YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Yitro**

**SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN**

**Creativity in the Study of Torah**

Summarized by Itai Weiss

Translated by David Strauss

And Moshe brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the base of the mountain. (*Shemot* 19:17)

*Chazal* expound this verse to mean that the people of Israel did not wake up on their own on the morning of the giving of the Torah, and therefore Moshe Rabbeinu himself had to arouse them. This is also the common explanation for the prevailing custom of staying awake and studying Torah on the night of Shavuot: We are atoning for that sleep of the people of Israel. But how is it possible that the people of Israel did not wake up on the morning on which the Torah was to be given?

It seems that the reason for this can be found in the previous verse:

And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. (*Shemot* 19:16)

The people of Israel feared the giving of the Torah. Why?

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 mountain quaked greatly. (*Shemot* 19:18)

Mount Sinai in its entirety quaked. As a rule, mountains represent the initial creation; a mountain is a great, stable, and primal thing. Here, an anxious Mount Sinai symbolically represents the whole of creation, which is incapable of coexisting with the revelation of God: "The mountains quaked at the presence of the Lord" (*Shofetim* 5:5). Accordingly, Chassidic and other thinkers noted that God's transcendent revelation leaves no room for His creatures, and they therefore put forth the idea of *tzimtzum*, Divine constriction.

Let us shift from the metaphysical to the psychological plane. The people of Israel advance toward the giving of the Torah, but fear losing their personality. The Torah is demanding, and it is forced upon man. It makes a moral and educational statement, and it is supposed to shape a person. The people of Israel are not happy to lose their autonomy. In the same way, on the day of one's wedding, a person experiences a strong sense of anticipation, but together with that also apprehension, for he does not know what he is getting himself into, what is likely to change in his personality. As the Rambam writes regarding the days of the *Mashiach*, "all these and similar matters cannot be definitely known by man until they occur" (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2). The same is true about a person's first day at work, in the army, in first grade, in his first year in *yeshiva*, or in his freshman year in university. Even if one is absolutely certain that this is what he wants to do, such beginnings are always mixed with concerns related to one's personality, and this applies also to receiving the Torah.

Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu has to take the people of Israel out of the camp, out of their comfort zone, and stand them at the base of the mountain. The meaning that we generally assign to the *gemara* in *Shabbat* expounding the verse to mean that God arched the mountain over the people of Israel like a barrel and forced them to receive the Torah is that the commandments are not voluntary; we are forced to observed them. This message is certainly true, but there is also another dimension to this. When God reveals Himself, the people of Israel stand in a completely passive position, and the coercion, which is the change in personality resulting from God's revelation, is built-in to the process.

This is how R. Soloveitchik describes it:

This is not the case with *homo religiosus*! When he stands before the cosmos, he is entirely aflame with the holy fire of wonder, he is all ashudder, confronted with the incomprehensible and unknown. His soul rages and storms like a tempestuous sea. He is frightened – nay terrified – by the mystery. He hides his face, for he is afraid to look upon it. He flees from it, but at the same time, against his will, he draws near to it; enchanted, he finds himself irresistibly pulled toward it, pines for it, and longs to merge with it. *Homo religiosus* is suspended between two giant magnets, between love and fear, between desire and dread, between longing and anxiety. He is caught between two opposing forces – the right hand of existence embraces him, the left thrusts him aside. (*Halakhic Man,* p. 67)

There are two possible responses to this tension. The first is to argue that the goal of the Torah is to subdue and subjugate man to it. Man must make himself like the wilderness, the place where the Torah was given – a place that has no boundaries, a place lacking order and organization – and allow the Torah to enter and shape his entire world.

There is, however, another possibility. The second approach, which R. Soloveitchik adopts, is to believe that if God implanted within us the desire for autonomy and creativity, this is a sign that those are human faculties that God wants us to use. Accordingly, the solution that he proposes is to channel that creativity to the study and development of the Torah:

However, Halakhic Man *has* found the third verse – the Halakhah. He, too, suffers from this dualism, from this deep spiritual split, but he mends the split through the concept of Halakhah and law. (ibid., p. 64)

According to R. Soloveitchik, one must use the creativity implanted within him to develop the Torah. This is the "third verse" that decides the matter: On the one hand, man rules and controls, while on the other hand, he channels his powers to Torah activity.

In this context, let us consider the “Brisker” method of Torah study. R. Soloveitchik used the Brisker method in his development of the Torah. This method has two significant advantages: It makes it possible to translate halakhic details into abstract legal rules, and it enables the creation of entirely new a priori worlds. In this way, it allows a person's faculties of innovation and creativity to find expression in the broadest possible manner. The second advantage is that unlike many other good approaches, such as that of the novellae of R. Akiva Eiger, R. Chaim Brisker's method can be reproduced and executed throughout the entire Torah. It is a "systematic" system, a clear method that can be replicated.

Parallel to the scientific revolution, the Brisker method left the question of "why" on the sidelines. The method clarifies the findings that arise from the Talmudic passages, classifies them into categories, and deals with the question of "what." The scientific revolution of the 17th century similarly tried to deal exclusively with a description of reality, induction of rules, and the creation of patterns of thought, and this is the secret of its success. In contrast to Aristotelian physics, which tried to explain the "whys" of the world, modern science is much more successful on the scientific plane by virtue of its disregard of that layer and its preoccupation with the analysis of the empirical findings alone. In similar fashion, R. Chaim's method succeeds in analyzing the data in a very convincing way.

This is also the reason why the Briskers make such extensive use of the Rambam. For a method that analyzes the final data and is not interested in the discussions along the way or the intentions of the writers, what is most important are the practical halakhic ramifications. The Rambam, who brings only the final rulings and not the discussions, is a most fertile ground for such discussion, and that is why he is so loved by the Briskers.

Today, however, about a hundred years after R. Chaim's death, there is a sense that we too are being "forced" to use this method in our learning. Once again, we are standing at the base of the mountain. The method does not always encapsulate the sense of creativity that accompanied it in the beginning. If this is the case, where can we express the creativity and autonomy within us?

The Haredi world is dealing with this problem, and the solution that it has been implementing in recent years is a horizontal solution – namely, the application of the method to new areas of Torah study, in *Zera'im* and *Taharot*, in virgin soil that has not yet been plowed.

The Religious Zionist world seems to be going in a different direction – not a quantitative expansion, but a qualitative one, creating a second floor. This second floor relates to the question of "why": a return to the philosophical and spiritual foundations behind the abstract halakhic analyses, to the verses, to the reasons for the commandments, to an encounter between the abstract concepts and concrete reality. This approach is promising, and it allows for the feeling of creativity.

The great danger in this approach is the tendency to forget that the "why" question comes only as a second floor on top of the "what" question. It is impossible to say significant things about the *mitzvot* and our spiritual world if one has not yet analyzed the issues thoroughly, if one has not used abstract Torah scholarship, if one has not yet clarified the question of "what." The *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* adopted this approach, giving up on the first floor, and indeed, its glass ceiling is quite low.

Another characteristic of the Brisker method is the disregard that it demonstrates for the "author's intent." This is another way, through an objective analysis of the text, that the student can express his own personality in his Torah study. What is binding is the law, not its rationale. When we rule in accordance with Abayei that the testimony of a conspiring witness is disqualified retroactively, we do not necessarily have to accept his rationale. The moment that Abayei uttered his position, his words became part of the Torah, and they stand for analysis in themselves. The text is the raw material, and we are permitted and even obligated to analyze it in an objective manner.

Of course, when using this method, one must avoid the danger of going off in the other direction. Instead of analyzing the text in an objective manner, we are liable to shift from the author's subjective position to our own subjectivity. One must not dictate to the Torah how it is to appear because we want it to appear like that. We must aim for "the truth of the Torah."

At the same time, we must remember that in the end, the dialectic exists. There are times when a person expresses his personality through his Torah study, but there are also times when the experience that accompanies his study is one of surrender, of the arching of the mountain like a barrel. Both elements exist in reality, and we must turn this tension into a fertile tension – to aim for the truth of the Torah, to be subject to it, and to express our own personalities in its study.

(This *sicha* was delivered at *seuda shelishit*, Shabbat *Parashat Yitro* 5778 [2018].)