YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

**"Where Are You?"**

**Sin, Punishment, and Repentance**

Translated by David Strauss

### I. The call to Repent

And the Lord God called unto the man and said unto him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.” And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree whereof I commanded you that you should not eat?” And the man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.”

And the Lord God said unto the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”

And the Lord God said unto the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you from among all cattle and from among all beasts of the field; upon your belly shall you go, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; they shall bruise your head and you shall bruise their heel.”

Unto the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply your pain and your travail; in pain you shall bring forth children; and your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

And unto Adam He said, “Because you have hearkened unto the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, saying: You shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to you; and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread, till you return unto the ground, for out of it were you taken; for dust you are, and unto dust shall you return”. (*Bereishit* 3:9-19)

There is a clear lack of symmetry between God's interaction with Adam and his wife, who are interrogated about what brought them to sin, and His interaction with the serpent, who immediately receives his punishment, with no attempt made to look for extenuating circumstances or examine his motivation. Rashi explains this based on the *gemara* in *Sanhedrin* (29a): "We do not occupy ourselves with arguments in favor of one who seduces people to idolatry." I would like to propose another explanation.

On the face of it, there is no room to look for favorable explanations of Adam and Chava's behavior. They knew about the command and the prohibition, but upon the serpent's advice, they decided to violate it. What justification can there be for such conduct? Nevertheless, God opens His communication with questions: "Where are you?" "Who told you that you were naked?" "Have you eaten of the tree whereof I commanded you that you should not eat?" God awaits man's answer. Of course, at issue was not the factual answers to these questions, which God most certainly knows. God awaits an act of repentance, an admission of sin, a request for forgiveness, and a plea for a way to repair the damage. God opens a door for Adam to declare, "I have sinned."

Unfortunately, Adam does not take advantage of the opportunity granted him. Instead of admitting his sin, he blames his wife. She too does not admit her sin, but rather shifts the blame to the serpent. With this evasion of responsibility, the opportunity that had been given them to engage in repentance is missed, and the privilege to live in the Garden of Eden and enjoy the continued presence of the *Shekhina* is lost.

Adam and Chava behave in the manner that King Shaul would one day behave when the prophet Shemuel turned to him with a question:

And Shemuel said, “What means then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?” And Shaul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice unto the Lord your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.” (I *Shemuel* 15:14-15)

Shemuel asked his question in order to hear Shaul's confession, but the first king of Israel blamed the people instead of himself, and the first kingdom was therefore lost.

The serpent is not granted an opportunity to repent. The serpent is part of the natural world, which is governed in accordance with the attribute of justice, and the strict laws of nature make no room for repentance. The one and only response to sin is punishment. Only man, God's friend who was created in His image, merits the attribute of mercy and the ability to repent and repair sin. The Ramchal in his *Mesilat Yesharim* defines the appearance of the attribute of mercy in the world as follows:

You might ask: What then is the attribute of mercy for, if justice must be exacted for everything with precision, no matter what? The answer is that the attribute of mercy is certainly what preserves the world, for by no means could it endure without it. Still, the attribute of justice is not compromised. For according to the strict application of the law, a sinner should be immediately punished, as soon as he sins, without any delay… Moreover, the sin should be utterly irreparable: for, in truth, how can a person rectify what he has made crooked once the sin has already been committed?…

But what the attribute of mercy does is to argue for the opposite of the three aforementioned conclusions. That is to say, it allows for time to be given to the sinner and that he not be wiped off the earth immediately upon sinning; and that the punishment itself not be annihilation; and that [the opportunity for] repentance be extended with pure [Divine] grace to the sinners, whereby the uprooting of the will [which prompted his sin] is considered tantamount to the uprooting of the [sinful] act… Uprooting the thing from his will is accounted for him as an uprooting of the deed, so that the sin is uprooted retroactively like a vow, and he finds atonement…

Now this is surely a kindness that is not commensurate with the strict application of the law. But it is, nonetheless, a kindness that does not entirely contravene justice. For there is a case to be made that his will to sin and the pleasure he derived from it have been offset by regret and suffering. Moreover, to grant temporary reprieve is not to let the sin pass, but to show a bit of patience, in order to make for him an opening for restoration. Likewise with all [God’s] other merciful ways. (*Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 4)

It is only to man that God grants the opportunity to confess and make emends. He knocks on his door and asks questions, in the hope that man will take advantage of the opportunity and repent.

A similar lesson can be learned from the story told about R. Elazar ben Dordiya:

It was said of R. Elazar ben Dordiya that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of dinars for her hire, he took a purse of dinars and crossed seven rivers for her sake.

As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said, “As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Elazar ben Dordiya never be received in repentance.”

He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed, “O, you hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!” They replied, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is stated: ‘For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed’ (*Yeshayahu* 54:10).” So he exclaimed, “Heaven and earth, plead you for mercy for me!” They, too, replied, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is stated: ‘For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment’ (*Yeshayahu* 51:6).” He then exclaimed, “Sun and moon, plead you for mercy for me!” But they also replied, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is stated: ‘Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed’ (*Yeshayahu* 24:23).” He exclaimed, “You stars and constellations, plead you for mercy for me!” They said, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is stated: ‘And all the hosts of heaven shall molder away’ (*Yeshayahu* 34:4).” He said, “The matter then depends upon me alone!”

Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming, “R. Elazar ben Dordiya is destined for the life of the World-to-Come!”… Rebbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] wept and said: “One may acquire eternal life after many years, another in one hour!” Rebbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] also said: “Penitents are not just accepted; they are even called ‘Rabbi’!” (*Avoda Zara* 17a)

There is no repair and no repentance in heaven or earth, in the mountains or in the hills; not with the sun nor with the moon, not with the stars, nor with the constellations. Repentance and repair are a privilege granted to man alone, and they depend exclusively upon him.

### II. The Day of Death And Repentance

There is a clear connection in the story of the tree of knowledge between death and sin. The man was warned that on the day that he would eat from the tree he would die. He ate from the tree of knowledge and was banished from the tree of life so that he would not live forever. The man did not die immediately, but he was deprived of eternal life and would therefore one day encounter death.

A logical connection can be found between sin and immediate death in its wake. How does death in the future affect the repair of one's sins and repentance? In order to answer this question, let us examine the continuation of our *parasha*.

The sin of the generation of the flood is also related to the shortening of man's life, for even before the decree of the flood, God had decreed that man's life would be shortened by about half. Adam and his descendants, the first ten generations, lived for about nine hundred years. Shem's descendants, in contrast, lived between four and five hundred years.

The sin of the generation of the dispersion also led to the shortening of man's life. The Torah relates that in the days of Peleg, "the earth was divided" (*Bereishit* 10:25). If we look at the years of people's lives, it seems that during his lifetime, life spans were cut, and that after the sin that led to the dispersion, people's lives were cut again in half. After Peleg, people lived for less than two hundred and fifty years.

The connection between sin and the shortening of human life follows also from the verses at the end of the book of *Kohelet:*

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth; and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes; but know you, that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. (*Kohelet* 11:19)

Remember then your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw nigh, when you shall say: I have no pleasure in them. (*Kohelet* 12:1)

Consider the thinking of a two-hundred year old man living before the flood, whose contemporaries lived close to a thousand years. What would bring him to consider mending his ways and breaking his heart before God, if he cannot see at all the day of his death? The shadow of death in the aftermath of sin was meant to lead a person to mend his ways during his lifetime.

The penalty of future death was intended to bring a person to internalize the need to repair his sin and repent before he is forced to stand before the throne of God's judgment. Sin gave rise to the need for repair and repentance. Death, which came in the wake of sin, created the possibility that a person would indeed want to repent and to repair his sin. As man's sins grew in the time of the flood and the dispersion, so his life became shorter and shorter – in order to enable him to remember his Creator and fully repent before Him.

This is stated explicitly in the book of *Kohelet*:

He who keeps the commandment shall know no evil thing; and a wise man's heart discerns time and judgment. For to every matter there is a time and judgment; for the evil of man is great upon him. For he knows not that which shall be; for even when it comes to pass, who shall declare it unto him? There is no man that has power over the wind to retain the wind; neither has he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in war; neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it. (*Kohelet* 8:5-8)

Just as there is no power over the day of death and man has no control over his spirit to keep it locked up within him as it departs from him on the day of death, so too wickedness will not deliver those given over to it, for they day of death is also the day of judgment before God, when the spirit returns to Him and gives a reckoning of the person's deeds. Death reminds man of the day of judgment. The memory of death is what calls upon man to repent during his lifetime, when it is still possible for him to do so.