YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat MASEI**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

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In memory of Fred Stone *z"l*, Yakov ben Yitzchak,
whose *yahrzeit* is on the 25th of Tammuz:
beloved father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

By Ellen and Stanley Stone and Family

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,
whose *yahrzeit* is 21 Tamuz. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.

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**Torah and Life, and the Appropriate Response to the Destruction**

Summarized by Elyashiv Kompler

Translated by David Strauss

**The Book of the Land of Israel**

The book of *Bamidbar* closes with the arrival of the Israelites at the Plains of Moav – the gates of the Land of Israel. The Israelites will remain there for the full length of the book of *Devarim*, through Moshe’s great speech; movement will resume only in the book of *Yehoshua*, which describes Israel's entry into, and conquest and inheritance of, the land.

Moshe Rabbeinu, the shepherd of Israel, was given two commands: to take the people of Israel out of Egypt, and to bring them to the Land of Israel:

And moreover I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant… and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians… And I will bring you to the land. (*Shemot* 6:5-8)

He merited to fulfill the first of these commands, but not to enter the land. *Chazal* describe for us what would have happened "had Israel not sinned":

Rab Ada bar Rabbi Chanina said: Had Israel not sinned, they would not have been given but the five books of the Torah and the book of *Yehoshua*, which expresses the value of the Land of Israel. (*Nedarim* 22b)

The tragedy is not limited to the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu and the generation of the wilderness did not enter the land, but is also expressed in the deep rift and disconnect between the five books of the Torah (*Chumash*) and the Land of Israel, which they entered only in the first book of the *Neviim*. The book of *Yehoshua*, the book of the Land of Israel, should have been one of the books of the Torah. The book of *Devarim* deals extensively with the Land of Israel as the people prepare to enter it, but relates to it only from the outside, without fulfillment of these preparations.

It is, however, possible that in the depths of this disconnect, there is also good news. Regarding the verse in *Tehillim*: "A psalm of Asaf: O God, the heathen are come into Your inheritance; they have defiled Your holy Temple; they have made Jerusalem into heaps" (*Tehillim* 79:1), *Chazal* expounded:

It is written: "A Psalm of Asaf: O God, the heathen are come into Your inheritance." The verse should have read: "A weeping of Asaf," "A wailing of Asaf," [or] "a lamentation of Asaf." Why does it say: "A psalm of Asaf"?… Thus they said to Asaf: The Holy One, blessed be He, destroyed the Sanctuary and the Temple, and you sit and sing? He said to them: I sing that the Holy One, blessed be He, poured out His anger on wood and stones, and not on Israel. This is what is written: "And He has kindled a fire in Zion, which has devoured the foundations thereof" (*Eikha* 4:11). (*Eikha Rabba* 4:14)

Psalm 79 of *Tehillim*,which describes the destruction of the Temple, is called a "*mizmor*" (psalm, from the root *z-m-r*, sing), despite its distressing content, because within the destruction is an act of kindness that God performed for Israel: He channeled his anger so that it struck wood and stones, and not the people of Israel themselves. From this we learn that it is possible to see sparks of light even in destruction, pain, and disconnect. In light of this, let us try to see the sparks of light that become revealed out of the disconnect between the Torah and life (as represented by entry into the land and dwelling therein).

**The Destruction and the Crisis**

 The Gemara in *Bava Batra* brings two different responses to the destruction of the Temple:

Our Rabbis taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel became ascetics, binding themselves to neither eat meat nor drink wine.

Rabbi Yehoshua got into conversation with them and said to them: My sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine?

They replied: Shall we eat flesh, which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that the altar is suspended? Shall we drink wine, which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but is now suspended?

He said to them: If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased.

They said: [That is so, and] we can manage with fruit.

We should not eat fruit either, [he said,] because there is no longer any offering of first fruits.

Then we can manage with other fruits [they said].

But, [he said,] we should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water.

To this they could find no answer, so he said to them: My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mourn overmuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure, as it is written: "You are cursed with a curse, yet you rob me [of the tithe], even this whole nation." The Sages therefore have ordained thus: A person may stucco his house, but should leave a little bare. (*Bava Batra* 60b)

In response to those who abstained from eating meat and drinking wine, Rabbi Yehoshua explains that the duty of mourning is limited, and "mourning overmuch is impossible" because "we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure."

The Gemara continues with another statement, in the name of Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha:

It has been taught: Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said: Since the day of the destruction of the Temple, we should by rights bind ourselves not to eat meat nor drink wine, only we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure.

And from the day that a Government has come into power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids to us the observance of the Torah and the precepts and does not allow us to enter into the "week of the son" [according to another version, "the salvation of the son"], we ought by rights to bind ourselves not to marry and beget children, and the seed of Avraham our father would come to an end of itself. However, let Israel go their way; it is better that they should err in ignorance than brazenly. (*Bava Batra* 80b)

While Rabbi Yehoshua argued against the would-be ascetics that when the public is unable to comply with a certain decree, we refrain from enacting it, Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha gives an additional reason: "Let Israel go their way; it is better that they should err in ignorance than brazenly." In other words, Rabbi Yehoshua assumes that ideally, we should continue to live our normal lives, while from the words of Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, it would seem that this is merely a concession to reality; in his view, ideally we should "bind ourselves not to marry and beget children, and the seed of Avraham our father would come to an end of itself."[[1]](#footnote-1)

The destruction of the Temple was indeed a great crisis in the history of our people. To illustrate, imagine the Pesach holiday in the time of the Temple, and the grandness that accompanied it: The people of Israel are coming to Jerusalem for the festival and slaughtering their offerings; groups gather, with every individual belonging to a group. The sounds of song and praise rise from the houses, to the point that it seems the roofs are about to split open. Or picture Yom Kippur: The High Priest wears his white garments and confesses his own sins, the sins of his house, and the sins of all of Israel. All stand around, waiting for him to come out of the Holy of Holies, and immediately they break out in song and happiness, singing: "How glorious indeed was the High Priest!" All this was lost with the destruction of the Temple. It is not for nothing that when we mention this in our prayers, we immediately acknowledge our present bitter reality and say: "Our soul grieves at the mere mention of it."

**"The Four Cubits of Halakha"**

Our Sages outlined the appropriate response to this crisis. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai met Vespasian at the time of the destruction and asked, "Give me Yavneh and its Sages" (*Gittin* 56b), and "from the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His world but the four cubits of Halakha" (*Berakhot* 8a). Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and his disciples, and later Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues, developed the Torah and perfected it, to such an extent that Rabbi Yochanan stated that "[the author] of an anonymous *mishna* is Rabbi Meir, of an anonymous *tosefta* is Rabbi Nechemia, of an anonymous [dictum] of *Sifra* is Rabbi Yehuda, of *Sifrei* is Rabbi Shimon – and all [are taught] according to [the view] of Rabbi Akiva" (*Sanhedrin* 86a). Throughout the years of exile, Israel continued in this path that stands at the foundation of our nation's existence; otherwise, there would be no place at all for continued Jewish existence.

Our Sages not only developed and expanded the Oral Law, but also enacted new laws in accordance with the shift: During the time of the Temple, the focus of Pesach was the pilgrimage and the eating of the sacrifice in one's own house, which served as a kind of Temple (and therefore sacrificial meat could be eaten there, and eating leavened bread is forbidden). After the destruction, our Sages converted the Temple into a study hall and changed the focus on the sacrifice to a focus on telling the story of the exodus from Egypt. On this night, we expound in all places and in every house “from ‘A wandering Aramaean was my father' until he finishes the entire passage" (Mishna *Pesachim* 10:4), even in houses where books are not usually opened and studied. Thus, even though the daily offering was cancelled, the service of God was not cancelled. The Rambam asserts in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (positive commandment 5) that the service of God is performed not only in the Temple, but also through prayer and Torah study. We encounter God by turning to Him in prayer – "we will render for bullocks the offering of our lips" (*Hoshea* 14:19) – and we also encounter God through the study of His Torah.

As stated, had Israel not sinned, the book of *Yehoshua* would have been included in the Torah, and a disconnect would not have been created between the Torah and life in the land of Israel. However, in the depth of the disconnect lies a great message: even when Israel is exiled from its land and the *Shekinah* is not in its place, Torah continues. The Torah does not depend on the land, and it sustains the nation even in its exile. God continues to reveal Himself to the people of Israel, always, and sustains them even in their troubles.

**Conclusion: "May Our Eyes Behold"**

Although the main message in our *parasha* is the Torah’s continued existence among the people of Israel even in exile and destruction, we should not forget that this is not a complete reality. A reality without the Temple is missing its essence. We lack prophecy, *ruach ha-kodesh,* and God's presence among us in the Land of Israel, where "the eyes of the Lord are always upon it" (*Devarim* 11:12).

Beyond the development of the Torah and its reestablishment in Yavneh, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues also made many enactments "in memory of the Temple" (*Sukka* 3:12), which were meant to remind us of the emptiness in which we live, and of the missing Temple. Thus, in addition to our duty to engage in Torah study, we must continue to pray that we should merit to see the return of the *Shekhina* to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Masei* 5779.]

1. It should be noted that Rabbi Yehoshua and those abstaining from meat and wine are reacting to the destruction of the Temple, whereas Rabbi Yishmael is discussing the Roman decrees against Torah and the observance of the *mitzvot*, but this is not the place to expand upon the difference between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)