YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**PARASHAT TOLEDOT**

**SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT”A**

A Portrait of Yitzchak

Summarized by Binyamin Frankel

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The influence of the home on one’s world-view

In *Shabbat* (89b) we find the following rather surprising story:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: What is the meaning of the verse, “You are our Father, for Avraham has not known us and Yisrael does not acknowledge us; You, Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer, Your Name is from everlasting” (*Yishayahu* 63:16)?

In the time to come, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to Avraham: “Your children have sinned against Me.” He will answer Him, “Master of the universe! Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your Name.”

Then [God] will say, “I will say this to Yaakov, who is familiar with the travail of bringing up children; perhaps he will plead for mercy on their behalf.” So He will say to him, “Your children have sinned.” He, [too,] shall answer Him, “Master of the universe! Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your Name.”

[God] will say, “There is no reason in old men, and no counsel in children!” Then He will say to Yitzchak, “Your children have sinned against Me.” And he will answer Him, “Master of the universe! Are they then *my* children and not *Your* children? When they gave precedence to ‘We will do’ over ‘We will hear’ before You, You called them ‘Israel My son, My firstborn.’ [How is it that] now they are my sons, [and] not Your sons?!

Moreover, how much have they sinned? How many years does a man live? Seventy. Subtract [the first] twenty, for which You do not punish, [and] there remain fifty. Subtract twenty-five which comprise the nights, [and] there remain twenty-five. Subtract twelve and a half occupied by prayer, eating, and nature’s calls, [and] there remain twelve and a half. If You will suffer that total, it is well; if not, let half be upon me and half upon You. And should You wish to say that it is all upon me – behold, I offered myself up [wholly] before You!”

In contrast to Avraham and Yaakov, both of whom acquiesce to strict justice (“Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your Name”), Yitzchak seeks to defend *Am Yisrael* based on two separate claims. First, he asks “Are they then my children and not Your children?” Thereby he questions the need for and legitimacy of God’s appeal to the forefathers. Then he goes on to question the proportionality: after all, the time that a person actually spends sinning is very limited in relation to his entire lifespan.

It is most surprising that it is specifically Yitzchak who seeks to defend Israel and offers arguments of the sort that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev was famous for, while Avraham and Yaakov refrain from any attempt at mitigating the accusation. After all, Avraham is the only one of the forefathers who conducted a dialogue (one might even call it an “argument”) with God on the subject of punishment of the wicked.

The answer would seem to lie in the atmosphere of the home in which each of the forefathers was raised. Avraham and Yaakov grew up with negative influences: Avraham was raised by Terach, in a home full of idolatry. Yaakov grew up with Esav, and then lived for many years with Lavan. Their education from a young age, in the presence of the temptation of sin, led them to conclude that a person can stand up to his evil inclination even in the most difficult of circumstances. Therefore, if Israel have sinned, it is difficult to find any sort of real defense or mitigating factors; they must pay the price.

Yitzchak, on the other hand, grew up in a “perfect” environment. He was educated by Avraham and kept separate from the general surrounding culture (and he never left Eretz Yisrael). When Yishmael became a negative influence on his education, Yishmael was removed from the scene.

The fact that Yitzchak grew up in such a pure home allowed him to see the world in such a way that he is able to come to Israel’s defense and to plead for mercy on their behalf.

The choice to bless Esav

Even Esav, whom we mentioned above as a negative element in Yaakov’s upbringing, is viewed by Yitzchak in a positive light and receives a blessing from him. We must understand why it is that Yitzchak displays an affinity for and closeness towards Esav despite his evil ways. Let us consider the Gemara in *Pesachim* (88a) which discusses the nature of the Divine service of each of the forefathers:

Rabbi Elazar said: What is the meaning of the verse, “Many people shall go and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Yaakov (*beit e-lohei Yaakov*)…” (*Yishayahu* 2:3)? Is He then the “God of Yaakov” but not the “God of Avraham and Yitzchak”?

What it teaches is the following: Concerning Avraham, we read of a “mountain,” as it is written, “As it is said to this day, In the mountain the Lord will appear” (*Bereishit* 22:14). Concerning Yitzchak, we read of a “field,” as it is written, “And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field” (*Bereishit* 24:63). [It is only] concerning Yaakov [that] we read of a “house,” as it is written, “He called the name of that place Beit [the House of] God.”

What is the difference between a mountain, a field, and a house? Since the mountain and the field are both drawn from the realm of nature (with the mountain representing the pinnacle of that realm), we shall focus on the difference between a field and a house.

A house is a man-made structure; it represents man’s endeavor to demarcate his own realm that is separate from nature. A field represents nature itself – or, in human terms, free and natural conduct with no restraints.

Yitzchak represents the “service of the field”; he offers prayer in the midst of that which grows wild. And as such he feels an affinity with Esav, who is “a man of the field” (25:27).

The dangers of the bond with nature

At the same time, Esav is also “a cunning hunter.” His bond with nature is not via the pastoral field and tranquil Divine service of Yitzchak, but rather via the wild expanses where bears and lions roam. His tempestuous spiritual life, seeking the excitement of nature, may uplift a person, but it does involve danger to the person’s inner life and innocence. Indeed, it is for this reason that ultimately Esav is not Yitzchak’s successor.

The danger inherent in Esav’s view of and bond with nature is the glorification of the body. This can lead to what in fact happens after one of his hunting trips: “And Esav came from the field and he was faint” (25:29). This “faintness” is not necessarily negative in and of itself, but since Esav’s Divine service focuses solely on the body, his physical exhaustion causes him to scorn the birthright and its significance.

Chazal offer further insight into this faintness:

Rabbi Yochanan said: That wicked man (Esav) transgressed five prohibitions on that day: he lay with a girl who had been betrothed; and committed murder; and denied God; and denied the resurrection of the dead; and he spurned the birthright... (*Bava Batra* 16b)

All of these transgressions express disdain for the transcendental reality that lies beyond the material: what meaning can there be to betrothal and commitment in the physical world? What advantage does a live soul have over a piece of meat? And so on. Esav abandons the path of Yitzchak, because the field that characterizes him is different from the field in which Yitzchak roamed.

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