YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat VAERA**

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**Dedicated in memory of**

**Albert W. and Evelyn G. Bloom z"l,**

**on their Shvat yahrzeits,**

**parents who taught in word and deed**

**"And I will take you as my nation, and I will be your God." (Shemot 6:7)**

**by Shanen and Akiva Werber,**

**Dov and Sandy Bloom,**

**Elana Bloom and Jeffrey Garrett**

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**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Personal Responsibility and Redemption**

Summarized by Shaul Shulman and Binyamin Frankel

Translated by David Strauss

**Did they not listen to Moshe?!**

 Our *parasha* provides a negative report of the Israelites’ reaction to the tidings about their imminent redemption:

And Moshe spoke so to the children of Israel; but they did not listen to Moshe, out of impatience of spirit and out of harsh labor. (*Shemot* 6:9)

Moshe had earlier uttered the five formulations of redemption, but the people do not listen. It would have been possible to accept this, together with the explanation offered by the verse, "out of impatience of spirit and out of harsh labor," except that in the previous *parasha*,we hear that in fact, the people of Israel *did* listen to Moshe and Aharon:

And Aharon spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moshe, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had remembered the children of Israel, and that He had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. (*Shemot* 4:30-31)

How are we to understand this? Why in *Parashat Shemot* do the people of Israel respond to tidings of their coming redemption with bows and prostration, while in our *parasha*, they suddenly refuse to listen?

**Could Not or Would Not**

The Ramban here serves as Israel's advocate, explaining that the people did in fact believe, as was stated earlier:

"Out of impatience of spirit and out of harsh labor" – It was not because they did not *believe* in God and in His prophet [that they did not listen]. Rather, they paid no attention to his words because of impatience of spirit, as a person whose soul is grieved on account of his misery and who does not want to live another moment in his suffering even though he knows that he will be relieved later. The "impatience of spirit" was their fear that Pharaoh would put them to death, as their officers said to Moshe, and the "harsh labor" was the pressure, for the taskmasters pressed upon them and hurried them [in their daily task], which gave them no chance to hear anything and consider it. (Ramban, *Shemot* 6:9)

The Israelites would stop every now and then to hear a few words about redemption, while their taskmasters were whipping them, but they had no time to really listen to Moshe and Aharon. They were too busy gathering the straw and stubble they needed for building.

In the *Mekhilta*, however, we find the opposite position. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira explains that indeed the people of Israel did not want to listen to Moshe:

Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira said: Surely it is stated: "But they listened not to Moshe out of impatience of spirit and out of harsh labor." Is there a person who hears good tidings and is not happy – “a son was born to you”; “your master has released you to freedom” – and he is not happy?

If so, why is it stated: "But they did not listen to Moshe"? Rather, it was difficult in their eyes to separate themselves from idol worship, as it is stated: "And I said to them: Cast every man the detestable things of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt" (*Yechezkel* 20:7)… This is what is written: "And the Lord spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and gave them a charge to the children of Israel" (*Shemot* 6:13) – he charged them to separate themselves from idol worship. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Parashat Bo*, *massekhta de-pischa* 5)

According to this *midrash*, the people of Israel really did not want to listen to what Moshe had to say.

**"But they rebelled against Me, and would not listen to Me"**

What deficiency is there in the Ramban's explanation that forced Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira to speak ill, as it were, of the people of Israel? The Ramban’s approach seems very reasonable!

Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira bases his words on a prophecy of Yechezkel:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying… And say to them, Thus says the Lord God: On the day when I chose Israel, and lifted up My hand to the seed of the house of Yaakov, and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up My hand to them, saying: I am the Lord your God; in that day I lifted up My hand to them, to bring them forth out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had sought out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the beauty of all lands.

And I said to them: Cast you away every man the detestable things of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. **But they rebelled against Me, and would not listen to Me;** they did not every man cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt; then I said I would pour out My fury upon them, to spend My anger upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt.

But I wrought for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, among whom they were, in whose sight I made Myself known to them, so as to bring them forth out of the land of Egypt. So I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them My statutes, and taught them My ordinances, which a person will do and live by them. (*Yechezkel* 20:2-11)

The people of Israel were at first happy to hear that God was planning to save them, that "I am with him in [his] trouble" (*Tehillim* 91:15). What happened in our *parasha*? Why did the situation suddenly change?

Because Moshe came to them with a demand – "I am the Lord your God… Cast away every man the detestable things of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt"! This explains the big difference between the people’s response to the first tidings and their response to the second tidings.

Our teacher, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, explained that the first two of the Ten Commandments express one principle: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me" (*Shemot* 20:2-3). This is one verse, in which Moshe tells the people that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

**Habit Becomes Nature, and Nature is Hard to Change**

It is very difficult to change habits. While in bondage, the people of Israel would prefer to continue with their backbreaking work, to see their children cruelly cast into the river, than to go out into the wilderness and serve God.

In order to better understand where the people of Israel were coming from, let us try to imagine a similar reality for ourselves: If a prophet were to arrive now, and tell us that the troubles in the entire world would end, that there would be peace in the land of Israel and in the rest of the world, that the threats from Iran and ISIS would stop – we would certainly be happy to hear these things.

But what would happen if he conditioned these things on our giving up our technological communication? On throwing away our smartphones and televisions? It is likely that most people would find it difficult to give up on these things, and that they would refuse the demand despite the heavy price of forfeiting the promise of peace.

We encounter a similar situation in elections as well. We are promised redemption in hundreds of different formulations, but no demand is made of us. The politicians do not demand things from the people, or engage in a dialogue with them. They only offer tempting promises, and the country's citizens are merely asked to put the correct ballot in the ballot box.

This is not the way to solve problems. You can't expect things to work out without intense and serious effort. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira's words are so true and so on the mark. He is not speaking ill of the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt; rather, he is giving an accurate description of human nature.

**Assuming Responsibility and Elevating the Self**

Next week we will read *Parashat Bo*, which will describe the transformation that succeeds in the end. The people of Israel will indeed leave their old habits and familiar environment, and embark on a new path.

Every time we read *Parashat* *Vaera*, we must internalize the difficulty that the people of Israel faced, recognizing the demands that Moshe and Aharon made of them, and set similar goals for ourselves – not to despair, and to be ready to assume responsibility.

*Chazal* tell us that even when the people of Israel left Egypt, they did not abandon their idol worship; the statue of Mikha left Egypt with them:

Rabbi Yose says: There is a greater shame than that – Israel passes through the Sea of Suf and the statue of Mikha passes with them, as it is stated: "And over the sea affliction shall pass" (*Zekharya* 10:11), and the sea splits before them*.* This is: "To You, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us, confusion of face" (*Daniel* 9:7). (*Tanchuma Ki-Tisa* 14)

From where does this dedication to idol worship stem? And what is the uniqueness of God's service that makes it so difficult to abandon idol worship for its sake?

There is something natural and understandable about serving an entity that can be aspired to and addressed directly. Idolatry does not demand of a person that he change his habits, but only to give them gifts as part of their specific worship.

Moreover, there is generally no disconnect between the idol's worship and the framework of human inclinations. Idolatry cultivates various types of lustful behavior as part of the worship, and does not require a person to change his lifestyle with respect to the character traits and habits entrenched in him.

Mythological stories also reinforce the types of human behavior that we view negatively – they are full of jealousy and competition, tension and strife, lewdness and licentiousness. Their quests are for the strong, not for the virtuous.

This is not the way to serve the God of Israel. God demands of man that he understand that God is exalted above the lowly framework of man's inclinations. He is transcendent, and man must strive to elevate his entire lifestyle to in that direction, to strive for high and lofty behavior, full of value and meaning. A person must assume responsibility for his life even at the cost of changing habits.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Vaera* 5775.]