YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Yitro**

**THe Beit ha-Mikdash and The Beit Ha-midrash [[1]](#footnote-1)\***

**Sicha of HarAV MosHeh Lichtenstein**

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Translated by David Strauss

### Thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud

And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off. And they said to Moshe: Speak you with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (*Shemot* 20:15-16)

The people of Israel were standing before Mount Sinai, afraid that they would die. It was a frightening situation with thunder, lightning and a heavy cloud, and the people of Israel were terrified:

And Moshe brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. Now Mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the horn waxed louder and louder, Moshe spoke, and God answered him by a voice. (*Shemot* 19:17-19)

We can understand the significance of the occasion from the Pesach Haggada:

Had He only brought us near Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, it would have sufficed.

What is the significance of standing before Mount Sinai without receiving the Torah? Rather, it is clear that the assembly at Mount Sinai was a deep and penetrating experience, which could stand on its own, even without culminating in the actual receiving of the Torah.

In the book of *Devarim,* the attitude towards the assembly is presented in a more prominent manner:

These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice, and it went on no more. And He wrote them upon two tables of stone, and gave them to me. And it came to pass, when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain did burn with fire, that you came near to me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; and you said: Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire; we have seen this day that God does speak with man, and he lives. Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go you near, and hear all that the Lord our God may say; and you shall speak to us all that the Lord our God may speak to you; and we will hear it and do it. (*Devarim* 5:19-24)

In the book of *Devarim* we find the people of Israel sending representatives out of concern that they would die if they continue to hear the voice of God. However, Israel's argument seems to be a self-contradiction, for even they concede: "For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?" Why then are the people of Israel afraid that they will die?

### "That His fear be Before You"

It would appear that we are not dealing here with death, in its plain sense; for the people of Israel already know that they are still alive. Rather, we are dealing with the death of the "self." The people of Israel are afraid that receiving the Torah directly from God will harm its personality and its ability to maintain self-fulfillment, to preserve its uniqueness and independence. The fear is that a full commitment to God will harm each and every individual and his right to his own "freedom."

Moshe himself, an ideal figure who is capable of living in a constant state of high spiritual experience, rebukes the people of Israel for what they said:

And Moshe said to the people: Fear not; for God is come to prove you, and that His fear may be before you, that you sin not. And the people stood afar off; but Moshe drew near to the thick darkness where God was. (*Shemot* 20:17-18)

Moshe tries to persuade the people to listen to God, nullify themselves to him, and be ready to worship Him wholeheartedly. In the end, however, only Moshe approaches the cloud, and the people of Israel remain afar off. God understands the people's concern, and He answers Moshe:

And the Lord heard the voice of your words, when you spoke to me; and the Lord said to me: I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they have well said all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me, and keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever! (*Devarim* 5:25-26)

God accepts Israel's argument, and even refers to this request as coming from a positive spiritual place: "Oh that they had such a heart as this always."

Why can't the people of Israel live in a state of spiritual elevation and in high tension for an extended period of time? As is the case with all people, even the Jewish people are liable to develop over time a certain disrespect for such an experience. When a person experiences an experience frequently, it loses its value and meaning to him. It is impossible to get married every night, with a band and a meal fit for a king, and not only because of the budgetary issue.

A couple must see to daily activity, to a simple and intimate connection every evening, and not just to a shining event with lights and music. The *Mishkan* is sort of a small house, where the spiritual experience is preserved following the wedding that took place at Mount Sinai. This is similar to what the Gemara says in *Ta'anit*:

"On the day of his wedding" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 3:11) – this refers to the day of the giving of the Torah; "and in the day of the gladness of his heart" (ibid.) – this refers to the building of the Temple; may it be rebuilt speedily in our days. (*Ta'anit* 26b)

But over and beyond this: If Israel would have to remain in a state of high spiritual tension, the value of progress would be reduced, for these moments would be numerous, but not novel or exceptional.

### The commandment regarding the *Mishkan*

Therefore, God chooses to direct the people's motivation to other areas: In the book of *Shemot*, God issues three commands to the Jewish people in close proximity to their request:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: You yourselves have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.

You shall not make with Me gods of silver, or gods of gold, you shall not make to you.

An altar of earth you shall make to Me, and shall sacrifice thereon your burnt-offerings, and your peace-offerings, your sheep, and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones; for if you lift up your tool upon it, you have profaned it.

Neither shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness be not uncovered thereon. (*Shemot* 20:19-23)

The first commandment, "You shall not make with me," demands that the people of Israel not abandon the worship of God despite the difficulty. There was concern that when the people of Israel would understand God's deep demands, they would turn to "gods of silver, or gods of gold," and God warns about this explicitly.

The purpose of the third commandment was to prevent the people of Israel breaching forward for no reason – "Neither shall you go up by steps to My altar" – for if the people burst forward to God at inappropriate times, they are liable to be injured. It is forbidden to run ahead too quickly.

The second commandment is one of the main solutions that God gave to the people of Israel, alongside *Parashat Mishpatim*, which appears below: We find here two alternatives to the ecstatic worship at Mount Sinai – the Mishkan and the laws of *Mishpatim*.

The *Mishkan* serves as an alternative, because it involves constant and fixed worship, a clear connection with God through the offering of sacrifices, with the *Mishkan* serving as a spiritual center for all of Israel, in the sense of: "that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8). Every Jew can go to the *Mishkan* and seek God. The *Mishkan* is a way of keeping in touch with God, a way in which one can continue to live as usual alongside the worship of God. The command regarding the *Mishkan* appears again in the covenant at the end of *Parashat Mishpatim*:

And Moshe came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said: All the words which the Lord has spoken will we do. And Moshe wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent the young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt-offerings, and sacrificed peace-offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moshe took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.

And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people; and they said: All that the Lord has spoken will we do, and obey. And Moshe took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said: Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in agreement with all these words. (*Shemot* 24:3-8)

The *Mishkan* is a solution in the sense of "make me a bed-chamber":

Rather, make Me a bed-chamber, and I will speak with her. Thus at first "when Israel was a child, I loved him" (*Hoshea* 11:1); in Egypt they saw Me, "for I will go through the land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 12:12); at the sea they saw Me, "And Israel saw the great work that God did" (*Shemot* 14:31); at Sinai they saw Me face to face, as it is stated: "The Lord spoke with you face to face" (*Devarim* 5:4); after they received the Torah… "Let them make Me a sanctuary" (*Shemot* 25:8) and I will speak to them from inside the *Mishkan.* (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shir ha-Shirim*, no. 986)

### Tractate *Bava Kama*

Along with the *Mishkan*, God offers another solution for the spiritual experience, and it too touches on daily life:

Now these are the ordinances which you shall set before them. If you buy a Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve; and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing**.**(*Shemot* 21:1-2)

It is not by chance that most of the issues dealt with in *Bava Kama* appear immediately after the revelation at Mount Sinai. The people of Israel are seeking a solution to the problem of their connection to God, and the giving of the ordinances and statutes is the second solution, after the *Mishkan.* So too we find in the book of *Devarim*:

But as for you, stand you here by Me, and I will speak to you all the commandment, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess it. You shall observe to do therefore as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. (*Devarim* 5:28-29)

"The commandment and the statutes and the ordinances" is the solution that God offers following Israel's request to which God responded with the words: "They have well said all that they have spoken." God offers the people of Israel the solution of Torah study, with all of its profundity and breadth. Both of these solutions are explicitly mentioned in the Gemara:

This is what Rav Chiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His world but the four cubits of Halakha alone. (*Berakhot* 8a)

This teaches you that during the time of the Temple there were two solutions: The Temple and Halakha, but from the day that the Temple was destroyed, what was left was only "the four cubits of Halakha alone." Of course, we all know the Gemara's famous statement that in our time prayer substitutes for the sacrificial service, in the sense of "so will we render for bullocks the offering of our lips" (*Hoshea* 14:3).

### Routine and Novelty in the life of the individual

These solutions have two ramifications - both on the personal and on the communal level. On the personal level, we learn from here that it is not possible to seek spiritual highs all the time, and the best route lies in day-to-day and constant work. Thus, for example, yeshiva study accumulates over time.

We are now in the middle of the year, and it is a good time for a reckoning. Some students, in both lower and higher *shiurim*, will ask themselves: What have we done this year? We have not advanced at all. Sometimes such a reckoning leads one to the feeling that there was no progress at all, that there has been no Divine help, and that Torah study is not appropriate.

It is important to remember that yeshiva learning is a cumulative experience, an experience that takes time and requires intensive work throughout the year. It is related that the Vilna Ga'on was once asked if he would be interested in receiving the entire Torah through a revelation of Eliyahu without having to learn it word after word. The Gaon refused, because he understood the significance of the experience of Torah study, and furthermore, he understood that we are not judged according to the amount of knowledge that we have acquired, but rather according to the amount of work that we have invested in our study. What would we say to a proposal to put the entire Responsa Project in our heads using a small computer chip?

The spiritual processes and the knowledge that accumulate through spiritual work over time slowly become evident on the faces of the students, and it is impossible to draw conclusions from half a year. Anyone can ask his friends, his Ram or the *mashgiach*, and hear from them how he has progressed. It is impossible to compare a student in a lower *shiur* to a student who has become settled in the yeshiva, since there is always progress and spiritual movement. This movement is not measured in days, and it is impossible to point to the particular moment that a certain change occurred, just as a father cannot tell his children the exact moment he fell in love with their mother. The spiritual state of a yeshiva student is built brick by brick, at his own pace, and we must not be afraid to enter this process and become yeshiva students.

Students sometimes ask me on Purim, after they have had a little to drink, how to advance and acquire knowledge and fear of Heaven. The answer is to learn and work all the other 364 days of the year. On Purim we rejoice with the Torah; the rest of the year we study it. Yom Kippur is only once a year, and the experience of the *Ne'ilah* service is something rare and special. Were we to experience Yom Kippur every week, the *Ne'ilah* prayer would lose its significance. Therefore, we need to focus on spiritual work throughout the year and see how it elevates us.

Torah study throughout the year in a constant persevering manner will, with God's help, lead to a sense of affinity to God and His Torah. It falls upon us to examine our daily lives, our learning schedules for the day, and from there progress and blossom.

### "And he sent Yehuda before him" – communal Torah

On the community level, Torah study as a solution has undergone a change in recent years. We know that the Torah has exclusive status and special importance. The Gemara in *Pesachim* states:

Seven things were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehinnom, the throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the messiah. The Torah, as it is written: "The Lord made me as the beginning of His way" (*Mishlei* 8:22). (*Pesachim* 54a)

It was not by chance that the Torah was given in the wilderness. There is an opinion in *Chazal* that says the Torah was given in the wilderness to express the democratic nature of the ability to study it:

What is meant by: "And from the wilderness, Matana; and from Matana, Nachaliel; and from Nachaliel, Bamot" (*Bemidbar* 21:19)? He replied: When one makes himself as the wilderness, which is free to all, the Torah is presented to him as a gift, as it is stated: "And from the wilderness, Matana [a gift]." (*Nedarim* 55a)

But there is another dimension to the giving of the Torah in the wilderness – the Torah is not dependent on time or place, and the question of the Land of Israel is not crucial to the importance of the *mitzva* of Torah study. The Torah is the ultimate focus, and it is detached from any concrete earthly factor. The Torah is beyond the world and the Torah preceded the world.

This approach was brought to the fore in the approach to Torah study developed in Lithuanian yeshivas a hundred and fifty years ago, an approach that prevails until this very day. This is not just a Haredi approach. Despite the many disagreements with the ultra-Orthodox community, Torah study has remained an absolute value in religious Zionism, and was not weighed against other values.

Ultra-Orthodox Ramim were chosen to teach in yeshiva high schools, not only because of the lack of fitting educators in the religious public, but in order to create the exclusivity of the Torah and to educate the students to understand that the Torah stands above all else.

In the eulogy[[2]](#footnote-2) I delivered at the funeral of my teacher, Rav Aryeh Bina *ztz"l*, I mentioned his rare ability to create a Lithuanian yeshiva high school – Netiv Meir:

Rav Aryeh was one of those sons of "Yehuda" who came here with the old baggage of the world of the Eastern European yeshivas… His wisdom brought him, precisely in Netiv Meir, to emphasize the earlier aspect. Since he knew that he was well immersed in Israeli life, he decided to head a Lithuanian yeshiva high school. He was a unique creature, the head of a yeshiva high school who was also a Lithuanian yeshiva head.

He represented this combination even in the small details. He wore a Lithuanian yarmulke, and he instituted before his talk in the Beit Midrash, singing songs from the school of the Mussar movement. He made sure to implant within us the feeling that Netiv Meir was a yeshiva in all respects, in no way inferior to any other yeshiva.

We must know that the service of God through Torah study is incomparably greater than the service of God through the army. A yeshiva is a place of independent value, and the two years of Torah study should not be considered only as a preparatory program for military service. We must understand that Torah study is the central spiritual focus that enables us to establish direct contact with God, and all the other ways cannot be compared to it.

The yeshiva world needs to establish a generation of scholars. Not only an elite cadre of *talmidei* *hakhamim* who will serve as the rabbis of the next generation, but also a significant class of educated *ba'alei batim*, for whom the Torah occupies a significant place in their lives, and therefore they are active on the educational level in the community, in the synagogue, in the school and in the family.

1. \* This *sicha* was delivered at *Seuda Shelishit*, *Parashat Yitro* 5773. It was not reviewed by HaRav Lichtenstein. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The eulogy was published in *Alon Shevut Bogrim*, no. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)