**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated in commemoration of the yarhzeit of
Rabbi Lipman Z. Rabinowitz, by his family

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Yosef as a Role Model for Involvement in Secular Society

Adapted by Immanuel Mayer

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Is wealth an advantage for the righteous?

At the beginning of *Parashat Toldot*, we find a dispute between Ibn Ezra and Ramban as to whether Yitzchak was a wealthy man with much property, or actually poor. Ibn Ezra (*Bereishit* 25:34) writes:

Many would question this, for Avraham left him much wealth – as though they have never seen someone who was wealthy in his youth, but ended up impoverished in his old age. And the proof is that Yitzchak, his father, loved Esav because [he fulfilled] his need. Had there been plenty of food in his father’s house, and had he considered his father to be wealthy, he would not have sold his birthright for a pottage. And if his father had eaten sumptuous meals every day, then for what reason would he have said, “Bring me venison”? And why did Yaakov have no fancy garments [of his own]? And why did his mother not give him silver and gold for the way, such that he asks God “… and give me bread to eat and a garment to wear”? And why did she not send him money, if she so loved him, such that he had to work as a shepherd?

The verse stating that “the man [Yitzchak] grew great” refers to the time before his old age. The ignorant might think that wealth is a distinction for the righteous; let Eliyahu come and prove otherwise. They might further ask why God deprived Yitzchak of wealth. Perhaps they would then inform us why he was deprived of his eyesight. And let them not dismiss us with some midrashic justification. For there is a matter that is concealed here, and it is not for us to seek it out, for God’s thoughts are deep, and the human mind cannot understand them. Likewise, others would say, “But see – he [Yitzchak] did have flocks, for Rivka tells [Yaakov], Go, I pray you, to the flock.” Perhaps he did still retain some small amount of livestock, but it is also possible that the request, “Go, I pray you, to the flock” means “to the place where sheep are sold.”

Ibn Ezra maintains that Yitzchak was poor, and he proves this on the basis of various pieces of evidence in the text. First, based on the fact that Yitzchak loves Esav because he brings him venison, he proves that good food was not something to be taken for granted in Yitzchak’s home. Second, the sale of the birthright testifies to the high price and great importance of a bowl of pottage. He also brings proof from the interaction between Rivka and Yaakov, and from other details. Thus, in his view, Yitzchak was not wealthy; he may even have been impoverished.

On the other hand, Ramban, commenting on the same verse, cites the opinion of Ibn Ezra and then disagrees:

Rabbi Avraham [Ibn Ezra] errs exceedingly… And I wonder who blinded his reasoning in this matter… “For God’s blessing makes one rich, and no sorrow is added with it” (*Mishlei* 10:22). Rather, the forefathers were all like kings, and the kings of the nations came before them and forged covenants with them… If Yitzchak had suffered misfortune and had lost his father’s wealth, how could [Avimelekh king of Gerar and Fikhol the head of his army] say, “For we have surely seen that God is with you” (*Bereishit* 26:31), if he was already in dire straits?

The birthright was scorned by Esav because of his hard-heartedness. It may be that the double portion of the birthright, as set down in the laws of the Torah, was not practiced in earlier times; [the birthright] may have consisted only of inheriting the father’s status and power, such that the eldest would be honored and elevated over the younger brother, and therefore he told Yitzchak, “I am your son, your firstborn” (*Bereishit* 27:32), as if to say that he was the firstborn [in the sense of being] worthy of being blessed. Similarly, we find “For this is the firstborn; place your right hand upon his head” (*Bereishit* 48:18) – to give him a blessing first. Perhaps [the firstborn] would also receive a slightly bigger inheritance, for the law of a double portion is an innovation of the Torah.

As for “for he relished his venison” (*Bereishit* 25:28) – this was the practice of princes and kings, to choose venison over other types of food, and all the people would bring this as an offering of reverence. And Esav flattered his father, bringing all his venison to him to eat to his heart’s desire, and it is easy for a father to love his firstborn son.

Ramban expounds at length and rejects Ibn Ezra’s proofs one after the other. In his view, Yitzchak was indeed very wealthy. This interpretation, too, has many proofs in support of it, the main one being the description of Avimelekh and Fikhol, who declare that God is manifestly with Yitzchak (implying that his wealth is obvious), and seek to forge a covenant with him.

This dispute has a number of ramifications. First, on the exegetical level, we are left with the question of whether Yitzchak was a wealthy man or not. Second, Ibn Ezra himself raises the question of the place of wealth in the lives of the righteous: in his view, wealth is in fact a hindrance to the righteous man, rather than a help. Ramban, in contrast, maintains that wealth is something positive, a sign of God’s direct blessing.

Integration in the wider world

Let us focus on a third issue arising from the disagreement between Ibn Ezra and Ramban: the question of the extent to which a righteous person ought to be involved in the world. Ramban, who asserts that Yitzchak was wealthy, also maintains that Yitzchak was involved in worldly affairs: in business, and hence in the economic and social spheres. Ibn Ezra, in contrast, maintains that Yitzchak was not wealthy, and offers a more detached, isolated model.

Ramban’s opinion here, as in other places, shows why he might rightfully be considered the “father of Religious Zionism,” along with Rabbi Yehuda ha-Levi. He brings a message of involvement in the world, involvement in history, and an attempt to influence it. This message is illustrated most eloquently when, for example, seven out of eleven Nobel Prize winners (for the year 2012) are Jews. Here we see our influence in the world as a nation, and we perceive the sanctification of God’s Name that comes about as a result.

However, in our *parasha* the situation seems tilted more towards Ibn Ezra’s view than towards that of Ramban. In *Parashat Vayigash*, the brothers go down to Egypt, where they attempt to keep far away from the Egyptians, making no effort to exert any influence at all. The family dwells in Goshen, in isolation. Going beyond their geographical location, there are other expressions of this phenomenon. Pharaoh assumes, correctly, that Yosef’s brothers are able men. He therefore appeals to Yosef:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef, saying: Your father and brothers have come to you. The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land; let them dwell in the land of Goshen; and if you know any able men among them, then make them rulers over my cattle. (*Bereishit* 47:5-6)

Does Yosef act in accordance with Pharaoh’s request? A few verses previously we find: “And he took some of his brothers – five men – and presented them before Pharaoh” (*Bereishit* 47:2). Rashi explains how Yosef selected these five representatives: “‘Some of his brothers’ – of the least mighty among them, who did not appear mighty. For if [Pharaoh] saw how mighty they were, he would make them his soldiers.”

In other words, Yosef deliberately chose to present the least impressive of his brothers before Pharaoh, thereby seeking to evade Pharaoh’s wish that the brothers assume key positions in Egypt. Indeed, Yosef had already presented this plan in advance to his brothers and his father’s household, as we find in the previous chapter:

And Yosef said to his brothers and to his father’s house: I will go up and tell Pharaoh and say to him, “My brothers and my father’s house, who were in the land of Kena’an, have come to me. And the men are shepherds, for they have always been owners of cattle, and they have brought their flocks and their herds, and all that they have.” And it shall be, when Pharaoh calls you, and says, “What is your occupation?” Then you shall say, “Your servants’ trade has been with cattle, from our youth until today, both we and also our fathers” – in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to Egypt. (*Bereishit* 46:31-34)

Yosef specifies that his father and brothers are shepherds by tradition, in order that they will be regarded as an “abomination to Egypt.” While the arrival of Yosef’s brothers is being announced to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh is glad of the news, Yosef is already planning how to keep his family separate and secluded.

Opportunity vs. risk

We might ask, would it not have been better to take the opposite approach? Why not give Yosef’s family the opportunity to exert a positive influence, to spread their belief, and to bring about sanctification of God’s Name on a scale that had never yet been seen? After all, Egypt was the greatest superpower in the world!

Let us think back to the end of the eighteenth century. This was the time of the Emancipation, a time of equal rights. For the first time, European Jews were speaking the local language and beginning to involve themselves in the society within which they were living. In the social, economic and political spheres, Jews in Europe reached the very highest echelons.

All of this led to assimilation, to external influences that caused terrible destruction within Judaism. It led to the Haskala, with all its disastrous consequences. What halted this downward spiral? Not any Jewish leader who rose up from within and said, ‘Enough.’ Rather, what stopped it was antisemitism. Following the Damascus Affair (a blood libel in 1840), there began a counter-phenomenon of a return to ghettos and seclusion within the four ‘*amot*’ of Halakha.

Let us consider the story of a single family – in fact, a single individual: Baron Edmond de Rothschild. His contribution to the building of the land and the nation of Israel in general is unparalleled and unquestionable. However, despite all of the importance of this positive impact, there is no doubt that his involvement in the administration and finances of the European nobility did nothing to maintain the inner uniqueness of *Am Yisrael*, nor did it have any effect on the external attitude towards Jews.

In fact, the attempt made here by Yaakov’s family is likewise unsuccessful. Yosef settles the family in Goshen, Yaakov tries to prepare a spiritual infrastructure before they arrive there, but ultimately, as we read at the beginning of *Sefer Shemot*, “The children of Yisrael were fruitful and increased abundantly and multiplied, and grew exceedingly mighty…” (*Shemot* 1:7). Up to this point the description sounds positive, but then we reach the end of the verse: “… and the land was filled with them.”

*Bnei Yisrael* emerge from Goshen and spread throughout Egypt. It is reasonable to assume that they attain some key positions. Immediately after this verse, we find a description of the king of Egypt becoming fearful, and of the beginning of the subjugation:

And there arose a new king of Egypt who did not know Yosef. And he said to his people, Behold, the people of the children of Yisrael are more an mightier than we; come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass that, if any war should occur, they also join our enemies and fight against us, and so go up out of the land. (*Shemot* 1:8-10)

Multiplying is good, but spreading throughout the land brings openness to outside influences. Here we note the famous midrash that is cited by Rashi at the beginning of *parashat Beshalach* (*Shemot* 13:18):

A different interpretation: ‘*chamushim’* – meaning, one out of five (*echad mi-chamisha*) came out [of Egypt], while the other four-fifths died during the three days of [the plague of] darkness.

These eighty percent (!) were so deeply assimilated in the Egyptian population and culture that they were unable (and unwilling) to leave Egypt. It should be noted that, just as the Jews multiplied in Egypt before assimilating, there was a huge (approximately 900%) increase in the Jewish population of Europe during the 18th century.

Israeli society today

Where do we stand today in between the two poles of complete seclusion and complete assimilation? Jews exist on two axes. On the one hand, we are a link the chain of generations. Each of us is the latest link on the axis of time that goes all the way back to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. At the same time, we also exist on the axis of place, a horizontal axis instead of a vertical one.

The State of Israel today certainly has an honorable position on the axis of place. We have already mentioned the astonishing and inexplicable percentage of Nobel Prize winners. As we know, following the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the IDF delegation that went to offer aid was the best and most efficient of all the foreign aid groups. When the Japanese suffered an earthquake and tsunami in March, 2011, leading to the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Israel was the only foreign country whose aid was welcomed. The Haifa Technion is partnering with Cornell University to set up an engineering campus in New York. This is a tremendous honor.

At the same time, we must ask whether it is an altogether positive development. What are the chances of sanctifying God’s Name through this project, as opposed to the risk of assimilation? Can we be so certain that this is a desirable course to follow?

At the other end of the spectrum, we are aware of some extremely negative phenomena in Israel involving, for example, exclusion of women. We have nothing positive to say about a “*charedi*” man spitting at a woman in Beit Shemesh. Not a single word. But let us try to understand the source of the phenomenon. If we strip the deed of its coarse, ugly, rotten shell, what we discover underneath is a great fear – fear of the influence of the outside world reaching into the four ‘*amot’* of halakha. It is this fear that leads to extreme seclusion and rejection.

I disagree strongly with this view concerning the definition of external influences. Obviously, in my opinion, the influence of non-religious Jews on other Jews is not necessarily so deplorable. A young man who is quite happy to eat non-kosher meat described to me his intensive activity in helping with the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants. He collects and distributes clothing and food to people who are not receiving such aid from any other source. And thus engaged in holy work, he asks, “So am I exempt from praying on Yom Kippur?”

We might disagree strongly as to the definition of external influences, but we can put this issue aside for now. The point is that one part of our nation has adopted a policy that is at one extreme, while another part has adopted the opposite extreme. Dr. Yosef Burg, of blessed memory, offered an apt definition of Religious Zionism by referring to the symbol of the Bnei Akiva youth movement, which has at its center the two Tablets of the Covenant. “The one is inscribed with ‘Torah,’” he said; “those are the *charedim*. The other is inscribed with ‘avoda’ (labor) – those are the secular Jews. We, the Religious-Zionists, are the hyphen that connects them.”

A few years ago the Ministry of Absorption created a series of advertisements designed to persuade Israelis living outside of the country to return. One ad, which was shelved for reasons of political sensitivity, showed an Israeli woman somewhere overseas watching an Israeli Remembrance Day ceremony on TV and crying. Her non-Jewish husband walks in and cannot understand what has happened to her. Her son calls her “Mommy” instead of “*Imma*.”

All of this represents part of the reality of Israelis who have left Israel, and also of Diaspora Jews. The extreme pole of involvement with the non-Jewish world can indeed bring harmful external influences. We just celebrated the holiday of Chanuka, which emphasizes and reminds us to be careful when it comes to foreign influences. In a few more weeks, many youngsters will be going out, to our sorrow, to celebrate the “New Year.”

We must be aware of the gap between the two extremes. Which is preferable? What is the relationship between our influence on the world, and the world’s influence on us? These are important questions, and we must seek the proper path and the right balance.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Vayigash 5773 [2012].)