YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT DELIVERED BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT KEDOSHIM

SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

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The Gush Etzion and Efrat communities mourn the tragic death of HaRav Shmuel Greenfeld a"h, and ask that you pray for a Refua Sheleima for his wife Chaya Yehudit bat Sara Bina and their two daughters who were injured. HaMakom Yenakhem Otam Betokh She'ar Avelei Zion V'Yerushalayim.

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Intelligence and Ethics

Summarized by Danny Orenbuch

"Speak to the whole congregation of the children of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Vayikra 19:2)

"This teaches us that this parasha was recited during Hak'hel (the mass assembly of the entire nation once every seven years), because most of the major bodies of Torah depend upon it." (Rashi, ibid.)

 Our parasha introduces a multitude of commandments and prohibitions, some of which are mentioned explicitly in the parasha while others are inferred and deduced from its contents. The scope of this collection of mitzvot is broad: some pertain to interpersonal relationships while others deal with the man-God relationship; some are addressed to the nation as a whole while others are directed towards the individual.

 One mitzva which appears in this week's parasha several times in different forms is the obligation to distance oneself from idolatry. For example, we are commanded, "Do not turn to idols and do not make molten gods for yourselves" (19:4); and "The individual who turns to mediums and soothsayers, to go astray after them, I will set My face against that person..." (20:6).

 The Rambam relates to these verses from the point of view of their intellectual content (Hilkhot Avoda Zara 11:16):

"These things are all lies and falsehood, and they are the mistake that was made by the early pagans... It is not fitting that Israel, who are wise and intelligent, should follow such emptiness and imagine that they have any worth. Anyone who believes in these and similar things and imagines that they are indeed true and wise but that the Torah forbade them is merely foolish and ignorant... Whereas the wise and knowledgeable ones knew with clarity that all these things which the Torah forbade are not words of wisdom but rather nonsense and emptiness after which the ignorant were drawn... And for this reason the Torah says, when warning us of all these things, 'You shall be wholly with the Lord your God.'"

 The second mitzva with which we shall deal here is, "You shall not take revenge nor shall you bear a grudge against the people of your nation..." (19:18). On this the Rambam comments (Hilkhot De'ot 7:7):

"Someone who takes revenge on his friend transgresses a negative commandment, as it is written, 'You shall not take revenge.' And even though he is not punished for it, it is a very bad trait. A person should rather constantly review his middot (personal character traits) with regard to everything that happens, for to those who understand properly it is all simply emptiness and insignificant, and not worth avenging."

 These two mitzvot are completely different from one another and belong to two different categories, but there can be no doubt that the Rambam recognizes the intellectual basis which is common to these two phenomena, and he indicates this by using the same word to describe them - emptiness (hevel). In both cases he appeals to our intellect: a wise person should not make the mistake of being drawn after such things.

 But the appeal may be made not only from the intellectual point of view but also from the point of view of the Divine command. Even if your friend has offended you, you are forbidden to retaliate - because God has so commanded; and even if some wisdom is to be found in idol-worship, do not approach it - because that is what God commanded us. This is in fact the explanation of the Ramban on Sefer HaMitzvot and elsewhere when he addresses the reason for the prohibition of idol-worship: It may be that some partial truth is to be found even in idolatry, but nevertheless - "You shall be wholly with the Lord your God." God forbade it, and that is why you may not engage in it.

 From this perspective, too, there is a theme which is common to both mitzvot: in both cases one needs to be prepared to sacrifice for the sake of God's command and for the sake of fulfilling His will - even though logic and one's intelligence may point in the opposite direction. While the Rambam interprets "You shall be wholly with the Lord your God" as demanding intellectual integrity and identification with God's command, the second approach requires instead an identification on the moral level with God's will without looking for anything else.

 The message for us is clear. We need to be "wholly with God" on both levels - in the area of knowledge, the "Divine image" which is our intelligence, and in the area of morality, God's command. Every individual bears the obligation of navigating and combining these two approaches, each according to his personality and his sphere of action.

(Originally delivered on Leil Shabbat Parashat Kedoshim 5752.

Translated by Kaeren Fish.)