YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL**

**"Your Mitzva is Very Broad:"**

**Further Thoughts on the Search for "Connection"**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Last Chanuka I spoke about commitment vs. "connection" (distributed this year on the VBM as the sicha for parashat Vayechi). I would like to expand on what I said then.

The trend towards individualism has reached our batei midrash as well, and has become one of the distinguishing characteristics of Religious-Zionist youth. Books deriving from the Peshischa school of chassidut (e.g. the Izbicer rebbe's Mei Ha-Shiloach), which deal with phenomena different from those that characterize our times and with people quite different from today's youth, have become popular. Recently I agreed to a request by the students of this yeshiva, who wanted me to teach classes on the writings of R. Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin. Tonight I would like to speak about one of the expressions of the search for "hit'chabrut" (connection or identification) that I described a year ago.

There exists today a phenomenon of youth who wish to express their unique personality in their service of God. Moreover, these youth are searching for their personal religious identity. A number of years ago, youth were content with recognizing their COLLECTIVE religious identity - as part of such bodies as Bnei Akiva, the "hesder" yeshivot in general, a particular yeshiva, etc. Today, however, they seek their special PERSONAL identity; they are no longer satisfied with an identity defined in collective terms.

The critical question is whether they are seeking their personal identity WITHIN the collective or without any connection to it. This fundamental question has serious ramifications. I assume - and hope - that our youth are searching for their personal identity within the collective and are not trying to abandon it.

A year ago I proposed that the emphasis be placed on LOYALTY (ne'emanut) rather than OBLIGATION (mechuyavut), since the latter is regarded by the youth as problematic. The emphasis on loyalty is of great significance. One of the reasons that youth today reject obligation is that the concept implies obligation to something that is external to myself, while I am seeking my own independent, personal identity. Loyalty, on the other hand, implies obligation to myself: I am loyal today to that which I chose yesterday.

The concept of loyalty ensures personal stability. A person who chooses to study at yeshiva, for example, must remain loyal to his choice, even if this loyalty entails obligation to the norms and the framework of the yeshiva. A search for personal identity without connection to any collective means a search for personal identity in a vacuum. Such a quest will most likely lead to disintegration of the personality, since there is no obligation or loyalty to anything at all.

The Rosh Yeshiva of a well-known institution for ba'alei teshuva once told me that the most popular book in his yeshiva was the Kitzur Shulchan Arukh. The emptiness in the lives of these students before their turn to religion led to a sense of instability. Everything could fall apart; nothing was binding. That was why they eagerly grabbed a book that told them what they were OBLIGATED to do - only this gave them some sense of stability.

Since the founding of the yeshiva, I have spoken many times, with certain variations, about the following statement by the Vilna Gaon in his commentary on Mishlei:

...Each person has his own path to tread, for people's minds are not alike, nor are their faces alike, and no two individuals have the same nature. When there were prophets, people would go to the prophets "to inquire of the Lord," and the prophet would tell each person, through prophecy, the path he should take, each one according to the root of his soul and according to the nature of his body...

Since the time that prophecy disappeared, there is "ruach ha-kodesh" (Divine inspiration) in Israel, which advises each person how to behave...

But who can say, "I have cleansed my heart," that his spirit is free of deception altogether, and that his nature desires and tends towards nothing but the will of the Holy One, as it is written in the Zohar on parashat Va'era? [The Zohar teaches] that someone who has no deception in his spirit truly cleaves to the traits of the Holy One, but if (heaven forbid) he behaves in accordance with his own spirit - for a person's ways are pure and righteous in his eyes - and his heart contains a tiny root that sprouts gall and wormwood, then his spirit contains deception, and he will fall from heaven to earth, so far that he will not be able to rise, and he will turn away from God's ways and His mitzvot, and will not know himself. (Bi'ur Ha-Gra on Mishlei 16:4)

I usually mention this in different contexts, such as in relation to the Rashi at the beginning of Shemot (1:1), emphasizing the importance of "name" as opposed to "number." Rashi writes,

Although God counted them (the descendants of Ya'akov) in their lifetime, He numbers them again after their death, to show His love for them, for they are compared to the stars which He takes out and brings back in by their number and by their names, as it is written, "...Who takes out their hosts by number; He calls each by its name."

Although all stars look identical, we know that each star is a world on its own. The same applies to Israel: each individual is a world of his own. I also mention this idea in relation to the concept that every Jew has a special letter in the Torah.

Since I have always emphasized the need for individuality in the service of God, when I am faced with the youth today who seek their unique personal identity in avodat Hashem I ask myself, "Is this the youth for which I prayed?"

My response is hesitant and full of reservations. In principle, I can certainly say that there is a positive direction here, which may be channeled. I am not speaking of channeling from above; definitely not. I am speaking of channeling that the youth themselves can do, and I pray that each will indeed find his own special path and strive constantly upwards. But meanhile I sometimes sense their impatience; and impatience that leads to short-cuts, to the wish to achieve quick results, the desire for immediate gratification - here and now and right away. I believe that there is a lack of awareness of the dangers, and it is about these dangers that I wish to speak.

Firstly, we are speaking today of youth who - to put it carefully - have a problem living with obligation, and prefer to speak of "hit'chabrut," identification. By "identification" they mean personal, experiential identification. Hence there is a danger of seeing experience - even religious experience - as a central pillar of Judaism. I am certainly not belittling the experiential basis in one's Divine service. I accept the comment of Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura on the mishna which teaches that "The reward for a mitzva is a mitzva" (Avot 4:2), explaining that a person's pleasure in fulfilling a mitzva is considered a mitzva in itself, and that he is rewarded both for the mitzva which he performs and for the pleasure he takes in performing it. Religious experience is enjoyable and heart-warming, but if the emphasis is placed only on the emotional experience, and we forget that "the mitzvot were not given for our enjoyment," then we are missing something fundamental. Rashi explains the aforementioned statement thus: "The mitzvot were not given for our pleasure, but as a yoke upon our necks." Although Rashi is speaking of physical pleasure rather than spiritual pleasure, nevertheless the sense of bearing the yoke of Heaven is one of the pillars of the Torah. One may achieve an elevated level of spiritual experience through the acceptance of the Divine yoke, but that is a long and difficult path to follow. Likewise, that same wish for a "short-cut" may lead one to mysticisand wonder-workers - a phenomenon which has also spread in the religious-Zionist sector.

There is another danger to which the Vilna Gaon alludes: the quest for originality sometimes arises out of weakness, pride (the wish to be original), or laziness (a search for the "easy way"). The Gaon also hints at the danger that one's criterion for for judging his personalized path will consist of nothing more than the experiential feeling of gratification.

Kabbala speaks of five levels of a person's soul: nefesh, ruach, neshama, chaya and yechida. The last, yechida (meaning singular), represents the deepest level, which is individuality, uniqueness. But an uncontrolled drive for individuality is problematic. First of all, Chazal commented on the verse, "and in order that the fear of Him be upon your faces" - "this refers to shame." A sense of shame is an important element in one's service of God, just as it has been an important element of human culture since the days of Adam and Chava. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai taught his disciples, "May it be His will that your fear of heaven be like your fear of flesh and blood." A sense of shame can exist only in a person who does not deride other individuals and does not denigrate the society around him. The quest for individuality can cause a young person to scorn everything around him: "I'll do what I want to; I don't care about anything."

Secondly, this tendency may also lead to a lack of social empathy. Thus, for example, eastern religions, whose influence is penetrating Israel as well, concede from the outset any hope of social improvement; values such as justice are outside their scope of interest. A lack of social concern is the complete opposite of the fundamentals of Judaism, which began with Avraham: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him that they should follow the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice" (Bereishit 18:19).

Man is "political by nature," in the words of the Rambam (Moreh Nevukhim 2:40) - in other words, man is a social being. Therefore, a religious experience that does not carry with it any social responsibility is disqualified by definition, and actually runs contrary to human nature. Someone who wishes to highlight his own personal path must invest the effort and seek the special path that suits both his unique personality and leads him to contribute to society, rather than just to himself. Chassidim speak a lot about "deveikut," cleaving to God. Chazal taught (Sifri, Ekev 49) that the true meaning of cleaving is cleaving to God's WAYS, i.e. being merciful and performing kind deeds. In other words, a person must concern himself with the good of others and of society, just as God does.

I would also like to point out an ironic phenomenon to which we are witness: there are groups of bnei Torah whose members all share this tendency towards the personal. People in these groups seek out specifically the personal expressions in the writings of Rav Kook, and several collections of these sayings have already appeared. These people talk, dress and behave alike, and have in fact become a sort of closed circle - they are identical in their appearance, behavior, song and dance. This is another danger that one must avoid.

In summary, I would like to say that the quest for personal expression and for a personal identity is a positive thing, but...

This "but" may be expressed in the words of the Midrash:

"I pondered my ways and turned my legs back to Your testimonies" (Tehillim 119:59): King David said, Master of the Universe - every day I think and say, "I am going to such-and-such place, I am going to so-and-so's house," but my legs bring me to synagogues and batei midrash."

We may ask, did David really plan every day to go somewhere other than to a place of prayer or a place of learning? The Gerrer Rebbe, author of Chiddushei Ha-Rim, explains that King David sought, according to the midrash, his own special path. This midrash is not meant to negate the aspiration to finding one's personal path, but rather to teach that the path must pass through the beit midrash.

"For every purpose I have seen an end; Your mitzva is very broad" (Tehillim 119:96) - the emotional, philosophical, and experiential dimension of every mitzva is immeasurably broad. Therefore, there is room for every individual to find his personal expression within the philosophical, emotional or experiential sphere of the mitzvot, without deviating the slightest bit in observance of mitzvot.

(This sicha was delivered at the yeshiva's mesibat Chanuka, 5761 [2000].)