent into the lowest realms

Numerically, רצון equals 346, which corresponds to the phrase “רצה ה'” (ratzah Hashem) — “God desired.” This numerical equivalence reveals that Ratzon isn’t merely a function but the very essence of divine desire expressing itself through creation. The Zohar describes Ratzon as “the most concealed of all concealed things” because it precedes all revelation. Unlike wisdom, which can be grasped intellectually, or emotions, which can be felt, Ratzon exists before any manifestation. It is the pure “that” before the “what” or “how” of creation.

The Primordial Nature of Ratzon in Creation

In Kabbalistic cosmology, Ratzon Hashem occupies a unique position as the first stirring within Ein Sof that eventually led to creation. The Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria) describes this process as beginning with a primordial tzimtzum (contraction) that was itself an act of divine will. Before any sefirot (divine attributes) emerged, before

even the concept of Keter (Crown) as the first emanation, there was Ratzon — the will to create, to reveal, to relate. As Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains in Tanya, “Before the tzimtzum, there arose within His simple Will the desire to create worlds and emanate emanations, to bring to light the perfection of His actions, names and attributes.” This primordial will has several essential characteristics:

1. **Ratzon is Groundless:** Unlike human will, which is motivated by needs or deficiencies, divine Ratzon has no external cause or reason. As the Maharal of Prague teaches, “Ein Sof’s will is not based on any reason that precedes it, for nothing precedes Ein Sof.” It is a completely free choice arising from absolute perfection, not from lack.
2. **Ratzon Creates Possibility:** The Baal Shem Tov taught that divine will doesn’t just determine what exists — it creates the very possibility of existence. Before Ratzon, the concept of “something other than Ein Sof” was not merely non-existent; it was impossible. Ratzon creates the very category of possibility.
3. **Ratzon Transcends Logic:** While divine wisdom (Chochmah) follows a logical structure, Ratzon precedes and transcends logic itself. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, “Will is higher than reason. Reason must justify itself to will, but will need not justify itself to reason.”
4. **Ratzon Contains All Details:** Unlike human planning, which moves from general concepts to specific details, divine Ratzon contains every minute detail of creation from its inception. The Maggid of Mezritch taught that “every leaf that falls from a tree, every movement of the smallest creature — all was contained in the primordial will.”

The Two Dimensions of Ratzon Hashem

Chassidic teachings distinguish between two fundamental aspects of divine will that operate simultaneously yet differently throughout creation:

1. RATZON ELYON (רצון עליון) – HIGHER WILL

Ratzon Elyon represents Ein Sof’s transcendent will that exists beyond all worlds and creations. This is will in its most abstract form — the pure desire for creation itself, before any specific manifestations. Key aspects include:

- It is completely unified and simple, containing no divisions
- It transcends the limitations of time and space
- It remains unchanged by the actions of created beings
- It represents what Kabbalah calls “the delight in the essence” (sha’ashuim atzmi’im)

As Rabbi Dov Ber (the Maggid of Mezritch) explained, “Ratzon Elyon is like the desire to have a home before any blueprints are drawn or materials gathered — the pure will for the end result that precedes all details of implementation.”

2. RATZON TACHTON (רצון תחתון) – LOWER WILL

Ratzon Tachton is the manifestation of divine will as it descends into the specifics of creation, establishing the particular laws, boundaries, and nature of each realm. This includes:

- The specific divine will for how each creature should function
- The detailed laws of nature that govern physical reality
- The precise moral and spiritual expectations for humanity
- The particular mitzvot (commandments) given to Israel

The Alter Rebbe explains that Ratzon Tachton is “the divine will clothed within the particulars of creation, determining the nature and function of each entity according to its level.” The relationship between these two levels is profound: Ratzon Elyon represents what Ein Sof ultimately desires (a dwelling place in the lower worlds), while Ratzon Tachton represents how that desire manifests through particular pathways and requirements.

How to Best Align with Ratzon Hashem

Aligning with divine will represents the ultimate spiritual achievement. Unlike other divine attributes that we might embody partially (such as wisdom or kindness), Ratzon requires complete surrender and alignment. Here are the deepest approaches to discovering and fulfilling Ratzon Hashem:

1. THROUGH BITUL (SELF-NULLIFICATION)

The primary obstacle to perceiving divine will is our own will. The Baal Shem Tov taught that true alignment with Ratzon Hashem begins with bitul – the nullification of our separate sense of self:

- Practice seeing your desires as distinct from your essence
- Cultivate the ability to step outside your own perspective
- Develop the capacity to genuinely ask “What does Ein Sof want?” rather than “What do I want?”
- Recognize that your very existence is continuously created by and utterly dependent on divine will

As Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk famously said, “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart” – meaning that the shattering of ego creates the space for divine will to enter.

2. THROUGH TORAH STUDY AS REVELATION OF WILL

The most direct access to divine will comes through immersive Torah study. As the Zohar states, “The Torah, Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, are all one” – meaning that Torah provides direct access to divine intention:

- Study Torah not just for information but as communion with divine mind
- Approach halachah (Jewish law) as the detailed expression of divine will in practical terms
- Recognize that even seemingly technical details contain infinite divine wisdom
- See disagreements between sages as different facets of the same divine will

The Alter Rebbe explains in Tanya that when we study Torah properly, “The mind of the person is clothed within and encompassed by the divine will, and divine will encompasses his mind.” This creates a unique unity where human and divine will become aligned.

3. THROUGH LISTENING TO THE “DAUGHTER VOICE” (BAT KOL)

Chassidic masters teach that divine will continuously broadcasts itself as a subtle inner voice or intuition that we can learn to discern:

- Cultivate inner silence to hear beyond the noise of personal desires
- Practice distinguishing between ego-driven impulses and deeper intuitions
- Pay attention to persistent thoughts that arise during prayer or meditation
- Notice when the same message seems to come from multiple sources

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught that “God speaks to each person through the events of their own life.” Learning to read these messages requires developing what the Baal Shem Tov called “transparent consciousness” — awareness that can perceive divine will through the veils of physical reality.

4. THROUGH RECOGNIZING DIVINE PROVIDENCE AS WILL IN ACTION

The Baal Shem Tov revolutionized Jewish thought by emphasizing that every detail of existence is a direct expression of divine will in real time:

- Train yourself to see “coincidences” as divine orchestration
- Recognize challenges as opportunities designed specifically for your growth
- Understand that every situation contains precisely the conditions needed for your spiritual work
- View the people you encounter as messengers bringing exactly what you need to encounter

As the Baal Shem Tov taught, “From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven. And when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being.” This light is the manifestation of divine will through human

relationship.

5. THROUGH MITZVOT AS EMBODIED WILL

Perhaps the most concrete way to align with divine will is through the physical performance of mitzvot (commandments):

- Recognize that each mitzvah creates a direct connection to divine will
- Understand that physical actions affect spiritual realms
- Approach mitzvot not as symbolic acts but as actual fulfillment of cosmic purpose
- See each detail of proper observance as essential to aligning with divine precision

The Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasized that mitzvot accomplish something that even the highest spiritual intentions cannot: they create a dwelling place for Ein Sof in the lowest physical realms. Through mitzvot, we don't just align with divine will — we actively implement it in the physical world.

The Paradoxes of Ratzon Hashem

Divine will contains several profound paradoxes that must be embraced rather than resolved:

1. THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

Ein Sof's will establishes the entire framework of reality, yet within that framework, human beings are granted genuine freedom:

- Everything is predetermined by divine will, yet human choice is absolutely real
- Our freedom exists within parameters established by divine will
- Our choices have cosmic significance precisely because they fulfill divine intention
- Human free will itself is willed by Ein Sof

As the Rambam (Maimonides) explains, "Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn toward the good path and be righteous, the ability to do so is in his hands; and if one wishes to turn toward the evil path and be wicked, the ability to do so is in his hands." Yet paradoxically, this very freedom fulfills divine will.

2. THE PARADOX OF CONCEALMENT AND REVELATION

Divine will simultaneously conceals and reveals itself:

- The very act of creation conceals Ein Sof's presence while revealing divine will

- Physical reality both hides and expresses divine intention
- Our struggles to discern divine will are themselves part of divine will
- The hiddenness of God is itself a revelation of divine desire for relationship

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk taught, “God dwells wherever we let Him in.” This suggests that the concealment of divine will creates the space for us to actively invite it in — a profound expression of divine desire for partnership.

3. THE PARADOX OF UNCHANGING WILL AND EVOLVING CREATION

Divine will is eternal and unchanging, yet creation is dynamic and evolving:

- Ein Sof’s will is timeless, yet it manifests through time
- The ultimate divine plan never changes, yet its implementation responds to human actions
- Divine will established the laws of nature, yet those same laws allow for innovation and creativity
- Ein Sof’s will is perfect and complete, yet it desires human partnership in perfecting the world

The Midrash expresses this paradox in stating that “God created worlds and destroyed them” before creating our world, suggesting that divine will itself contains the potential for multiple pathways and possibilities.

Ratzon Hashem in Different Worlds

Kabbalah teaches that divine will manifests differently through the four spiritual worlds:

1. ATZILUT (WORLD OF EMANATION)

In Atzilut, divine will is transparent and obvious. There is no distinction between the revealer and the revealed, between will and its expression. In this realm:

- Ratzon exists in its most pristine form
- There is no concealment or contradiction
- Will and its fulfillment are simultaneous
- The sefirah of Keter (Crown) directly expresses Ratzon

2. Beriah (World of Creation)

In Beriah, divine will begins to take form through wisdom and understanding. Here:

- Ratzon becomes clothed in divine intellect
- Will becomes comprehensible through reason
- The “why” of divine will begins to be articulated
- Angels perceive divine will directly but as something distinct from themselves

3. Yetzirah (World of Formation)

In Yetzirah, divine will manifests through emotions and distinct attributes. Here:

- Ratzon expresses through specific middot (character traits)
- Will becomes associated with particular values and qualities
- The emotional dimension of divine will becomes apparent
- Spiritual beings experience desire for divine will rather than transparent perception of it

4. Asiyah (World of Action)

In our physical world of Asiyah, divine will is most concealed yet most powerfully expressed through concrete action:

- Ratzon is hidden within the limitations of physical reality
- Will becomes embodied in specific mitzvot and physical actions
- The ultimate purpose of creation reaches its fulfillment
- Human beings can choose to align with or oppose divine will

The Baal Shem Tov taught that the physical world, despite being furthest from direct perception of divine will, is actually its ultimate purpose. It is specifically in the realm where will is most hidden that it can be most powerfully revealed through conscious choice.

Ratzon Hashem and Human Will

The relationship between divine will and human will represents one of the most profound spiritual mysteries:

1. THE ORIGIN OF HUMAN WILL

Kabbalah teaches that human will is actually a spark of divine will embedded within creation:

- Our capacity to desire and choose derives directly from Ein Sof
- The Hebrew word for “I want” (רוצה/rotzeh) contains the same root as Ratzon
- Human will at its root is a manifestation of divine will
- Our deepest authentic desires reflect divine intention

As Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin taught, “The place where your deepest desire meets the world’s deepest need – that is where God wants you to be.”

2. THE ALIGNMENT OF WILLS

The ultimate spiritual achievement is the perfect alignment of human will with divine will:

- Not suppressing human will, but elevating it to its divine source
- Not blindly accepting fate, but actively choosing to fulfill divine purpose
- Not abandoning desire, but purifying it to reflect its divine origin
- Not denying individuality, but recognizing individual purpose within cosmic plan

The Mishnah instructs: “Make His will as your will, so that He will make your will as His will” (Pirkei Avot 2:4). This suggests not just submission but a dynamic partnership where human and divine will become mutually aligned.

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF WILL

Chassidut teaches that spiritual growth involves the progressive transformation of will:

- From wanting for oneself to wanting for others
- From wanting created things to wanting the Creator
- From wanting spiritual experiences to wanting divine will itself
- From wanting personal salvation to wanting cosmic redemption

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk stated that “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart” – suggesting that the shattering of self-centered will creates the possibility for authentic alignment with divine will.

4. THE ULTIMATE UNITY OF WILLS

At the highest level, the distinction between human and divine will dissolves entirely:

- The person becomes a perfect channel for divine will

- There is no longer any conflict or separation
- The individual doesn't lose identity but finds ultimate identity
- Human action becomes the direct expression of divine intention

This is the meaning of the verse "There is none beside Him" (אין עוד מלבדו/Ein Od Milvado) — not just that nothing exists apart from Ein Sof, but that nothing wills apart from Ein Sof when human will achieves perfect alignment.

Ratzon Hashem in Cosmic History

Divine will unfolds through a cosmic plan that encompasses all of history:

1. THE INITIAL WILL FOR CREATION

The Midrash teaches that before creation, Ein Sof had a primordial desire: "God desired to have a dwelling place in the lower worlds." This fundamental Ratzon established the purpose for all that would follow:

- Creation exists to reveal divinity in the realm of concealment
- Physical reality is not an obstacle but the ultimate purpose
- The material world is the arena for the fulfillment of divine will
- Limitation itself serves the purpose of infinite revelation

2. The Progressive Revelation of Will

Divine will reveals itself progressively through cosmic history:

- Through the natural order established at creation
- Through the covenant with the patriarchs and matriarchs
- Through the revelation at Sinai and the giving of Torah
- Through the ongoing relationship with Israel throughout history
- Through the future complete redemption

Each stage represents not a change in divine will but a deeper level of its revelation and implementation.

3. THE CURRENT STAGE OF WILL

According to Chassidic thought, we are now in the final stage of divine will's unfolding in cosmic history:

- We live in what the Zohar calls "the heels of Mashiach" (ikveta d'meshicha)
- Divine will is becoming increasingly transparent even within physical reality
- The barriers between spiritual and physical realms are progressively thinning
- Humanity is developing the capacity to perceive divine will more directly

The Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasized that our generation stands at a unique juncture where "all the work has been completed" and what remains is to actively reveal the divine will that has always been present but concealed. As he stated, "All that is required is to open our eyes and see that the redemption already exists."

4. THE ULTIMATE FULFILLMENT OF RATZON

The complete revelation of divine will culminates in what tradition calls the Messianic Era:

- Divine will becomes fully transparent within physical reality
- The purpose of creation reaches its fulfillment
- Human will and divine will achieve perfect harmony
- The original intention behind creation becomes fully manifest

This represents not an escape from the physical world but its ultimate elevation, where, as Isaiah prophesied, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

Practical Applications of Ratzon Hashem

Understanding divine will has profound implications for daily spiritual practice:

1. IN PRAYER (TEFILLAH)

Authentic prayer involves aligning our will with divine will:

- The Amidah begins with "God, open my lips" — recognizing that even our prayers arise from divine will
- The central phrase "Blessed are You" (Baruch Atah) represents our acknowledgment of divine will's primacy
- Praying for others helps transcend self-centered will
- The highest prayer state (d'veikut) involves complete alignment with divine intention

Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, taught that before prayer one should declare: “I hereby set aside my own limited understanding and connect to the infinite divine mind.” This creates the receptivity needed for genuine communion with divine will.

2. IN STUDY (TORAH)

Torah study becomes transformative when approached as communion with divine will:

- Study not just to accumulate knowledge but to absorb divine intention
- See legal details as precise expressions of divine will in practical terms
- Approach disagreements between sages as different facets of the same divine will
- Allow study to reshape your will rather than interpreting Torah according to your will

The Talmud states that “One who studies Torah for its own sake (lishmah) merits many things” (Pirkei Avot 6:1). The Baal Shem Tov explained that “lishmah” means studying with the intention to discover and fulfill divine will rather than for any personal benefit.

3. IN ACTION (MITZVOT)

Mitzvot (commandments) represent divine will in its most concrete expression:

- Perform mitzvot with awareness that each action fulfills cosmic purpose
- Pay attention to details, recognizing that precision matters in aligning with divine will
- Focus not just on the act but on the divine intention behind it
- See challenges in observance as opportunities to surrender personal will

The Alter Rebbe taught that even seemingly minor mitzvot contain infinite significance because they represent the will of the Infinite. As he stated, “If we knew that the king needed a small twig for some purpose, we would pursue it with the same dedication as a great treasure, simply because it is the king’s will.”

4. IN RELATIONSHIPS

Divine will manifests powerfully through human relationships:

- See the people in your life as divinely placed for specific purposes
- Recognize that difficult relationships often contain the most important spiritual work
- Understand that loving others fulfills divine will more directly than many overtly religious acts

- Practice seeing the divine image in every person you encounter

The Baal Shem Tov taught that “love your neighbor as yourself” is “a great principle of Torah” precisely because it represents direct alignment with divine will, which created diversity specifically for the purpose of unity through love.

5. IN BUSINESS AND WORLDLY AFFAIRS

Even mundane activities become sacred when aligned with divine will:

- Approach work as fulfilling divine purpose rather than merely earning a living
- Conduct business with absolute integrity as an expression of divine will
- See material success as providing resources for implementing divine will in the world
- Transform worldly activities through proper intention (kavanah)

As Rabbi Yisrael Salanter taught, “Not everything that is thought should be said, not everything that is said should be written, not everything that is written should be published, and not everything that is published should be read.” This represents the careful discernment required to align even our communication with divine will.

Obstacles to Perceiving Ratzon Hashem

Several obstacles prevent us from clearly perceiving divine will:

1. THE VEIL OF SELF-INTEREST

Our own desires and agenda create the primary barrier to perceiving divine will:

- We naturally interpret situations according to what benefits us
- We tend to project our wishes onto divine will
- We often confuse cultural conditioning with divine intention
- We mistake strong emotions for spiritual intuition

The remedy, according to Chassidic teaching, is continuous self-examination and the practice of bitul (self-nullification) — not to destroy the self but to create space for divine will to enter consciousness without distortion.

2. THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATION

The perception of ourselves as separate entities obscures the unity of all will:

- We perceive our will as originating solely within ourselves
- We experience conflict between our desires and divine expectations
- We see others as competitors rather than complementary expressions of divine will
- We fragment reality into disconnected parts rather than seeing the unified whole

The Baal Shem Tov taught that the remedy is to constantly remember “Ein Od Milvado” (there is nothing but God) — not just as a philosophical concept but as a lived awareness that transforms perception.

3. INTELLECTUAL LIMITATIONS

Our finite minds struggle to comprehend infinite will:

- Divine will contains paradoxes that transcend logical categories
- Our sequential thinking cannot grasp simultaneous divine intention
- Language itself imposes limitations on understanding divine will
- Cultural context shapes our interpretation of spiritual truths

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught that the remedy includes embracing mystery and developing “expanded consciousness” (mochin d’gadlut) through practices that transcend ordinary rational thinking.

4. THE CONCEALMENT OF PHYSICAL REALITY

The physical world by its nature conceals divine will:

- Material causality obscures divine orchestration
- Natural law appears to operate independently of divine intention
- The multiplicity of details overwhelms perception of unified purpose
- Time delays between actions and consequences obscure divine justice

The remedy, according to the Maggid of Mezritch, is to train ourselves to see through the veil of nature to the divine will animating it — to perceive what he called “the divine letters” continuously creating physical reality.

The Ultimate Expression of Ratzon Hashem

The highest manifestation of divine will in our world comes through what Chassidut calls “dirah b’tachtonim” — creating a dwelling place for divinity in the lowest realms:

1. THROUGH ELEVATING THE MATERIAL

Divine will ultimately aims not to negate physical reality but to transform it:

- Finding divine purpose in seemingly mundane activities
- Elevating physical objects through proper use
- Revealing the divine spark within material existence
- Transforming animal drives into holy passion

The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that each physical object contains divine sparks that are elevated when the object is used for a holy purpose. This is why Judaism emphasizes the sanctification of the mundane rather than ascetic withdrawal.

2. THROUGH UNIFYING OPPOSITES

Divine will manifests most powerfully when apparent opposites are unified:

- Bringing together heaven and earth
- Harmonizing justice and mercy
- Integrating masculine and feminine energies
- Unifying body and soul

The Kotzker Rebbe taught that “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart” — suggesting that the integration of brokenness and wholeness represents a profound fulfillment of divine will.

3. THROUGH TRANSFORMING DARKNESS

Perhaps the most profound expression of divine will comes through the transformation of darkness into light:

- Converting challenges into opportunities for growth
- Transforming suffering into compassion
- Redeeming past mistakes through teshuvah (return)
- Finding meaning in apparent randomness

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (the Tzemach Tzedek) taught that “Think good and it will be good” is not merely positive thinking but the actual fulfillment of divine will through transforming perception.

4. THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION

Divine will ultimately manifests through the collective efforts of humanity:

- Individual actions combining to create cosmic tikkun (repair)
- Communities embodying divine values in social structures
- Diverse traditions contributing complementary aspects to world redemption
- All creation participating in the revelation of its Creator

The Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasized that the final redemption requires the participation of all humanity, with each individual contributing their unique portion to the revelation of divine will.

Conclusion: The Dance of Wills

The relationship between divine and human will can be understood as a cosmic dance rather than a hierarchical imposition. Divine will creates the space for human will, which in turn finds its highest fulfillment in freely choosing to align with divine intention. As Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook beautifully expressed: “The highest level of free will is to choose to align with divine will not out of compulsion but out of recognition that this alignment represents our truest self.” This perspective transforms the traditional view of divine will from something imposed upon humanity to something discovered within humanity — the recognition that our deepest, most authentic desires, when freed from the distortions of ego and fear, naturally align with divine intention. The ultimate fulfillment of *Ratzon Hashem* comes not through the suppression of human will but through its elevation and purification until, as the Baal Shem Tov taught, “There is no difference between ‘I want’ and ‘God wants.’” At this highest level, the dance of wills becomes a perfect harmony where distinction remains but separation dissolves. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, divine will ultimately culminates in a new covenant where divine intention is no longer experienced as external law but as internal desire: “I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). This represents the perfect fulfillment of *Ratzon Hashem* — not the imposition of divine will upon human will, but the revelation that at their essence, they were always one.