**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**MIDRASH ON THE PARASHA**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

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**Parashat Yitro:**

**“You Are Wholly Fair, My Love;**

**And There Is No Blemish in You”**

**The Physical Perfection of the Israelites at the Time of the Revelation at Mount Sinai**

**Introduction: The *Derasha* of Rabbi Eliezer Ha-Gadol**

As children, we were all taught that the Israelites at the time of the Revelation at Mount Sinai were healed of all their physical imperfections. What is the source of this *derasha*? In the course of this *shiur,* we will trace the development of this idea across Rabbinic literature.

This idea appears for the first time in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* in the name of Rabbi Eliezer Ha-gadol, i.e., the Tanna Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus:

"And all the people saw the thunderings" (*Shemot* 20:15).

Rabbi Eliezer said:

This comes to tell us the praise of Israel when they all stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

This teaches that there were none who were blind among them, as it is stated: "And all the people saw."

This teaches that there were none who were mute among them, as it is stated: "And all the people answered together" (*Shemot* 19:8).

And this teaches that there were none who were deaf among them, as it is stated: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will listen" (*Shemot* 24:7).

And from where do we know that there were none who were lame among them? As it is stated: "And they stood at the bottom of the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:17).

And this teaches that there were no simpletons among them, as it is stated: "To you it was shown, that you might know" (*Devarim* 4:35). (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Ba-chodesh*, 9)

The first part of Rabbi Eliezer's words, "to tell us the praise of Israel," does not relate to some good deed of Israel which is their “praise.” Rather, it describes the reality that at the time of the Giving of the Torah: the Israelites were all complete in body and mind. Also, the *derasha* does not appear to come to answer any difficulty in the plain meaning of the text; the verses that are expounded are taken out of their contexts for the sake of creating the *derasha.* From this it may be concluded that Rabbi Eliezer creates the *derasha* in order to deliver a message. What then is the message that the Tanna wishes to convey, and why is it important?[[1]](#footnote-1)

This *derasha* indicates that it is important that there be no people with physical disabilities among the Israelites when they receive the Torah, but the *derasha* does not appear to include an explicit or implicit explanation of the matter. The wording of the *derasha*, "that when they all stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah," indicates that what Rabbi Eliezer means is that even before they receive the Torah, there are no people among them with physical or mental disabilities. Accordingly, most verses brought to prove that there are no people with disabilities in Israel at Sinai relate to the preparations in anticipation of receiving the Torah.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is true despite the fact that four out of the five abilities that are mentioned — sight, speech, hearing and standing — are found together in the text which is being expounded, after the Ten Commandments (*Shemot* 20:14-15):

And all the people saw 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 listen; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

**The Symmetry Between Matter and Spirit**

Rabbi Eliezer's *derasha* echoes through two *derashot* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a disciple of Rabbi Eliezer's disciple.[[3]](#footnote-3) Let us examine the first of them, which is found in *Vayikra Rabba*:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught:

At the time that Israel stood at Mount Sinai and said: "All that the Lord has spoken we will we do and we will listen" (*Shemot* 24:7) —

At that time there were among them neither *zavim* [those suffering from atypical genital emissions] nor *metzora’im* [those suffering from certain dermatological conditions],

Neither lame nor blind,

Neither mute nor deaf,

Neither incompetent, nor demented, nor simpletons. About that time it is stated: "You are wholly fair, my love; and there is no blemish in you" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:7).

And once they sinned, a few days did not pass before there were found among them *zavim* and *metzora’im*; lame and blind; mute and deaf; incompetent, demented and simpletons… (*Vayikra Rabba* 18, 4)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's *derasha* adds to Rabbi Eliezer's *derasha* the precise moment and reason for the healing of Israel's disabilities — namely, Israel's declaration, "We will do and we will listen." Like Rabbi Eliezer, he too relates to the stages before the Revelation itself.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai presents the perfection of the body as a result of spiritual exaltation; this perfection cannot be maintained in a reality of sin. Thus, the first part of the verse from *Shir Ha-shirim*, "You are wholly fair, my love," is read as relating to the spiritual level of the people and the physical perfection resulting from it, and the second part, "and there is no blemish in you," is understood as describing the removal of the disabilities that had existed previously. The "blemish" in the *derasha* refers to a situation of deficiency in the broad sense, and it includes manifested physical and intellectual disabilities, as well as physical states which reflect spiritual states (*zavim, metzora’im*). This stands in contrast to the *derasha* of Rabbi Eliezer, which relates exclusively to manifested physical disabilities.

This *midrash* raises the idea of mind-body symmetry, namely, that one's physical state or appearance is an expression of one’s spiritual state. According to this, we may point to an answer in Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's *derasha* to the question formulated above: what is the significance of pointing to the physical perfection of the Israelites at the time of the Revelation at Mount Sinai? According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Revelation at Mount Sinai is an unparalleled sublime event, and the people's physical perfection attests to their elevated level.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai associates the spiritual rise (and decline) of the Israelites with action on their part. It is their active partnership that entitles them to achieve this.

Let us look at Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's second *derasha*, which relates to Israel's physical state prior to the Revelation at Mount Sinai:[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught:

At the time that Israel went out of Egypt, to what could they be likened?

To the son of a king who recovered from his illness.

His tutor said to him: Let your son go school.

The king said to him: My son has not yet recovered his bright looks that changed because of his illness.

Let my son be nursed with good food and drink for about three months, and afterwards he will go to school.

So too, at the time that Israel went out of Egypt, there were among them people with blemishes resulting from the bondage of mortar and bricks.

The ministering angels said before Him: Now is the time, give them the Torah!

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: My children have not yet recovered their bright looks [that changed] because of the bondage of mortar and bricks.

Rather, let My children be nursed from the well, the manna and the quails for about three months, and afterwards I will give them the Torah.

When? "In the third month." (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 2, 2)

As in the previous *derashot*, the idea that when the Israelites stand at the Revelation at Mount Sinai their bodies are defect-free is repeated here, but in a different way. To His people who bear on their bodies the scars of their bondage, God gives time and indulgence, because of His love for them. The message this expresses is that God leads the Israelites according to their own pace and ability to adapt.[[7]](#footnote-7) The use of the school in the parable expresses the effort that will be required of the people the moment they receive the Torah, to keep it and to study it. In order to do this, the people will have to be at their full strength before entering into this obligation. The angels are presented in this *derasha* as not understanding the need for this process, just like the teacher who relates exclusively to the scholastic dimension of his student's personality, not seeing his entire being.

On the face of it, this *derasha* does not accord with the first *derasha*, which explains the perfect bodies of the Israelites at the Revelation as the end of a three-month healing process, from the Exodus from Egypt to the month of Sivan, and not as a miracle of a single moment. It may be suggested that the moment of healing at the time of the declaration of "We will do and we will listen” is the climax of an extended process. The slow healing restores Israel's bright looks and overall health; the permanent disabilities which do not pass with rest (and the temporary disabilities which have developed in the meantime, e.g., being *zavim* and *metzora’im*) are healed through the declaration of "We will do and we will listen."

In the parable, the king's son is no longer ill, but it is still clear from his appearance that he has not fully recovered: "My son has not yet recovered his bright looks (*ziv*) that changed because of his illness." The meaning of the word *ziv* in Rabbinic Hebrew is beauty. Facial beauty expresses the son's health. As in the previous *derasha*, here too we find the notion that an inner state is reflected on the outside: the spirit in matter, the soul in the body, general health and stamina in the face.

This *derasha* adds to the first *derasha,* which emphasizes Israel's exalted state at the time of the Revelation and God's concern for His people. In both *derashot,* the issue of perfection of the body relates to the state of the people.

The theme of the physical perfection of Israel at the time of the Giving of the Torah is further developed in a *derasha* of an Amora from Eretz Israel, Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon, appearing in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*:

"In the third month" (*Shemot* 19:1)…

Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon said:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: I will make a *chiddush* of the matter and renew you.

[This may be likened] to a king who had a son, and the son came of age.

He wanted to marry him off, but he did not have a new table service of silver and gold.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The king said: This is not in keeping with my son's honor.

If we wait until a new table service is made, I will delay my son's celebration.

What did the king do?

He brought smiths and artisans and they shined copper utensils…

Thus the king married off his son on old table service that looked new.

So the Holy One, blessed be He, when Israel went out from Egypt,

He wanted to give them the Torah, but there were among them those who were blind, lame and deaf.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: The entire Torah is perfect, as it is stated: "The Law of the Lord is perfect" (*Tehillim* 19:8).

Shall I give it to this generation which includes people with blemishes?

But if I wait until their children come of age, I will delay the celebration of the Torah.

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do?

He healed them and afterwards He gave them the Torah.

And from where do we know that he healed them?

Whoever was blind could see, as it is stated:

"And all the people saw the thunderings" (*Shemot* 20:15).

And whoever was deaf could hear, as it is stated: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will listen" (*Shemot* 24:7).

And whoever was lame became whole, as it is stated: "And they stood at the bottom of the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:17).

I will make a *chiddush*, and renew you similar to the World to Come.

Just as in the future: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened" (*Yeshayahu* 35:5), so too here: "And all the people saw."

Just as in the future: "And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (ibid.), so too here: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will listen."

Just as in the future: "Then shall the lame man leap as a hart" (ibid. v. 6), so too here: "And Moshe brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom of the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:17).

Just as in the future: "And the tongue of the mute shall sing" (*Yeshayahu* 35:6), so too here: "And all the people answered together, and said" (*Shemot* 19:8). (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Ba-chodesh* 12, 18-19)[[9]](#footnote-9)

God's miraculous intervention that brings about the healing of Israel at the time of the Giving of the Torah emerges from the *derasha* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Vayikra Rabba*, but it is not stated explicitly. On the contrary, the Tanna emphasizes the healing of the disabilities as a result of Israel's readiness to commit themselves to the Torah and its *mitzvot*, in their saying, "We will do and we will listen."

By contrast, this is explicit in the words of Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon. Here there is also no pointing to a process of healing Israel before the Giving of the Torah, as in the *derasha* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The unique idea in this *derasha* is pointing to the perfection of the Torah as a reason requiring the physical perfection of Israel at the Giving of the Torah: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: The entire Torah is perfect… Shall I give it to this generation which includes people with blemishes?" This is in contrast to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who sees this as a reflection of the state of the people and of God's attitude toward them. They both see physical perfection as an expression of the importance and exaltedness of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, each from a different angle.

**Innovation and Honor at the Giving of the Torah**

Why must the perfect Torah be given to a people that is whole in their bodies? The element of symmetry recurs as a premise that requires no explanation. In the words of Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon, the symmetry is not between matter and spirit, but between the Torah and those who received it.

In order to understand the significance of Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon's *derasha*, let us examine the parable presented there:

[This may be likened] to a king who had a son, and the son came of age. He wanted to marry him off, but he did not have a new table service of silver and gold. The king said: This is not in keeping with my son's honor. If we wait until a new table service is made, I will delay my son's celebration.

What did the king do? He brought smiths and artisans and they shined copper utensils… Thus the king married off his son on old table service that looked new.

Unique and beautiful gold vessels are not essential to the marriage itself, but royal families cannot allow themselves to marry without them. When faced with the constraint of time, the king solves his problem by making the old utensils look like new. That is to say, what matters is what the wedding environment will look like. Once a resolution is found to that problem, the wedding may take place.

The entire parable revolves around appearances that are in keeping with the honor of the king or the groom: "The king said: This is not in keeping with my son's honor." If so, the physical perfection of Israel is not essential to receiving the Torah, but it is not in keeping with the Torah's honor that those who receive it should have blemishes. The honor relates primarily to those looking in from the outside, that is to say, neither the Israelites nor God, but rather the nations of the world. Were the Torah given to people with blemishes, this would impact in the observers’ consciousness on the wholeness of the Torah, and they would devalue it. Therefore, it is important that the Israelites be whole in their bodies when they receive the Torah. It is possible that the honor in the parable refers also to the groom himself, to the magnitude of the significance of the event in his life; and thus in the moral, to the significance of the Revelation at Mount Sinai for the Jewish people across the ages.

Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon emphasizes throughout his remarks the dimension of novelty. He expounds "in this month (*ba-chodesh*)they came to the wilderness of Sinai," as referring to renewal (*chiddush*). Thus also the *derasha* begins: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: I will make a *chiddush* of the matter and renew you." The wedding is a new and formative stage in the life of the prince, and the Revelation at Mount Sinai is a formative stage in the life of the Jewish nation. Rabbi Yehuda points to the Giving of the Torah as a new stage in the world — a world in which there is Torah, in contrast to the history of humanity up to this point. In the continuation of the *derasha*, he draws a parallel between the Revelation at Sinai and the future redemption. The world advances from one appearance of the glory of God to the next such appearance, at first to the Israelites, and afterwards to the entire world. Or perhaps it is the opposite: the Giving of the Torah is tantamount to the future redemption, and it is just the setbacks which come in its wake that ruin it.

The old utensils that look like new in the parable correspond to the whole bodies of the Israelites healed of their disabilities. So too in the *derasha* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, that same body that had been ill strengthens itself so that it is able to take on new challenges. Do their words mean that the Giving of the Torah heralds the possibility of perfecting the body (and the whole of reality)?

The figure of the prince-groom also explains the reference to the dimension of time in the *derasha*. In contrast to the *derasha* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Midrash Shir Ha-shirim* about a recovery process which takes time, in the *derasha* of Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon there is no waiting, because "I will delay my son's celebration." Some things cannot be put off, and when necessary, other things are changed so as not to put off that which is truly important. Something in the dimension of time clashes with God's appearance in the world, and a leap is necessary, like the haste of the redemption from Egypt. God, as it were, must accommodate Himself to the human pace, cutting corners or letting loose so that things may really happen. The Divine intervention in the healing of Israel is an expression of the need for God's involvement in the process of perfecting the world, in order for its destiny to be fulfilled.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**The Development of the *Derashot* in the Late *Midrash***

Let us now move on to the late Midrash, *Midrash Tanchuma*:

"In the third month."

Teach us, our teacher, regarding one who has pain in his mouth, what is the law concerning healing him on the Sabbath?

This is what our Rabbis taught: If one has pain in his mouth, one may give him medicine on the Sabbath, because of the possibility of danger to human life.

For wherever there is the possibility of danger to human life, the laws of the Sabbath are suspended. For the Torah said: Desecrate one Sabbath for him, so that he may keep many Sabbaths…

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: There is no infirmity that has no cure, and the cure and medicine for each and every infirmity is known.

If you wish that no trouble should reach your body, occupy yourself with Torah which is a cure for the entire body…

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The Holy One, blessed be He, already did something like this at the time of the Giving of the Torah.

When Israel went out of Egypt, there were among them people with blemishes resulting from the toilsome labor which they did with mortar and bricks; for a stone would fall from the building and break an arm or sever a leg.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Is it right that I should give my Torah to people with blemishes?

What did He do? He gestured to the ministering angels, and they went down and healed them.

And from where do we know that were none who were blind among them? As it is stated: "And all the people saw the thunderings."

And from where do we know that there were none who were deaf among them? As it is stated: "We will listen."

And from where do we know that there were no amputees among them? As it is stated: "We will do."

And from where do we know that there were none who were lame among them? As it is stated: "And they stood at the bottom of the mountain."

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon said:
Since the Holy One, blessed be He, renewed them, He called that month the master of renewal.

From where do we know this? From what He called it in the matter: "In the third month." (*Tanchuma*, printed edition, *Yitro* 8)

The *derasha* opens with a halakhic question and answer, and from there it moves to the subject matter of the *parasha*. This is one of the classic opening forms of the *Tanchuma* literature. The central idea expressed here is that Torah study protects a person from sickness, and the healing of Israel in order to receive the Torah is brought as proof of this. If so, we have before us a latter *derasha* using an earlier *derasha* to deliver a spiritual-educational message.

The *derasha* and its contents show traces of the earlier Midrashic sources, especially the words of Rabbi Eliezer in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* and the words of Rabbi Yehuda be-Rabbi Simon in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana.* In general, what is said here may be characterized as using the basic idea as it appears in the *Mekhilta*, with the conceptual developments appearing in the Midrash of Eretz Israel.

Another feature of the *derasha* is the expansion of the description of the bondage in Egypt. This trend is further expanded in the Midrashic work from the Middle Ages, *Bamidbar Rabba*:

At the time when Israel went out of Egypt, most of them had physical blemishes.

Why? Because they toiled with mortar and bricks and went up to the top of the building.

And whoever was a builder, by going up to the top rows of stones, a stone would fall and cut off his hand, or a beam or mortar would enter his eyes and he would go blind, and they had physical blemishes.

When they came to the Wilderness of Sinai, God said: Is it in keeping with the honor of the Torah that I should give it to a generation of people with blemishes?

But if I wait until others come of age, I will be delaying the Giving of the Torah.

What did God do? He told the angels to go down to Israel and heal them… (*Bamidbar Rabba,* *Naso* 8)

In this way, the core *midrash* becomes more rounded, and the traditions expanding from it become broadened, further developing the narrative.

**Summary**

Throughout the *shiur*, we have seen that the notion that it would have been impossible to give the Torah to people with physical disabilities is deeply ingrained in the minds of Torah scholars across the generations. This concept is present in all versions of the *derasha,* with Tannaim and Amoraim developing the narrative and conceptual core found in the words of Rabbi Eliezer in different directions.

The attribution of physical perfection to Israel at the time of the Revelation at Mount Sinai leaves little room for ignoring the fact that *Chazal* see a close connection between the two. The earthly expression of the sublime is physical perfection, and physical perfection is a result of the encounter with the sublime. The consciousness of symmetry as an expression of perfection runs through all of the *derashot.*

Rav Kook speaks of the return to Eretz Israel as a return to the proper balance between the flesh and the spirit, while providing the right place for the body. This stands in contrast to the exile, where the body does not receive proper expression.[[11]](#footnote-11) This redemptive reality begins at the time of the Giving of the Torah.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This question becomes sharper in light of the great circulation of this *derasha* across the length of Rabbinic literature. Its parallels are the following: *Mekhilta de-Rashbi*, *Shemot* 20:18; *Vayikra Rabba* 8, 4; *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* (Vilna) 2, 2; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* p. 106b; *Pesikta de-Rabbi* 7; ibid. 15; *Tanchuma* (Warsaw) *Yitro* 8; *Tanchuma* (Buber) 8, 12; *Bamidbar Rabba, Naso* 7 (1 and 6); ibid. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of the five verses quoted, only the first and last verses appear in the Torah after the Revelation itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rabbi Akiva was a disciple of Rabbi Eliezer, and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was a disciple of Rabbi Akiva. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, Ba-Chodesh* 3 on the verse: "And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the ears of the people; and they said: All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will listen" (*Shemot* 24:7):

"And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people…” — they said: We accept upon ourselves. When he saw that they accepted upon themselves, he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people… He said to them… Tomorrow, come and accept upon yourselves all of the commandments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It also follows from the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai here that physical perfection is defined as the absence of disabilities. See *Bereishit Rabba* (ed. Theodor-Albeck) 12, 1:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: This may be likened to a king of flesh and blood who built a palace, and people came in and said: If the pillars were high, it would be attractive; if the walls were high, it would be attractive; if the ceiling were high, it would be attractive. Would a person come and say: If I had three eyes or three feet… It does not say here: that which he has already done, but rather: “that which they have already done” (*Kohelet* 2:12). As it were, the King of kings’ kings, blessed be He, and His court appoint over each and every organ of yours, and stand you up in accordance with what has been planned for you.

According to this, a defect constitutes a deviation from the form of the body as it was supposed to be according to Divine wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the parallel passage in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana,* *Ba-chodesh* 12, 3, this *derasha* appears in the name of Rabbi Levi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai likens the signs of God's accompanying Israel when they first set out in the wilderness — the well, the manna and the quails — as indulgences of food and drink. It should be emphasized that these serve as both physical and spiritual nourishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (ed. Buber), notes on p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. And similarly in *Tanchuma* (ed. Buber), *Yitro* 12. The first statement is reported there in the name of Rabbi Avin, and the second in the name of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi bar Rabbi Shalom. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Ramchal, *Derekh Hashem*, II, chap. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Rav A. Y. Kook, *Shabbat Ha-aretz,* Introduction*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)