YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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In loving memory of my parents

Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z"l

- Benzion Lowinger

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In memory of Amos Dubrawsky   
(Amos ben Chagai HaLevi and Nechama Pearl) zt"l –  
brother, son and friend. May his neshama have an aliyah.

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**Parashat Vayishlach**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**On Zealotry**

Summarized by Daniel Herman

Translated by David Strauss

In our *parasha*, we encounter the very complex concept of zealotry (*kana'ut*).Dina's brothers, Shimon and Levi, set out on a mission to protect and rescue their sister, during the course of which they carry out a total massacre of the people of Shechem. This slaughter was carried out to the displeasure of their father Yaakov, as is evident from what he says to them shortly before his death:

Shimon and Levi are brethren; weapons of violence their kinship. Let my soul not come into their council; to their assembly let my glory not be united; for in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they hacked oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Yaakov, and scatter them in Israel. (*Bereishit* 49:5-7)

But is zealotry necessarily a negative concept? We find in the Torah several positive expressions connected to *kana’ut*, two of which we will note here. First, God Himself is referred to as "jealous" in several places:

You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous (*kana*) God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me. (*Shemot* 20:5)

And, of course, Pinchas receives from God the covenant of peace and everlasting priesthood on account of his *kana’ut*. What, then, is the status of *kana’ut*?

It would appear that the zealot does not choose an evil value. Were that the case, he would be an evil man. The zealot chooses a true and positive value, but he blindly prioritizes it over all other values. God created a diverse world, with many different conflicting values between which we must try to maneuver in order to find the right balance. The zealot does not see all of these values ​​before him; he sees only that value in which he believes at that moment, and he subordinates everything else to that value.

My father, HaRav Aharon *z"l*, once told me that a person who writes a monograph on a particular subject almost always rules stringently on the matter at hand, because when he invests so much time and effort in studying and writing about the subject, he comes to see it as a matter of "*yehareg ve-al ya'avor*" – a matter requiring martyrdom, in miniature.

Shimon and Levi return from the exile to the land of Canaan, carrying in their minds the blessing with which God had blessed their fathers, the promises that He had made to them, and the destiny that had been assigned to their family. All of these join together to bring them to one position: Conquering the land and protecting their family stand above all other considerations. In light of the greatness of these goals, all means of achieving them are fitting in their eyes.

This finds particularly pronounced expression in the case before us. The *midrashim* describe the absolute trust that that the people of Shechem had put in the proposal presented by Shimon and Levi, for it was inconceivable to them that the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, whom God had blessed and with whom He had remained the entire time, would lie. If so, not only did Shimon and Levi throw morality overboard when they slaughtered the people of Shechem – even those who were not at all involved in the story of Dina – but they also desecrated the name of God, as well as the name of their family. What is more, they did not hesitate to use the commandment of circumcision – the only commandment that had been given to them as a family as a unique marker – in order to carry out their plan.

In light of the dramatic act of Shimon and Levi, one might mistakenly think that Yaakov was indifferent to what they had done. This, however, is not the case; Yaakov heard what had happened and internalized it, but he knew how to act with discretion. The reckless action of his sons was not his way, and he would indeed criticize them for it in the future. This is an important point that must always be remembered: At a time when disagreements grow more and more heated, one must not think that the party who chooses the more complex approach and tries to find a compromise between opposing values is a person who does not care at all about these values. The opposite is true – these values are of utmost importance to him, but he chooses to uphold them in such a way that they can coexist.

The actions of Shimon and Levi put Yaakov in a difficult positions, and the *midrashim* describe his preparations for battle to save his family. The very person who had opposed this whole move, who did not want to act impulsively, must now rise up and take military action to save the situation. Yaakov understands that this is not the time to reproach his sons, because standing up to a zealot while he is in his zealous mode will bring no benefit in the long run. At this time, he chooses to remain silent and put out the fires that his sons had ignited; only in his last days, when his sons crowd around his bed shortly before his death, will he rebuke them for their deeds and scatter them so that they cannot repeat what they had done.

The work that needs to be done now can be found in God's instruction to Yaakov: He asks him to move to Beit El and remove the foreign gods from his midst. These foreign gods remind us of Rachel's earlier theft of Lavan's *terafim*, an act that was fundamentally the right thing to do, but was carried out in a deceitful manner. The educational work must start from the beginning; it must return to the basics, so that his family members understand the proper way to act, the well-balanced and considered way. To do this, they must remove the foreign gods, but they must also move to the place upon which God had set His name and build there an altar. They must return to the family tradition, to the initial values.

Why did Pinchas receive from God the covenant of peace and everlasting priesthood in the wake of his act of zealotry? It seems that there are extreme situations, when the entire congregation is crying at the Tent of Meeting and everyone is paralyzed, and it falls upon the right person to choose exceptional means. In general, we must refrain from assigning absolute priority to one particular value over all others, but there are situations in which there is no escape from doing so. Pinchas, who knew how to identify that exceptional case, merits receiving the greatest blessings.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Vayishlach* 5777 (2016).]